

Reflections on Women's Empowerment and Rights in John Stuart Mill's the Subjection of Women

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Abstract: *The Subjection of Women* is a powerful statement of J. S. Mill's feminist philosophy and a passionate application of his theory of individuality, freedom and justice to the cause of women's empowerment. Mill was a supporter of women's political, social and economic rights and an advocate of equal opportunities. In this article, I offer a description and an assessment of Mill's feminist views focusing mainly on a particular passage in *The Subjection of Women* that has generated a heated scholarly debate. The article is in three parts. In the first part, I show that Mill is a liberal feminist who applies the key tenets of liberalism to his theory of gender equality. For Mill, the betterment of women's position is indispensable to social development and progress. The second part discusses the passage in *The Subjection of Women* where Mill suggests that the current sexual division of labour in the family is the most suitable arrangement between the two spouses. In the third part, I assess Mill's views and identify some key points concerning his feminist thought and strategy. I argue that we must adopt a holistic approach to Mill's feminism and consider the historical, theoretical, and strategic dimensions of his thought. J. S. Mill contributed to women's struggle for equality and rights with both his philosophical work and his socio-political activism. *The Subjection of Women* will remain one of the most important texts in the canon of feminist theory for generations to come.

Résumé: *The Subjection of Women* est une déclaration puissante de la philosophie féministe de J. S. Mill et une application passionnée de sa théorie de l'individualité, de la liberté et de la justice à la cause de l'autonomisation des femmes. Mill était un partisan des droits politiques, sociaux et économiques des femmes et un défenseur de l'égalité des chances. Dans cet article, je propose une description et une évaluation des vues féministes de

Mill en me concentrant principalement sur un passage particulier de *The Subjection of Women* qui a suscité un débat universitaire passionné. L'article est divisé en trois parties. Dans la première partie, je montre que Mill est une féministe libérale qui applique les principes clés du libéralisme à sa théorie de l'égalité des sexes. Pour Mill, l'amélioration de la situation des femmes est indispensable au développement et au progrès sociaux. La deuxième partie traite du passage de *The Subjection of Women* où Mill suggère que la division sexuelle actuelle du travail au sein de la famille est l'arrangement le plus approprié entre les deux époux. Dans la troisième partie, j'évalue les points de vue de Mill et j'identifie quelques points clés concernant sa pensée et sa stratégie féministes. Je soutiens que nous devons adopter une approche holistique du féminisme de Mill et considérer les dimensions historiques, théoriques et stratégiques de sa pensée. J. S. Mill a contribué à la lutte des femmes pour l'égalité et les droits, tant par son travail philosophique que par son activisme sociopolitique. L'assujettissement des femmes restera l'un des textes les plus importants du canon de la théorie féministe pour les générations à venir.

Introduction

The Subjection of Women is seen as “one of the landmarks of British feminism” (Pyle, 1995a, p. ix), a classic text in the canon of feminist theory and a fine example of J. S. Mill’s social and political philosophy. Written in 1861, it was first published in 1869 when Mill thought that the societal and intellectual conditions were sufficiently ripe for an assertive statement on the women’s cause. His intention was to influence public debate and policy. The book is a robust manifestation of Mill’s feminist views and a passionate application of his theory of individuality, freedom and justice to the cause of women. Mill links women’s empowerment and self-realisation to social development and the improvement of humankind (Panagakou, 2017).

Since its publication, *The Subjection of Women* has received constant scholarly attention. During the nineteenth century, its reception focused mainly on the reaction to Mill’s theory of women’s emancipation, equality and rights (Panagakou, 2019; Pyle, 1995b). Mill’s views shocked the conservative world, while,

at the same time, his theory excited the supporters of political reform and social change. The book, which “was ahead of its time in boldly championing feminism” (Annas, 1977, p. 179), represents “one of the peaks of Mill’s rhetorical achievement as a public moralist” (Collini, 1996, p. xxxiii). Contemporary feminist scholarship explores topics such as the type of Mill’s feminism, his views on the role of friendship in marriage, his analysis of power, his reflections on justice, autonomy, equality and care, as well as the style and methodology of his narrative. The writings of Asha Bhandary (2016), Helen McCabe (2014, 2015, 2018), Susan Mendus (1989, 2000), Maria Morales (1996, 2005, 2007), Martha Nussbaum (2010), M. L. Shanley (1981, 1998), Nadia Urbinati (1991) and others provide insightful analyses and critical assessments of Mill’s views on women. Yet the value of Mill’s feminist philosophy is not recognised only by feminist thinkers. The intellectual historians Gregory Claeys (2013) and Frederick Rosen (2013) stress the importance of Mill’s profound critique of despotism and gender inequality in *The Subjection of Women* “for the proper understanding and evaluation of his social and political philosophy” (Panagakou, 2019: 32). It is obvious that, though published more than a century ago, *The Subjection of Women* has still the power to inspire with its vision and stimulate discussion and research.

Mill’s analysis of the subjection of women starts with an eloquent declaration of his opposition to the legal and social subordination of women. He states,

That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (Mill, 1991, p. 471)

This powerful statement introduces the subject of Mill’s essay and sets the scene for the development of his narrative. The reader would reflect on opinions and ways of thinking that sustained and legitimised the command and obedience ethic having characterised for so long the relation of the sexes. *The Subjection of Women* contains both an anatomy of this modern type of bondage and

Mill's recommendations for its abolition. Sexual inequality and the subjection of women are harmful to the social whole for they hinder both the development of the individual and the improvement of humankind. The patriarchal power relations that pervade marriage and the family corrupt the character of those involved and affect political culture. Mill questions the common-law doctrine of coverture and asks for changes in the law regulating marriage (Garner, 2004; Panagakou, 2017; Shanley, 1988). As MacKinnon rightly observes, *The Subjection of Women* "remains the most compelling, sympathetic, subtle, perceptive, consistent, coherent, and complete statement of the liberal feminist argument for women's equality" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 41).

