



Between Reform and Rupture: Women's Emancipation on John Stuart Mill¹

Entre a Reforma e Ruptura: a Emancipação Feminina em John Stuart Mill

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ABSTRACT:

This essay examines the defense of women's rights in John Stuart Mill's social philosophy, contextualizing it within the liberal and utilitarian traditions of the 19th century. Based on an analysis of his mature works, it examines the extent to which Mill proposes a gradual reform or a radical break with the patriarchy. It concludes that while Mill's feminism is not revolutionary in terms of implementation strategies, his ideas represent a fundamental milestone in questioning the logic of female domination and in advancing the debate on gender equality in contemporary political philosophy.

KEYWORDS: John Stuart Mill, Feminism, Liberalism, Utilitarianism, Gender Equality.

RESUMO:

Este ensaio examina a defesa dos direitos das mulheres na filosofia social de John Stuart Mill, contextualizando-a no âmbito das tradições liberal e utilitarista do século XIX. Com base na análise de suas obras de maturidade, investiga-se até que ponto Mill propõe uma reforma gradual ou uma ruptura radical com o patriarcado. Conclui-se que, embora seu feminismo não se configure como uma revolução em termos de estratégias de implementação, suas ideias representaram um marco fundamental para questionar a lógica da dominação feminina e fomentar o debate sobre a igualdade de gênero na filosofia política contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: John Stuart Mill, Feminismo, Liberalismo, Utilitarismo, Igualdade de gênero.

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INTRODUCTION

In line with the discussions of the first phase of feminism, also known as liberal feminism, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) argued that the roots of women's oppression were linked to inequality in education, the restriction of political rights, the rules of marriage and the limitation on the exercise of women's private right to property (CW XXI [1869]²; Miguel; Biroli, 2014, Chap. 1). The combination of these disadvantages placed women in a marginal political position in relation to men, and limited their scope for action to the private sphere.

Mill's social philosophy, attentive to this issue, proposed a revision of the dominant political assumptions in 19th century society, extending the principles of liberty and equality to all individuals, paying particular attention to the situation of women. Recognizing that the concept of human nature was being mobilized to justify the maintenance of the *status quo* and the perpetuation of the "law of the strongest", Mill used the arguments previously published in *On Liberty* [1859], as well as in *Considerations on Representative Government* and *Utilitarianism* [both published 1861] to argue in *The Subjection of Women* [1869³] for the women's emancipation as a necessary political agenda for increasing the personal dignity of the individual, and also as a condition for the achievement of democratic values and the progress of humanity.

From this perspective, Mill argues that increasing general happiness also depended on overcoming gender inequality. First, because freedom and autonomy were fundamental to the perfection of individuality. For him, humanity had more to gain from mutual tolerance than from control over the interests of others. Viewing the realm of conscience as the sphere of life that concerns only the individual, Mill argues that any interference (social or political) would be legitimate only if the agent's behavior posed a risk of harm to third parties (CW XVIII [1859], Chap. 1). Furthermore, he claims that the adoption of the principle of utility requires a convergence between the ideal of individual happiness and the ideal of public happiness, which presupposes a regime of greater equality in the consideration of society's interests. The silencing of women undermined their ability to participate in political decision-making,

² All of Mill's texts will be cited in accordance with the cataloguing indicated in his Collected Works, which was published by Liberty Fund. References to his works will follow the CW format, accompanied by the volume number, year of publication in brackets and the number of the chapter or page(s) where the information is located, depending on whether it is an indirect or direct quotation.

³ Mill compiled the texts that would eventually become *The Subjection of Women* in 1861, a period concurrent with his work on *Considerations on Representative Government* and *Utilitarianism*. However, due to his perception that the timing was unfavourable for addressing the feminist issue, he postponed the publication until 1869. Commenting on the issue, Shirley Letwin (1998, p. 341) states that *The Subjection of Women* was the final part of the Millian argument, published at a time when the author "had already pronounced on all the important themes, and was ready to take advantage of having become the oracle that he had become inside and outside England".

made inadequate the calculation of general happiness, and thus jeopardized the quality of political decisions (CW X [1861]; CW XXI [1869]). Finally, Mill argued that the subjugation of women was a real waste of talent, which he considered unacceptable from a human development point of view, as well as a position blatantly contrary to liberal principles.

