



# An Analysis of John Stuart Mill's Feminist Theory and Its Relevance Today

Wenxin Xu<sup>(✉)</sup>

School of Marxism, Shantou University Shantou Guangdong, Shantou 515063, China  
18508291713@163.com

**Abstract.** John Stuart Mill was a key figure in the development of early feminism. While keeping the vast majority of Jeremy Bentham's theories as liberal theorists, he revised some of them. His feminist works set the bar high since they in-depth examined both the historical realities of women's equal rights and the contemporary social realities of their exploitation and oppression. However, as feminist theory developed and evolved and as feminist movements proliferated around the globe, Mill's ideas were revealed to have several number of weaknesses that require critical analysis in light of the dominant theories and circumstances.

**Keywords:** Jeremy Bentham · John Stuart Mill · feminism · liberalism

## 1 Foundation of Mill's Feminist Ideology

### 1.1 Theoretical Foundations

In the 19th century, British liberal theorist John Stuart Mill published *The Subjection of Women*, a scholastic work that encapsulated his perspectives on feminism. The feminist ideals of Mill, one of the founders of the first Women's Suffrage Organization in history, had a significant impact on both the feminist movement of his day and the development of feminist thought in later decades.

As a liberal thinker, Mill's ideas were naturally inherited from Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. Mill's argument is not solely from the perspective of women, but from the perspective of the interests of humanity to justify granting equal rights and employment opportunities to women. Firstly, Mill is very forward in suggesting that men and women are not fundamentally opposed to each other and that they are to a large extent even a community of interests. Secondly, Mill argues that only equality between the two parties in a marriage can create a truly beneficial relationship.

### 1.2 Foundations of Reality

In the 19th century, the industrialization of Britain was almost complete and the political democratization of the country had begun, but women were still politically and economically subordinate, their labor was not recognized and their rights were not valued.

© The Author(s) 2023

M. F. b. Sedon et al. (Eds.): SSHA 2023, ASSEHR 752, pp. 1370–1373, 2023.

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-062-6\\_176](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-062-6_176)

On the one hand, the mechanization of mass production separated the family from production, and this made life even harder for British women. After industrialization, however, the cottage industry lost its market and British women, who had been living in the private sphere, had to enter social production to earn a living, but they were unable to obtain the same employment and pay as men. In the 19th century, the majority of working women were employed in unskilled, unorganized, poorly paid service industries and sweatshops [1]. On the other hand, the middle class was growing in size, and the British middle-class women were the first to make a strong demand for gender equality. 'The British feminist movement was initiated by intellectual women in middle-class drawing rooms and fought tirelessly for equal rights for women within a constitutional context' [2]. And while Mill's feminist ideas, as a British thinker active in the 19th century, were both inspired by the middle-class feminist movements of the time, such as his wife, Lady Harriet Taylor, who was a feminist of the time and had a very profound influence on his thinking, 'another force that led Mill to devote himself to the study of feminist issues came from the other force that drove Mill to feminist research was several highly qualified women, one being Mrs. Taylor.....and The Subjection of Women expresses the views that he shared with her' [3].

## 2 The Feminist Ideological Content of Mill

From the account of the birth of man in the Bible's Book of Genesis, the birth of Eve as a woman as part of Adam, the male body, and the fact that Eve's birth was almost entirely out of Adam's need, has set the tone for its overall promotion of a patriarchal view of gender. 'The idea that the female emerges from the rib of the man implies the idea of the male as the whole and the female as the part. From the dependence of the part on the whole, the basic value of the inevitable dependence of the female on the male is derived, and the female naturally becomes the silent another half' [4]. In this religious context, not only did men habitually ignore the value of women as incapable of performing complex tasks, but women themselves fell into the sweet trap of patriarchy, willing to live under male patronage and domination.

Mill argues that women's subservience is not innate but is conferred. There is no natural superiority or inferiority between men and women and that gender differences are determined by social factors. The law, traditional gender concepts, and the social division of labor together create the subordinate position of women. 'The intellectual differences that supposedly exist between men and women are merely the result of differences in their education and environment' [5] (p304).

Mill's argument for the removal of gender restrictions on the right to vote and to be elected. If half of all human beings are women who have no interest in public affairs or are even incapable of doing so, it is clear that such a situation is not conducive to the common well-being of all human societies. Only by granting women the same rights can we promote the awakening of the female community to the extent that they can be of greater value. 'It is the proper means of self-defense for every man to express his opinion when he chooses the one who will rule him, though he must always be excluded from the function of ruling' [5] (p303), Mill argues the case for women's suffrage from a human rights perspective, which is a very clever approach. The defense of human rights

has been one of the dominant ideas in the Western world since the Renaissance, and building on this argument makes this forward-thinking idea more acceptable to society at the time.

Mill argued that women should be given a free and fair chance to compete. Only when women are given the same right to education and employment opportunities will the gap between women and men in terms of ideological and even moral qualities gradually narrow and disappear, 'so that the negative influence of women on their husbands in the family can be minimized and the positive influence maximized, thus maximizing the benefits for both sexes' [3]. Even if one agrees that the education of men is more important, it is not conducive to the development of men if their mothers are less qualified and less educated.

In Mill's view, it is inevitable and natural that some occupations are suitable for men and some for women, but the division of labor does not need to be regulated by law, because if a woman enters a job that is not suitable for her, she will naturally be eliminated [5]. However, Mill does not completely abandon the stereotypes of the traditional gender narrative, and he cleverly replaces the mechanical division of labor between the sexes with the rhetoric of social competition and natural elimination. But he ignored the negative impact that women's structured inequalities in the wider social environment had on their own free choice of occupation and personal development, which is one of the reasons why he was criticized by later feminist scholars.

### 3 Conclusion

Mill, as a representative of early feminism, has made an outstanding contribution to the theory and practice of feminism, which has taken on epochal significance. He exposed the disparities faced by women in the political and social arenas of life, but he was also aware of the pervasive injustice done to women in society at the time. As one of the leading figures of liberalism, Muller viewed the social status of women from the perspective of the development of human society and human happiness and freedom. But Mill's neglect of the impact of economic systems and modes of distribution on male-dominated societies leaves some flaws in his theory.

### References

1. Sally Alexander *Becoming a Woman and other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, British Mackays of Chatham P.L.C, Kent, P.15 -16.
2. Lu Weifang. A theoretical examination of the women's movement in nineteenth century Britain [J]. *Women's Studies Series*, 2003(02):45-50.
3. Wu Han. A study of women's rights from the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people: A review of John Stuart Mill's *On the Subordination of Wom-en* [J]. *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2001(03):41-44+132.
4. Li Shuqin, Tian Wei. A review of Christian feminist theology [J]. *Philosophy Update*, 2004(08):34-39+48.
5. John Stuart Mill *The Subordination of Women* [M] Beijing: The Commercial Press 1996

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