This article is in three parts. In the first part, I discuss Mill's views on the relation between women's empowerment and the recognition of fundamental rights such as equality of opportunity and property rights. I demonstrate that Mill is a liberal feminist who promotes the application of key tenets of liberalism to the case of women and regards gender equality as central to both the individuals' well-being and the common good. The second part focuses on a seemingly puzzling passage in *The Subjection of Women* wherein Mill regards the sexual division of labour in the family as being the most suitable arrangement between the two spouses. I offer a brief review of selected commentaries on this issue and I suggest that we must read both attentively and contextually what Mill says instead of condemning him. The third part contains my analysis of the aforementioned controversial passage. I assess Mill's view by identifying eight key points which can help us to better understand and appreciate his feminist thought and narrative strategy.

Empowering Women: Equal Opportunities and Property Rights

In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill advocates perfect equality, women's right to property, and women's access to education, professions, politics and public offices (Mill, 1991, pp. 490-491, pp. 524-532, p. 558, pp. 561-562). The active role of women in the public sphere is indispensable to the foundation of a truly modern, inclusive and just polity. Women should have the opportunity to cultivate their abilities, get the necessary professional training, and decide about the jobs they can do. Mill writes: "There are no means of finding what either one person or many can do, but by trying – and no means by which any one else can discover for them

what it is for their happiness to do or leave undone" (Mill, 1991, p. 499). There is no need to erect legal barriers for tackling issues that individuals themselves can resolve. "What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing" (Mill, 1991, p. 499). To restrict women's equality of opportunity and freedom of choice while men enjoy these rights is unjust.

Mill then reflects on the common view that "the natural vocation of a woman" is "that of a wife and mother" (Mill, 1991, p. 499). If the natural choice of women is marriage and children, why should the system "force women into marriage by closing all other doors against them"? (Mill, 1991, p. 500). Women would follow the natural path independently of the availability of other options! The socio-legal establishment insists upon regulating women's choices, because if an ethic of equal opportunities and freedom prevails, the validity of the so-called natural vocation of a woman will be tested. We do not question here the woman's natural ability to nurture or the natural connection of mother and infant. However, women's natural inclination to undertake some particular tasks does not mean that women always find, or should find, fulfilment and self-realisation in the context of marriage and the domestic sphere. It could be the case that the lack of available alternative options "coerces" women into marriage. Mill "reveals" the patriarchal origin of the discourse which depicts marriage as women's natural choice and vocation. Should women have other means open to them "of filling a conventionally honourable place in life" (Mill, 1991, p. 501), they would have probably found marriage (in Victorian society) a less attractive option.

Mill detects the complex mechanism supporting women's subordination in Victorian society. As women do neither get systematic education, nor have access to the professions, they regard marriage as the only route to a good life. Impediments concerning the right to property and the power of earning money make women economically dependent on their husbands. Mill argues that women live in an environment that forestalls real development and have their life regulated by a gender-biased legal system, which maintains injustice, inequality and dependence. This situation perpetuates a vicious circle of domination-subordination relations. Women, in order to please men, learn to be attractive and obedient (Mill, 1991, pp. 486-487). Instead of developing freely their individuality, they cultivate a mentality of submission, passivity, self-abnegation and servitude (Mill, 1991, p. 486). Excluded from the public sphere and confined to the

domestic realm, women live in a state of subjection and inequality. Male lust for power and domination is the cause of this situation, according to Mill:

I believe that their [women's] disabilities elsewhere are only clung to in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life; because the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal. Were it not for that, I think that almost every one, in the existing state of opinion in politics and political economy, would admit the injustice of excluding half the human race from the greater number of lucrative occupations, and from almost all high social functions; ordaining from their birth either that they are not, and cannot by any possibility become, fit for employments which are legally open to the stupidest and basest of the other sex, or else that however fit they may be, those employments shall be interdicted to them, in order to be preserved for the exclusive benefit of males. (Mill, 1991, p. 524)

Mill's brave denunciation of the evil nexus of subjection, domination, and inequality concerning the relation of the sexes makes his readers aware of a shocking reality: he argues that the root cause of the perpetuation of sexual inequality is men's intolerance to living with an equal (Mill, 1991, pp. 500-501, p. 524). To sustain the relations of male command and female obedience, men resort to methods of legal and social engineering that can help them to maintain their superior status and keep women under control. In his famous "Statement on Marriage," Mill renounces "these odious powers" that marriage law conferred upon the husband over his wife's "person, property, and freedom of action" (Mill, 1996a [1851], p. 99).

An effective method of achieving the continuation of this command and obedience ethic is to prevent married women from owning their own property. Women's economic dependence on their husbands is the result of an array of strategies including lack of adequate education and training, little if any access to the world of professions, and a lack of property rights. Social, political and economic inequality feeds and reinforces the unequal status of women in marriage. Recognition of the property rights of married

women would undermine male dominance and protect the personality, dignity and liberty of women.

The legal right to ownership of property is an important mainstay for the individual's development, security and self-realisation. Mill wants to safeguard women's right to legally retain their own property. Property is an "instrument of power" (Mill, 1991, p. 522) and a woman's position improves when the law recognises her right to own property as the right to property is a key to independence and freedom. Furthermore, allowing married women to keep and acquire their own property secures equal treatment between married and unmarried women concerning property rights. In other words, a married woman's right to property gives her an equal status with respect to two other groups in society: men and unmarried women. This arrangement protects both women's interests, and the ethical character of marriage. It prevents "the scandalous abuse of the marriage institution, which is perpetrated when a man entraps a girl into marrying him without a settlement, for the sole purpose of getting possession of her money" (Mill, 1991, p. 522). A law at that time promoting equality, justice, respect and recognition for all would be beneficial to both individuals and society.