Ridiculed for defending what they considered to be a highly controversial cause, Mill saw his work *The Subjection of Women* evaluated by his peers in a fragmented and decontextualized way. Instead of being understood as an illustration of his moral and political positions, the argument for women's emancipation was treated as a minor or irrelevant theme in his philosophical production. After a period of low visibility, during the 20th century Mill's feminist thought was revisited, sparking debates about the scope and limits of his proposals (Morales, 2007). More generally, the intellectuals from the second wave of feminism, emphasising epistemological aspects and seeking to uncover the less obvious mechanisms for reproducing female subordination, began to confront the ideas of liberal feminism, evaluating its approach from two interpretative models: reformist and revolutionary. Associating liberal feminism with legal struggles, such as the right to vote, the exercise of private property and equality in marriage, they accused it of insufficiency in the face of struggles for recognition and social justice. In this way, liberal feminism, of which Mill was an exponent, came to be portrayed as, at best, a struggle for partial reforms, prioritising urgencies and therefore making very slow progress.

This article, which is not intended to be exhaustive, examines some of Mill's canonical works to analyze the argument in favor of women's rights and investigates the articulation between the principles of liberty, equality, and utility in his social philosophy. Based on this theoretical reconstruction, the aim is to understand whether his approach is revolutionary or reformist, justifying the position adopted in the light of his own ideas.

CRITICISING FEMALE SUBJUGATION BETWEEN TWO MODELS

The issue of women's subjugation can be analysed from two paradigms: (a) the model of difference and (b) the model of domination (Morales, 2007).

The difference model recognises the equality of the sexes in social and political life, claiming that if women are equal to men, there is no plausible justification for imposing unequal treatment between the sexes. Linked to the classical liberal perspective, this model emphasises the importance of formal (or legal) equality and the need to adopt reforms within the current system, without, however, questioning or breaking the structure of patriarchal power.

The domination model, on the other hand, goes beyond the demand for formal equality by questioning the grounds for male supremacy and understanding patriarchy as a system of privileges and

advantages that must be challenged because it places men in a position of absolute superiority over women (Morales, 2007, p. 48). There is a more radical dimension to this model, which is not limited to the pursuit of freedom in the negative sense, understood as the absence of arbitrary interference, but requires the combination of different conditions that promote the expansion of substantial freedoms for individuals of both sexes. This model therefore requires significant changes in the way the public and private spheres are organized. In both models, freedom is central. However, it is only in relation to the dominance paradigm that factors such as social and economic dispositions can be brought into the discussion about the content and extent of the freedom to be pursued.

It is therefore necessary to examine which of these positions Mill adopted to understand which model his feminism fits into. His interpreters differ on this question.

In the classical literature, Mill is often classified as a liberal thinker and, in this context, his defense of women's emancipation is often interpreted as a mere call for formal equality between the sexes, promoted especially in the political-institutional sphere, through the extension of suffrage and the granting of civil rights to women. From this point of view, Mill's liberal feminism was actually a critique of the difference model and, consequently, a proposal for legislative reforms that did not aim to break with the fundamental structures of society. This interpretation has lost strength as the fragmented view of his work has been revised.

When analysed through the prism of recognising the social dimension of democracy emerging in his thought, Millian feminism is no longer perceived as an autonomous project of emancipation, but rather as a fundamental part of his broader commitment to individual autonomy and social progress. From this perspective, the internal coherence of the author's thought suggests not only a rejection of the patriarchy portrayed in the model of domination, but also a critique of this social structure, with the recognition that the intersection between the disadvantages imposed on women in the fields of contracts, education and political rights was intrinsically linked to the broader forms of hierarchy and exclusion observed in his time (Calado, 2024, Chap. 3)

Mill's feminism is a constituent of egalitarianism, insofar as it conceptualizes an ideal of unlimited perfectibility that does not accept unjustified distinctions between the sexes. In this sense, Mill considers the exclusion of women to be unjust, given the understanding that they are capable of the same things as men. However, his proposal is also in line with discussions of the domination model, since he condemns the abuses committed against women, highlighting structural issues that go beyond the understanding of freedom as non-intervention, demanding that obstacles that prevented women from participating equally in English society must be overcome. From his perspective, the exclusion of women should also be considered unjust in the light of the realization that women have their own desires

suppressed by education, customs and legislation, making them structurally submissive and dependent. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill would have synthesised these two arguments, oscillating between reformist and radical perspectives (Annas, 2005). The ensuing discourse will meticulously delineate the salient arguments that substantiate this perspective.