At this stage, Mill refers solely to the property rights of women of the wealthy class. He does not clarify whether these women would also choose to have professional occupations in addition to their domestic duties. One could argue that they probably would because, for them, the heaviest part of child rearing and housekeeping lies in the hands of nannies and servants. Yet, even then, this does not mean that the privileged women of the upper classes can do whatever they want. A woman of "a rank and circumstances" might not spend time on household chores, yet she is still responsible for the management of her family's "intercourse" with "society": "the dinner parties, concerts, evening parties, morning visits, letter-writings, and all that goes with them" (Mill, 1991, p. 551). A female aristocrat is also constantly preoccupied with matters of dress and beauty and with the cultivation of a pleasant atmosphere at home where "she is expected to have her time and faculties always at the disposal of everybody" (Mill, 1991, p. 552).

However, if such women have access to proper education and training and there are no legal barriers concerning female entrance to professions, women of the upper classes would choose occupations that suit their interests and thus can contribute to

their self-realisation. Enjoying the security that the right to property gives, aristocratic women would have more time and freedom to consider options and decide on what is best for them. As they do not need to work for a living, they might focus on cultivating their intellectual, aesthetic and scientific interests purely for enjoyment contributing both to their self-realisation and to the common good as all actions have a social influence. They would also continue to engage more thoroughly and professionally in philanthropic work by running charities and other similar organisations. Of course, this is hypothetical thinking as I endeavour to elaborate further on Mill's theory and develop rather freely a line of argument. Mill would probably retort that aristocratic women, despite the domestic help at hand, still have limited time to pursue their own interests for they should devote lots of energy and thinking to commitments related to the demands of their social class (a point that I have already noted in the previous paragraph). Perhaps, a reform of the complicated system of etiquette characterising "society" was needed to free women (those of whom wished to be free) from all these time-consuming duties and responsibilities stemming from their social status and class.

My analysis of Mill's thoughts concerning women's right to property and their access to the world of professions refers mainly to the women of the property-owning classes of the Victorian nineteenth century. Mill focuses on the women of the property-owning classes because these women had property through their families, given the fact that, in his time, women did not have access to the whole range of professions and entrepreneurship in order to acquire property via other means. The socio-political structures and the economic life were also different from ours today. Although Mill refers to a particular group of women in a specific historical socio-economic context, his argument has broader applicability. Mill refers mainly to property that a woman acquires as inheritance. Yet he also speaks of "gains" – another form of property relating to money acquisition from a job or from other profitable activities (related probably to the management of one's estate or to other financial and commercial enterprises). Mill refers to "a woman's inheritance or gains" which "ought to be as much as her own after marriage as before" (Mill, 1991, p. 521).

At the normative level, Mill's ideas concerning women's property rights and equality of opportunity apply to all women, single or married, and women of the various social classes. The

emphasis on the women of the property-owning classes is justified because, during Mill's time, these women represented a group of individuals who as single women had property, but as married women lost this entitlement to their husband. In this case, rich parents usually took measures by means of settlements "to withdraw the whole or part of the inherited property of the wife from the absolute control of the husband" (Mill, 1991, p. 503). The right of women to keep ownership of their property after marriage is central to their financial security and independence. Furthermore, recognition of women's right to choose freely among professions and occupations would enable women from poorer households and other social classes to create wealth and acquire property. There must be equality before the law. This would be a historical development showing social progress and a fundamental change of attitudes. Financial independence makes women (married or single) real mistresses of their life and fortune because it gives them freedom to develop their agency, cultivate their capacities, and express their volition. Mill starts from his current reality and develops a normative framework to accommodate future developments. Every step in the right direction supports social change and maximises happiness.

The right to property and equality of opportunity are fundamental tenets of liberalism. Recognition of rights in the state's legal system safeguards the existence of rights and demonstrates the political will to give typical legal authority to arrangements that consolidate good governance and serve the public good. Legal recognition of a right means that a person can invoke the law and appeal to courts when there is violation of this right. Rights are powers that protect the freedom and dignity of individuals, while, by doing so, they contribute to the maintenance of a well-constituted society and to the attainment of the common good. For instance, the right of the individual to have access to professions and occupations independently of class, sex, religion or race is a power that enables people not only to attain self-realisation, but also to contribute to the well-being of their community. The cultivation of talents and abilities is good both for the individual and for society. Access to professions and occupations means that individuals (in our case, women) can earn their own money. Economic independence is central to freedom, happiness and self-determination and to the individual's personal and political autonomy.

The Sexual Division of Labour in the Family: A Puzzling Passage in J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women*

"The *power* of earning is essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has not independent property" (Mill, 1991, p. 523). Although this statement expresses Mill's standpoint within a specific discourse, it has a wider reference and applicability, for its core idea is a woman's right to earn money and be in charge of her finances. The normative principle that this statement contains is that the power of earning is important to all women – having or not having property; being married or single. It becomes essential "to the dignity of a woman," if she does not have other means of wealth. The power of earning relates to the right to work and the right to own property. Mill's narrative harbours a powerful critique of the system and prepares the ground for an emancipatory discourse. Concerning women's power of earning, he uses an approach that refers both to the case of married women and, more widely, to all women's empowerment and equality. Mill's aim is to defend women's right to live in a socio-political environment that supports equality of opportunity and freedom of choice. In order to accomplish his purpose, he must use a persuasive discourse. This means that he should show to his audience that his theory does not threaten the ideal of family life, but, on the contrary, it enhances it by making its moral purpose fairer and conducive to the well-being of all its members.

I now turn to Mill's views expressed in the last two pages of chapter II of *The Subjection of Women*. I discuss freely Mill's position without losing sight of his main idea. A woman's right to work and earn money should be recognised and legally safeguarded. Women can decide how they will use this right and the arrangement of the division of labour in the family is something that can be resolved by informed opinion and dialogue. I think that Mill's theory offers us the necessary tools in order to observe the demands of reason and justice without challenging the traditional state of things if it serves both the individual good and the common good. How is, then, the power of earning related to the good of a married woman? Marriage can fail and the woman might find herself in an insecure and stressful position. Financial independence is not a panacea, yet it empowers individuals and helps them improve their life by providing them with the

necessary means to cope with dignity in difficult circumstances. However, if everything runs smoothly and nicely in marriage and the livelihood of the family depends on job earnings, Mill suggests that the traditional division of labour is preferable. Mill's discourse accommodates both scenarios of married life – the good and the bad. He highlights, however, what is the best route to follow (according to his view), when all is good in marriage and the common arrangement can continue: the husband “earns the income” and the wife is in charge of the domestic expenditure and household management. Mill writes:

When the support of the family depends, not on property, but on earnings, the common arrangement, by which the man earns the income and the wife superintends the domestic expenditure, seems to me in general the most suitable division of labour between the two persons. If, in addition to the physical suffering of bearing children, and the whole responsibility of their care and education in early years, the wife undertakes the careful and economical application of the husband's earnings to the general comfort of the family; she takes not only her fair share, but usually the larger share, of the bodily and mental exertion required by their joint existence. If she undertakes any additional portion, it seldom relieves her from this, but only prevents her from performing it properly. (Mill, 1991, p. 522)

This passage from *The Subjection of Women* has generated an avalanche of responses. Almost all analyses of Mill's feminist treatise contain some reflections on this extract. Mill, the advocate of perfect equality and of women's rights, suggests that married women would better devote themselves to the domestic sphere, while men would operate in the competitive world of income earning (Mill, 1991, pp. 522-523). At first, this is a rather “frustrating” moment in Mill's discourse, especially if the reader has hastily “transferred” Mill's views into a contemporary feminist framework and judges his ideas accordingly. It also appears to be a curious turn in the narrative of women's empowerment. We would rather have preferred to see Mill putting an end to the sexual division of labour, as well as asserting that married women should also have a job and pursue a career. Yet, this means that

instead of trying to understand Mill's theory, we want to impose our own views on what he should have written and then, develop a critique according to what we have expected to hear. Mill's views on the issue of the most suitable division of labour in the family as expressed in this particular passage of *The Subjection of Women* is definitely an intriguing topic. It is worth considering some of the relevant commentary.

For Julia Annas, Mill's position concerning the sexual division of labour in the family is "most unsatisfactory" and "confused" (Annas, 1977, pp. 189-190). Jennifer Ball believes that although Mill thinks that the traditional sexual division of labour in marriage was "efficient," this does not mean that he would have completely ruled out the possibility of a different arrangement (Ball, 2001, p. 521, pp. 525-526). Barbara Cameron credits Mill with the recognition that a woman's role in the domestic sphere as a full-time wife and mother is equal to her husband's role in the public domain of competition and money-earning. Yet the fact that the woman remains financially dependent on her husband means that Mill did not address effectively the issue of sexual inequality (Cameron, 1980, p. 782). For Diana Coole, "Mill's claims never amount to an attack on the sexual division of labour which underlies much inequality" (Coole, 1993, p. 111). According to Susan Hekman (1992), the sexual division of labour in marriage is a hindrance to women's equality and freedom. Very few women of exceptional faculties could have both marriage and a career, while most women would choose marriage. Patricia Hughes argues that Mill's adherence to the conventional division of labour in the family limits the radical potential of his theory, for it is assumed that "taking care of a family was a woman's usual, preferable, and desired role" (Hughes, 1979, p. 532). Kate Nash argues that although a woman's choice of marriage and motherhood might limit the spectrum of her activities, the primary domestic role of a married woman does neither mean a lower status, nor lack of legal rights "to protect her from the power of her husband" (Nash, 2001, p. 261). For Susan Moller Okin, Mill's unquestioned acceptance of the traditional family and of its "demands on women" limits his liberal feminism (Okin, 1992, p. 230). Yet, Mill is a non-dogmatic thinker, and he "would certainly not have claimed to have said the last word on the subject of women's position in society" (Okin, 2005, p. 46). Jennifer Ring claims that Mill's preference for women's traditional role in the family derives from his methodology and shows a theoretical confusion. Does Mill admire

women for qualities which are the result of their subordination? "If the qualities already present in women are uniquely desirable, what is the motivation for changing women's circumstances?" (Ring, 1985, p. 39). Nathalie Sigot & Christophe Beaurain are critical of Mill's acceptance of the sexual division of labour in the family and argue that his stance on the status of married women "is surprising" for it confirms patriarchal principles and excludes married women from professional occupations (Sigot & Beaurain, 2009, p. 301).

This brief survey shows the undiminished scholarly attention that Mill's more conventional "turn" concerning the division of labour in marriage has generated. It also demonstrates the selective way in which some of the commentators acted in judging Mill. The critics sometimes give the impression that they have read only the first sentence of Mill's statement. I agree with Stafford who notes that "that page and a half" in which Mill expresses his views on the most suitable division of labour in marriage "has attracted an inordinate quantity of commentary" (Stafford, 2004, p. 174). I think, however, that it is important to shed more light on this subject because it relates to an array of issues concerning Mill's feminist philosophy such as the nature of Mill's feminist thought; his rhetoric and strategy; our interpretations of his feminist discourse; and, the contemporary reception of his ideas.