UTILITY AS A FOUNDATION AND METHOD FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY

Throughout his oeuvre, Mill expounds the notion that the flourishing of happiness, freedom and the efficacy of government is contingent upon the surmounting of inequality in its various manifestations, namely legal, social and economic. In his argument, he employs the disparity between the sexes as a demonstrative example of this assertion. The basis of this conviction is that equality is the optimal moral framework for individuals, as it fosters the comprehensive development of the social body's rational and moral capacities.

The principle of utility is posited as the underlying tenet of their argument, functioning both as a foundational principle and a methodological approach to achieving democratic equality, and consequently, equality between the sexes. Utilitarianism, more than a mere theoretical framework, is a practical philosophy aimed at guiding people's concrete actions. It provides clear criteria for action and serves as a reliable guide for individual and collective decision-making (Mulgan, 2014).

Alongside the notion of freedom, understood from the perspective of self-determination, the concept of utility serves as an indispensable criterion for political transformation. It establishes an empirically grounded moral principle, rooted in the pursuit of human happiness. Mill, in alignment with the utilitarian tradition established by his predecessors, including the philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and James Mill (1773-1836), maintains that the principle of utility not only proposes an explanatory model of human motivations, but also provides a critical tool for evaluating English social and political institutions (Morrison, 2012). This is because, according to this principle, "actions are [considered] right in the proportion they tend to promote happiness, and wrong as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness" (CW X [1861b], p. 210). Happiness, defined in terms of pleasure and the absence of pain, is presented as the sole desirable end in itself, both for the intrinsic good it brings to the individual and for its role in promoting collective wellness.

In this context, the maximization of happiness assumes the role of a 'summum bonum', as outlined by Mill. This is not in the conventional metaphysical sense, but rather as a normative criterion for social organization. In order to achieve this objective, the principle of utility demands the adoption of a system of broad equality in the consideration of social interests, realising that this is the only way to

ensure the bargaining power and influence of individuals in the political sphere. Once the demand for equality has been realised, utilitarianism also demands the emancipation of women.

The feminist agenda is not merely depicted as a moral imperative; rather, it is presented as an indispensable condition for ensuring the happiness of women, and, by extension, society as a whole. Mill's argument is unambiguous in its assertion that the exclusion of women is a primary factor contributing to the impediment of social progress, owing to the restriction of the development of higher faculties and the limitation of human potential.

Utility, therefore, would not only justify equality between the sexes, but would also serve as the appropriate methodology for its implementation, because it would contribute to the formation and self-development of individuals. In the context of utilitarianism, the transformation of institutions, public opinion and customs would unfold in a gradual manner, anchored in elements drawn from everyday social life and the enhancement of political discourse. This approach eschews appeals to expressions such as "common good" and "public interest", which, from a utilitarian perspective, are deemed vague or devoid of content.

FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY IN MILL

Mill's position is that individuals are the best guardians of their own interests, and that the diversity of lifestyles, opinions and knowledge can act as a catalyst for self-improvement (CW XVIII [1859]). However, as he does not advocate a neutral image of happiness, he believes that freedom should only be used to pursue what is good in diversity. In other words, Mill's position differs from Bentham's utilitarianism in which pleasures are considered in a strictly equal regime and evaluated exclusively in quantitative terms. Instead, Mill begins to demand the qualification of pleasures so that they can be pursued legitimately. In this sense, for Mill, adopting a moral point of view does not consist of pursuing personal interests selfishly, but presupposes an understanding of the interests of others and directing behavior towards a stance that favors altruism over selfishness (CW X [1861b]).

This conviction, when considered in conjunction with the importance attributed to freedom, results in the philosopher drawing a precise distinction between what is considered legitimate and illegitimate intervention in the sphere of human autonomy. At the level of conscience, Mill considers freedom to be an absolute good, as it involves individual self-determination, allowing each person to pursue, in their own way, those values they consider fundamental to their happiness. However, in the realm of action, he acknowledges the conditioning of freedom through the imposition of the harm principle (CW XVIII [1859], Chap. 1).

Mill's philosophical standpoint is characterized by a nuanced conception of freedom, understood as existing within the confines imposed by the prevailing social order. This standpoint is further characterized by a defense of the right to intervene in situations where the well-being of others is at risk. Rather than regarding freedom as a right in itself, Mill conceptualizes it as a means to achieve autonomy, thereby enabling individuals to self-determine. This transition from freedom to autonomy, as Mill conceptualizes it, ultimately leads to the development of individuality, which is regarded as a fundamental component of human happiness and a significant indicator of social progress (CW XVIII [1859], Chap. 3). In this context, equality emerges as an indispensable condition for the full exercise of freedom, autonomy and individuality, and is confused with the capacity for self-government (Dalaqua, 2018).