Understanding J. S. Mill's Feminism

A discussion of this "problematic" passage in the last two pages of chapter II of *The Subjection of Women* is necessary in order to get a better idea of Mill's position. Instead of "condemning" Mill, we must consider both the tactical purpose of his essay and the historical period in which Mill writes. My analysis contributes to a more holistic understanding of Mill's theory and suggests a reading that is both historically sensitive and aware of Mill's strategy and gender diplomacy. We must read Mill's theory as open-minded feminists who would not allow ideological blinkers to hide from view what Mill actually did and how he contributed to women's liberation. Mill's style of writing can be intricate and requires patience, analytical skills, and an ability to maintain focus on his main aim concerning women's well-being as expressed in various parts of his philosophical discourse. In what follows, I reflect on Mill's position and I identify some points that could lead us to a better understanding and appreciation of his thought.

Firstly, Mill's suggestion concerning the traditional division of labour in the family does not refer to single women who, when equality of opportunity becomes a reality, would be free to choose a profession and devote themselves to it. I think that Mill's preferred solution does not support the conservative view that a woman's place is at home, but it shows his intention to inform his readers that things will not change just for the sake of modernisation. He accepts the common practice as far as it does not threaten women's well-being. A scenario of domestic life according to which the husband is the breadwinner and the wife is the homemaker and manager of domestic expenditure is not necessarily a bad arrangement. It can work perfectly well when the two parts involved are happy with this option. Mill's description of the male and female roles in this case accords an equal distribution of power to two partners. The "radical" element in this discourse is that Mill recognises the power of earning as a right that women should have independently of their particular preferences or circumstances. Mill's strategy is to affirm a right that is essential to women's equality and freedom, without destabilising the foundations of the (traditional) family.

For many women, marriage was, and still is, an attractive option. Furthermore, if their economic situation permits it, some women may prefer to devote themselves full-time to their family. This is too a very demanding occupation. Women who prefer marriage might be happy with a flexible job that allows more time for the family; they may delay joining the professional world and give priority to their family instead; they might interrupt their professional career for a while; or they might never seek employment in the competitive job market. It is up to women to decide about the option that better suits them. From a liberal point of view, there is nothing problematic with that, as long as women enjoy unrestricted access to education, information and employment and have their rights legally secured. Rights safeguard individuals from arbitrary interference and coercion and support individual development. Recognition of a right is important for reasons of formal codification, legal reference, and safeguarding of this right. For instance, not all people wish to enter higher education. However, recognition of their right to study if they pass the required exams means that they can enrol in a course independently of sex, race, ethnicity and class.

Secondly, Mill acknowledges that some exceptional women would be able to raise a family and have a profession. Although

this sounds rather elitist, we must note that it does express a progressive idea for Mill's time. Even nowadays, women may be criticised for their ambition to have both children and a career (though the same does not apply to the case of men). Mill's view that a relatively few exceptional women can have it all challenged traditional understandings of women's role and capabilities at that time. Yet, Mill "assures" his readers that only a small number of women can manage a family and a career and that the fulfilment of their responsibilities as mothers is, in this case too, a priority. The important point here is that Mill introduces the plausibility of female excellence in both the domestic and the public sphere. The way I understand Mill's point is as follows. The majority of women would be happy to care for their home and family, without probably desiring to enter the public sphere, at least as long as their constant presence at home is required. Yet, the few women who might have the exceptional ability to combine both family and a career should not be discouraged, but assisted (Mill, 1991, p. 523). Mill also praises women's qualities for leadership and mentions examples of successful queens and empresses (Mill, 1991, pp. 528-532). A queen is a queen whatever her marital status is. She is born into this position and nobody questions her ability to fulfil her duty as a monarch because, by virtue of her role, she is above and beyond the tyranny of public opinion.

Thirdly, Mill prefers the arrangement according to which married women stay at home instead of joining men in the competitive world of income earning, because he has a reasonable fear that, if women follow the latter option, they would be loaded with both family duties and job responsibilities and thus do more than their fair share of work. In Mill's time, families were bigger, social etiquette was more complex, and women did not have at their disposal the labour-saving devices we are familiar with today. As a result, women would be exhausted, unhappy, and probably less efficient in the accomplishment of their duties. To avoid this toll on women, Mill theorises the division of labour in the family from a distributive justice perspective and prioritises justice over autonomy (McCabe, 2015, pp. 231-232; 2018). Of course, Mill could have mentioned the option of men helping in the household, but it might have been a radical idea that would not resonate with the majority of his audience. We must not forget that Mill wanted to persuade his readers, not to alienate them. "His goal was to persuade property-owning men, who already had the vote, to go against their natural inclination to hold on to

power, and extend the franchise to their wives, daughters and sisters” (McCabe, 2015, p. 228). Mill could have recommended the hiring of more domestic staff; but this proposal could have triggered reactions concerning economic and social inequalities for it refers to an arrangement that suits rich households. Flexible working hours would have been another possible solution, bearing in mind, however, that this option requires an advanced system of employment rights.

The adoption of an ill-conceived egalitarianism that requires for married women to work both domestically and outside the home, while remains silent regarding men’s contribution to household work can generate more injustice and evil. Mill explains that there might be cases where a woman is exploited by a coercive husband who abuses his power “by forcing her to work, and leaving the support of the family to her exertions,” while he indulges “in drinking and idleness” (Mill, 1991, p. 523). Mill wants to safeguard women’s dignity and freedom, not to jeopardise their well-being and happiness in the name of false equality.