The problem of the issue pertained to the disparity in the degree of freedom and autonomy among individuals, as evidenced by the reality of the 19th century. The social and legal context experienced by women demonstrated the profound impact of inequality, which significantly impeded the ability of this group to exercise their freedom and autonomy. Mill realised - in anticipation of the lessons explored by Amartya Sen (2000) in his work *Development as Freedom* – that exercising personal preferences and self-determination, would require substantial freedoms, such as political participation and education. Those are indispensable elements for the full exercise of people's liberties, as well as their influence in the private sphere.

Mill's conception of this principle is characterized by its emphasis on the intertwined concepts of political and civil liberties. Consequently, Mill's concept encompasses more than mere freedom of action, thought and expression; it also demands real opportunities for individuals to influence their personal and social circles. This dynamic relationship is characterized by a reciprocal relationship, where the expansion of individual freedoms is accompanied by an enhancement in the capabilities of individuals.

A parallel can be drawn between the arguments presented in *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* when Mill discusses the role of liberty and equality in the formation and development of character. In *On Liberty*, he explicitly states that an individual who permits external influences to shape his or her character requires no more than the capacity for imitation [CW XVIII [1859], Chap. 3]. Mill emphasises that the unrestrained cultivation of individuality is an indispensable component for individual wellness, but also, and perhaps even more significantly, for the advancement of civilization. This is due to his belief that no individual is born with innate intelligence. Accordingly, intellectual development occurs in an environment of freedom of thought and expression, as these conditions stimulate the associative capacity between individuals and the exchange of ideas that promotes genius. This assertion underscores the significance of exposure to diverse experiences, which are deemed essential for intellectual vitality and

individual autonomy. In *The Subjection of Women*, the philosopher employs the same logic, contending that the restriction of women's freedom hinders their potential, leading to the squandering of their lives and the stagnation of human happiness (CW XXI [1869], Chap. 4). In both of these works, Mill conceptualizes freedom not only as an individual right, but also as an indispensable catalyst for intellectual development and advancement, both moral and social, for both men and women.

Mill (1859) emphasized that freedom can only be defended among equals, and therefore requires the capacity for individual autonomy and the presence of conditions that ensure the survival of individuals (Dalaqua, 2018).

FREEDOM AS THE ANTTITHESIS OF SUBJECTION

The issue of restrictions on personal freedoms and autonomy, as exemplified by the experiences of women, forms the crux of the problem that Mill addresses in his works. While other liberal thinkers of his time generally began from the premise that autonomy, consent and voluntary choices were interdependent concepts, Mill innovated by denouncing the paradoxical persistence of inequalities and limited access to civil liberties for women in modern times.

To elaborate, women continued to encounter substantial impediments to the exercise of their personal autonomy. A consequence of a rigid social order that compartmentalised the public and private spheres, thereby delineating participation and passivity in a highly delineated manner. While men, as citizens, articulated concerns on behalf of universal issues, women, who were excluded from politics, were confined to tending to specific relationships of a personal and intimate nature. This social structure, reinforced by customs and public opinion, perpetuated the idea of female subjugation as a natural phenomenon. It was regarded as a necessary aspect of social organization for the proper development of relationships (Miguel; Biroli, 2014, Chap. 2).

Expressing dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, Mill, in *The Subjection of Women*, proceeded to enumerate potential rationalizations for the prevailing inequality between the sexes. He advanced the argument that female condition constituted a vestige of modern slavery, a contention that became all the more paradoxical when juxtaposed against the fervent advocacy of liberty espoused by intellectuals since the Enlightenment. From his perspective, the disparities between the sexes were primarily attributable to imbalances in access to education, political engagement, and fundamental rights, rather than being a consequence of innate differences, as had been historically asserted. Furthermore, he advanced a critique of family despotism, deeming it to be incongruent with the values of civilization, as it facilitated and, to a certain extent, even validated the pursuit of selfish interests within the private sphere. Mill argued that the guiding principles of social justice should be cultivated based on interpersonal affinity, in other words,

sympathy. The subjugation of individuals to despotic relationships was identified as a contributing factor to the degeneration of character, impeding the circulation and refinement of moral sentiments, thereby inflicting significant harm on the collective social body. The family, as the primary site of socialization, must not be confined to the normalization of subjugation and repression (CW XXI [1869], Chap. 2).

Confronted with these findings, he adopted a critical stance on human nature as the focal point for his critiques. As an empiricist influenced by associative psychology, Mill advanced the notion that nature can be shaped by external influences. Consequently, the observed differences between men and women can be attributed to the intricacies of social relations. He refuted the conceptions that defended the physical and intellectual inferiority of women, stating that such conceptions lacked foundation and were perpetuated by a model of unequal society that naturalized female submission, without realising the risks that this position represented in moral and political terms. The widespread belief that women were "naturally" inferior or that they had a "natural" inclination towards the private sphere and only meant to look after the home and family was not only erroneous from the author's point of view, but also acted as a real obstacle to development and progress (CW XXI [1869], Chap. 1).

Despite the existence of compelling evidence to the contrary, Mill observed that the patriarchal system was sustained by the belief in the supposed inferiority of women, thus perpetuating mechanisms that not only reinforced but also engendered various forms of oppression. Women, confined to private life and domestic and familial tasks, were subjected to gender stereotypes that defined their behavior as a kind of apathy or docility, as if they played a pre-established social role in eternal and immutable organizational structures. Consequently, the concept of nature, as opposed to that of tradition or custom, was employed as a legitimizing justification for the subjugation of women.

Another issue addressed by the philosopher pertained to an observation that, whilst it may appear self-evident in the contemporary era, was not necessarily so at the time. This observation concerned the fact that this particular model of social organization excluded private relationships from the purview of theories of justice. This, in turn, enabled the development of despotic family relationships, whereby regulation, when it existed, was arbitrarily defined by the criterion of affinity or affection. A significant outcome of this institutional framework was the infantilization of women, which perpetuated the belief that they required guardianship for their entire lives. Consequently, irrespective of age or mental health, women were regarded as lacking the capacity to terminate their relationship with the family unit, remaining under the guardianship of their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons. This system of despotism within the family, cloaked in a paternalistic guise, served to obscure the subjugation of women's freedom and autonomy. Pateman (2020, p. 142) asserts that "classical patriarchy" transformed this reality of child dependence on the father into a fundamental political fact about the world, from which all other aspects

of society derived. In the event that Enlightenment values had been successful in emancipating men from this role of dependence and subordination, it was evident that this prerogative had not yet been extended to women.

The issue of transposing patriarchy from the family to politics raised an interesting question for Millian theory: *since government is a necessity, who should be entrusted with the duty of governing?* Following the prevailing structure, a consistent response to this question was provided: that the role of governance should be assigned exclusively to men. In contrast, Millian theory advanced a distinct perspective. Mill contended that the presumption of men as the sole legitimate authorities for themselves and society was incompatible with the principles of liberalism and, more broadly, with the values espoused during the Modern era. The argument was made that equality was essential for the moral cultivation of society, as was the freedom of competition between individuals interested in exercising this function. It was proposed that the same limiting mechanisms that excluded unfit men from exercising certain functions would be applied to women. He believed that the realization of this concept would empower individuals, irrespective of their gender, to self-protect their interests to the fullest extent. The recognition of a system of male oppression served to underscore the alienation of women's rights and the denial of their autonomy.

Mill's philosophy advocated for the amalgamation of liberal and utilitarian values, thereby establishing a novel social ethic characterized by a pluralistic bias and democratic principles. This philosophy was designed to be incompatible with tyranny, with the objective being to realign the pillars of freedom and equality in favor of maximizing general happiness. Furthermore, it sought to facilitate institutional pathways for the discourse of liberalism. Mill combined liberal and utilitarian values to create a new social ethic, that was pluralistic and democratic, and incompatible with tyranny. It aimed to realign the pillars of freedom and equality, maximizing general happiness. It also opened up institutional paths for the discussion of liberalism.

To ensure freedom and autonomy of women, it was necessary to politicize relevant aspects of the private sphere. This encompassed the recognition and overcoming of family despotism, as well as the expansion of horizons through education and the opportunity to engage in the world of work and politics. Drawing from these observations, in *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill contended that the efficacy of a government could only be properly assessed when its electoral base was broadened, as this ensured that all individuals had the opportunity, to a greater or lesser degree, to contribute to the formulation of policies that aligned with community's values. It is vital that the interests of the general public are aligned with those of the individuals engaged in community life, because it ensures that minority or economically disadvantaged groups are marginalized or rendered voiceless.