Can we then argue that Mill’s feminism is flawed because he prefers the common arrangement of gendered division of labour in order to either save women from an unfair burden of work, or to reassure them that they are protected against exploitation in a non-ideal state of social conditions? Certainly not. We must consider both the socio-cultural context of Mill’s writing and the tactical nature of his feminist treatise, before rushing to judge his views dogmatically and unappreciatively using today’s feminist standards. In addition, Mill’s discourse is multi-layered and invites further analysis and interpretations. This observation leads us to our next point.

Reflecting on Mill’s narrative, one could suggest that another way of dealing with the “work or family” dilemma is the possibility of an interrupted career. The woman stays at home during the crucial years of children’s upbringing and joins the labour market again, at a later stage. Women sometimes choose this alternative, albeit it has its drawbacks and, in any case, it does not represent an ideal arrangement for a talented and career-minded woman. It might offer a kind of solution, but it does not challenge the conventional sexual division of labour in the family. Mill does not object to the idea of women having other pursuits during the time in which they are mostly devoted to raising a family. He seems to allow that married women can have other occupations – without however giving exact details – as long as these activities do not

interfere with the primary duties of a woman as a wife and mother. Mill writes:

Like a man when he chooses a profession, so, when a woman marries, it may in general be understood that she makes choice of the management of a household, and the bringing up of a family, as the first call upon her exertions, during as many years of her life as may be required for the purpose; and that she renounces, not all other objects and occupations, but all which are not consistent with the requirements of this. The actual exercise, in a habitual or systematic manner, of outdoor occupations, or such as cannot be carried on at home, would by this principle be practically interdicted to the greater number of married women. (Mill, 1991, p. 523)

He then mentions that “the utmost latitude ought to exist for the adaptation of general rules to individual suitabilities” (Mill, 1991, p. 523). In my view, Mill endeavours to accommodate in one framework both the traditional division of labour in the family and a more progressive understanding of women's place in society. Although from a feminist perspective, this approach is debatable, we must recognise an important point. Mill does not discriminate between occupations in the public sphere (the professions) and women's work in the domestic realm. He regards both types of work as being of equal importance: each one with its own set of duties and responsibilities. Di Stefano, however, believes that Mill's analogy between a woman's decision to marry and a man's choice of a profession “is disingenuous,” for a woman's “choice” to be a housewife does not open to her the plurality of options that “her male counterpart” has in choosing among different professions (Di Stefano, 1991, p. 178). Although Di Stefano has a valid point, I think that the key issue here is Mill's recognition that the two types of work – household management and the professions – are of equal importance. Mill acknowledges the value and the importance of household management. A woman's decision to start a family and run a house is like a man's choice of a profession. I agree that there are some rather problematic issues in Mill's view. First, Mill seems to “forget” that the professional world is more pluralistic, dynamic, and, in many cases, more exciting, than the domestic realm. Second, Mill's view implies that

the household management and the domestic responsibilities are a woman's job. Third, household management does not provide women with financial autonomy and they still need to have other sources of wealth. Although I understand the feminist objection, I stress the fact that Mill compares the household management on equal terms with the jobs in the public sphere. His position implies that housekeeping and child-rearing constitute a job in the domestic sphere, requiring skills and having duties and responsibilities as the jobs in the public realm do. The domestic and the public, albeit different spheres, are linked in the social dialectic of the communal life and through the moral dynamic of citizenship. The well-being and ethical character of the families that comprise a community have an impact on the healthy constitution of society and the state.

In defending Mill, I would like to note that Mill's comparison of a woman's decision to get married to a man's choice of a profession might hide an undetected radical element. This is the fifth point that I will discuss in my endeavour to clarify Mill's position. I now turn to this issue. To establish the equal value of a woman's choice to get married and a man's choice of a profession is the first step in this discourse. The analogy that Mill draws can be further analysed for it challenges the traditional view of gendered division of labour, which regards family and housekeeping as being the "natural" option for women. Mill's statement might imply that not all women are naturally drawn into the domestic realm. For some women, marriage and children might indeed be a natural choice. For others, it may be the most useful option for the time being and in the context of a particular socio-cultural environment where conditions conducive to freedom and equality for all are yet to exist. A woman might choose to stay at home, at least for the time that is necessary for raising her family, because this seems to be the best available choice, given the fact that there is no social policy regarding, for instance, the provision of nurseries and/or other day care arrangement for working mums. The "best available" choice is not identical with the "natural" choice. The phrase "best available choice" implies a rational process of decision-making based on the consideration of various conditions and circumstances, and suggests that choice *a* can be replaced by choice *b* if the situation changes and the reasons that supported choice *a* are no longer valid. On the other hand, the word "natural" alludes to a kind of determinism that is more difficult to change.

I think that Mill adopts a complex strategy to achieve, or prepare the ground for, the goal of equality. Considering the type of society in which he lives, he suggests his preferable option in order to protect married women from possible further hardship and exploitation. He also leaves space for individual initiative and micro-level negotiations between rational human beings. This “dialogue” would be more effective when society and the individuals who constitute it reach a level of right opinion on these matters. Mill explores the potential of emancipation and attempts to establish processes of change without provoking the reaction of a society that might not yet be ready for a completely new model of family life. In a masterly way, Mill combines his feminist discourse with a recognition of the utter value and importance of care for both the wellness of the family and the development of society. I now turn to this point.

Mill's feminist theory accords a prominent place to the concept of care which characterises family life, and whose impact and significance extend well beyond it. A key moral function of a household is to provide security, love and care for its members, especially for those who are dependent and need material and emotional support. Care is both a fundamental value in the domestic sphere and a social necessity. Historically and traditionally – for reasons we cannot analyse in the context of the present article – women have been seen as the primary care providers. Mill's recognition of women's pivotal role in the family shows his respect for women's nurturing and caring capacities. Mill values more highly the complexity of care-giving ability (and, I would add, the central role of women in the administration of care) “than people who argue for men to provide care without first acquiring the requisite skills” (Bhandary, 2016, p. 181). The responsibility of care requires knowledge, aptitude and skills and should not be assigned thoughtlessly to anyone just for reasons of equality.

The family is the place where the foundations of the moral character are laid and the virtues of respect, co-operation, responsibility and duty are cultivated. Love and care are important for human development and for the creation of a healthy social environment conducive to global well-being and happiness (Held, 2006, p. 168). Mill's feminist theory reminds us of difference feminism and care ethics discourses which focus on emotions, the relational self, and the importance of a holistic view of society and the individual (Engster, 2007; Held, 2006; Noddings,

2002; Tronto, 1993). Some feminist thinkers might believe that the emphasis on women's nurturing abilities can harm the cause of female emancipation because it "confines" the woman to the role of care provider. This role, which historically has been seen as almost exclusively assigned to women in the context of patriarchal power relations, may in some cases impede a woman's path to empowerment and self-realisation. For instance, Rowland-Serdar & Schwartz-Shea (1991, p. 620) argue that the "tendency to glorify women's nurturing abilities can reify what are historically produced traits. Such glorification encourages women to lose sight of the connection between the care ethic of women and the context of subjugation within which it arose." I think that Mill's theory is immune to this danger. His recognition of women's particular qualities related to the well-being of the family by no means overshadows his focus on, and defence of, women's right and ability to realise themselves in the public realm. Mill also believes that women's empowerment not only would make them better mothers, spouses and citizens, but also would contribute to the moral progress of society as a whole. This is a view that we also find in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft, 1992). In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill "discusses the issue of women's empowerment and rights in relation to the promotion of social utility and the common good" (Panagakou, 2017, p. 22).

We must also note that Mill favours the traditional division of labour when he shifts the focus from the property-owning classes to families whose support depends on earnings, not on property. His remark that the power of earning "is essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has not independent property" (Mill, 1991, p. 523) can produce a variety of interpretations. Firstly, if a woman has independent property, she can rely on the profits generated by the use of her property, without having the pressure to look for a job. Of course, this presupposes that women have economic and other rights. Secondly, the woman might have a profession, but as her livelihood does not depend thoroughly on it, she has more freedom and flexibility. Thirdly, if she comes from the wage-earning classes and there are problems in her marriage, she can find a job and preserve her dignity by being financially independent. Finally, we examine the case of a perfect marriage. The wife might probably prefer to stay at home, at least for the period that is required for the smooth running of all aspects of domestic life. She is in a loving relationship with her husband and she does not

experience any financial hardship or threat. She can focus on her domestic duties without needing to find a job for income. I think that this is the case that Mill has in mind when he suggests that the existing division of labour in marriage seems to him, in general, to be the preferable option. According to this model, the husband is the breadwinner of the family and the wife runs the household. Mill simply stated his own preference, and he would not have objected to a different division of labour in the family: "He would probably have celebrated the diversity. He loved and encouraged experiments in living (Burgess-Jackson, 2005, p. 86). Jennifer Ball observes that Mill's views show "his affection for the traditional family," yet, this does not mean that he would oppose new possibilities in parenting (Ball, 2001, p. 510). J. S. Mill is a non-dogmatic thinker who welcomes reflection and dialogue. He safeguards a woman's fundamental rights, yet he does not dictate every detail, living space to individuals to find the most suitable arrangement for their lives.

Finally, Mill did not live and write in a vacuum, but in the context of the nineteenth-century English society. The views of Stafford (2004), Urbinati (1991) and McCabe (2014) are relevant to this point. Stafford urges us to think historically. Mill's "conventional" view refers to a particular social culture that made it almost impossible to envisage as viable an alternative arrangement for the time being. Stafford explains: "In Mill's England, if a man interfered in the management of the house this could be regarded as infringing his wife's rights and even as grounds for separation" (Stafford, 2004, p. 174). According to Urbinati, Mill's endorsement of the traditional sexual division of labour within the family is tactical. He wanted "to assure his Victorian readers that even without formal obligation" a woman's choice would be to raise a family (Urbinati, 1991, p. 640). Mill aimed at convincing a wider audience who could welcome gradual reform concerning the issue of women, but would not endorse radical change. McCabe (2014, p. 56) places *The Subjection of Women* in the conceptual framework of Mill's "new philosophy of persuasion" that he developed after his mental crisis of 1826/7. Mill's new persuasive philosophy was "based on trying to bring people, from their own standpoints, to change their views incrementally until they had better opinions, which they had formed for themselves" (McCabe, 2014, p. 39).

This thorough analysis of Mill's views expressed towards the end of chapter II of *The Subjection of Women* gave us the

opportunity to discuss his approach and delve deeper into his theory and strategy. My aim was to show that Mill, in “that page and a half” that has attracted so much feminist attention, focuses consistently on women’s well-being and self-realisation. A woman who does not object to her current position in the division of labour in the family should also have the right and freedom to seek an alternative arrangement if she ever wishes to. Rights empower individuals and provide them with protection when they need it. The existence of a right does not endanger the traditional division of labour as far as the latter is the result of a consensus between the two spouses. Mill does not challenge his audience. If the current practice does not cause harm to anyone and both spouses find it useful, the common arrangement can continue. Yet, he also recognises the importance of the power of earning to women. Mill’s strategy is to offer reassurance without, however, closing the door to other possibilities. The right of a woman to have a job and earn money can peacefully coexist with the option of the conventional division of labour in the family. We must note that Mill prefers the latter in the context of the particular socio-cultural conditions characterising his epoch. He also remains steadfast to his programmatic goal. J. S. Mill is aware that in socio-political matters, we achieve a more permanent victory by means of persuading and including, not alienating, our audience.

Conclusion

In *The Subjection of Women*, J. S. Mill relates women’s empowerment to the recognition of rights and equal opportunities. The right to property is fundamental for women’s freedom and independence and the power of earning is essential to women’s dignity. Mill identifies and castigates ways of thinking and practices which keep women in a subordinate state. It may be the case that many men cannot tolerate the idea of living with an equal – and this can be seen as the main reason why Mill observes that women remain in a state of dependence and subjugation in the domestic sphere. Preventing married women from keeping their own property is a powerful weapon in the patriarchal politics of domination-subordination relations. A lack of equal opportunities and thus absence of free choice complete the picture of women’s confinement to the domestic realm. Mill speaks of this injustice and envisions a society characterised by equality, real progress and human well-being. He supports women’s

empowerment and rights and *The Subjection of Women* is an ode to female emancipation. Yet, having said this, Mill seems to undermine his feminism when, in a controversial passage towards the end of chapter II, he prefers the sexual division of labour for married women as the most suitable solution when the support of the family depends on earnings. As expected, this statement has generated an avalanche of feminist responses.

In this article, I have identified some key points concerning a better understanding of Mill's feminism in the famous puzzling passage wherein he appears to support the sexual division of labour in marriage. I noted that Mill refers to married women in families whose support depends on earnings (not on property), while acknowledging that some exceptional women would be able to have both a family and a profession. He favours "the common arrangement" in order to avoid overloading the woman with both family commitments and a job, especially in cases where a lazy or inconsiderate husband can exploit the wife. Mill's discourse does not rule out the possibility of an interrupted career for married women who wish to work. Mill thinks that a woman's decision to get married is of equal importance to a man's choice of a profession – a view which harbours a couple of interesting interpretations. Mill's recognition of women's pivotal role in the family shows his respect for their nurturing and caring skills and for their contribution to the moral development of society. At this point, Mill's theory anticipates themes in difference feminism and the ethics of care discourses.

A thorough understanding of Mill's feminist theory requires a distinction between Mill's feminist discourse and our own expectations from his feminism. A critical assessment is always welcome; yet when a critique is accompanied by disappointment because we did not find what we would have wished to read, it is a bit problematic for we project our own ideas and expectations on the narrative and we judge the text in a preconceived manner. For instance, M. L. Shanley (1981, p. 242) argues that Mill holds traditionalist views concerning the division of labour in the family and that he misses an important dimension in his exaltation of marital friendship, by not considering the man's active involvement in parenting. Mill, however, was not a philosopher of the twentieth or the twenty-first century, and it is rather unfair to project our own wishes, desires and perspectives on his work and then "accuse" him of not being equal to the task. Moreover, even if we feel that Mill failed to address properly a particular issue, we

still should be able to appreciate without prejudice his feminist theory and its importance for the shaping of the social ethos of his time.

Mill was a vigorous campaigner for gender equality and women's rights. As a youth, he was arrested for distributing pamphlets with information about contraception in a working-class district of London (Burgess-Jackson, 2005, p. 95; Hayward, 1873; Mineka, 1972; Packe, 1954, pp. 56-59). He supported the Married Women's Property Bill, the Divorce Act of 1857, and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) (Mill, 1996b [1871]; Shanley, 1981, p. 235). In 1866, he presented a petition for the extension of the suffrage to women. In May 1867, he moved an amendment to the Reform Bill to replace the word "man" with the word "person." Mill was closely involved with the women's movement which "was aided by the theoretical arguments" that he "presented on its behalf" (Coole, 1993, p. 110). He was honorary president of the London National Women's Suffrage Society. Apart from *The Subjection of Women*, Mill wrote several shorter pieces concerning women's equality and delivered public and parliamentary speeches on relevant topics (Robson, 1996; Robson & Robson, 1994; Rossi, 1970, pp. 20-21). As an MP for Westminster (1865-1868), Mill "made a strong mark as a Liberal of radical disposition" because of his interest in controversial causes such as parliamentary reform, proportional representation, Irish affairs, and women's rights (Robson, 1988, p. 503). Mill's commitment to gender equality and his stance on the "woman question" affected his "epistolary friendship" with Auguste Comte (Loizides, 2021).

It is evident that Mill made a great contribution to the fight for women's equality, empowerment and rights. Both his theoretical work and his activism attest to that. J. S. Mill's feminist theory might not absolutely satisfy all contemporary feminists and some might be disappointed because he did not say what he *could have said* in order to tick all the boxes on the feminist list. However, this does not mean that Mill's feminist discourse is of limited value. We should see things in perspective and consider both the socio-cultural constraints of each historical epoch, as well as the objectives and strategy of the philosophers.

In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill discusses the issue of women's equality and freedom from a variety of angles and adopts a complex methodological "dialectic" between the speculative, the normative, the descriptive, the prescriptive, and the strategic

levels of discourse. His diagnosis of the social evil of women's inequality is accompanied by advice on what should be done to address this issue. Mill's writing is characterised by an insightful mixture of vision and pragmatism, of philosophical principles and tactical purposes. Mill applies his liberalism to the cause of women's emancipation and reflects on how to achieve the best results in the context of current realities, modalities and conditions. A thorough appreciation of Mill's thought requires that we approach his work as a whole, not in a fragmentary way. The method of isolating parts of his book and then proceeding to unfair and condemning generalisations is deeply problematic. The richness of Mill's theory inevitably generates discussion and opens new paths of reception and interpretation. In assessing Mill's feminism in *The Subjection of Women*, we should take into account his overall contribution to women's liberation and his efforts to change ways of thinking through writing, activism and other means of public involvement. J. S. Mill is a fighter in the struggle for women's empowerment and rights and his feminist theory provides instruction, inspiration and hope.

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