Mill's argument is persuasive in asserting the paramount importance of recognising women's political rights. He argues that, within a political framework, unjustified qualifications such as wealth, income and gender should not be permitted to supersede the fundamental right to vote. The sole justification that is deemed valid for assigning greater value to a person's opinion is an affiliation with superior intellectual capacity. Consequently, Mill advocates for the universalization of education as a means for achieving moral and political equality (CW XVIII [1861a], Chap. 8). According to Mill, the criterion of sex would be irrelevant to politics, as would the color of a voter's hair or their height.

The political disqualification of women as a relic of the past is incompatible with the freedom of modern individuals and the equal conditions typically associated with the nascent democratic society. Consequently, the practice should be comprehensively eradicated from both political discourse and social praxis. The model of patriarchal domination was seen as a significant threat to autonomy and individuality, undermining women's capacity for agency and their ability to protect themselves from abuse. This model was regarded as antithetical to the concepts of freedom, autonomy and equality.

REFORMISM OR RUPTURE? IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITS OF THE TWO MODELS FOR CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Studying Mill's political thought is a complex undertaking. The philosopher is a multifaceted figure of the 19th century that synthesizes a series of intellectual influences. This renders any attempt to fit him into fixed and precise categories difficult. This heterogeneity is evident in the philosopher's position on the matters at hand.

Although Mill was an advocate of the liberal system, his political reforms, such as universal suffrage, also involved proposing significant breaks with the dominant tradition of his time, especially concerning patriarchal sexual ethics (Morales, 2007). There was a questioning of the ethics that kept women tied to conceptions of submissiveness and legal incapacity, which represented an obstacle to the exercise of their freedom and full autonomy. In the author's words, this tradition is portrayed as an idea whose foundation is no different from a series of unjustifiable prejudices from the point of view of the rational and/or historical evaluation of its institution (CW XXI, Chap. 1).

A comprehensive analysis of Mill's works, including *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, *Considerations on Representative Government*, and *The Subjection of Women*, illuminates a clear stance in favor of formal equality between men and women. Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates that Mill did not limit his defense of this principle, but also interrogated the very nature of arbitrary domination and female subjugation. Evidence of this can be found in his defense of an ideal of freedom that could bring full emancipation

to individuals and question the *status quo*. This reflects political-philosophical conclusions that were at odds with the prevailing norms and public opinion of his time, bringing him closer to radical ideas.

In this sense, Mill denounced the relationship of command and obedience, which began in the family and spread throughout the structures of society, as a political evil that cannot be relegated to discussions in the sphere of private life. He argued that family despotism functions as a form of pedagogy, inculcating in individuals a disposition to engage in oppressive behaviors. Mill's critique of female subjugation within patriarchal structures was anchored in a direct challenge to the notion of an "immutable" human nature, thereby underscoring the need for a nuanced examination of social structures and individual behaviors. While acknowledging the biological distinctions between the sexes, Mill contended that these could not be employed as determinative factors in delineating capabilities or entitlements. From his perspective, differences – whether based on biological criteria or not – can and should be transformed through education and self-development whenever necessary.

The demand for change in women's education bears a strong resemblance to the demand for the universalization of education. In both cases, there is a perception that external factors, operating independently of individual freedom, maintain individuals of both sexes in a state of subjugation. Consequently, the defense of education can be regarded as a further mechanism for the rupture with the traditional conceptions of the world that prevailed in Victorian society. In summary, these arguments offer a critique of patriarchal ethics, thereby situating Mill within a nascent tradition of radical feminism. Although Mill does not employ the term 'patriarchy' in his work, his critical stance towards this institution and the imposition of an 'immutable order' parallel to slavery is evident (Morales, 2007, p. 47).

Nevertheless, while Mill's critique is unambiguous, his pragmatic approach appears to be indicative of a conservative bias, thus aligning him more closely with the typical reformist perspective. Despite his condemnation of the subjugation of women, the proposals he puts forward for transformation are developed within the confines of an existing institutional framework, eschewing the adoption of sudden ruptures. The teleological nature of his thought process is evident in his pursuit of an ideal moment in which personal interests would align with the common interest, thereby consolidating the progressive march of an efficient government and a responsible society. While emphasising the necessity for legal equality and freedom, Mill does not delve into the intricacies of how such transformations could be realised.

In general terms, Mill's position can be summarized as follows: he recognized that a transformation of this magnitude would not happen overnight. This transformation is a gradual process involving the capacity for agency, the expansion of avenues for individual participation, education, and the improvement of public opinion in favor of the pursuit of general happiness. Utilitarianism, while

mobilized by Mill as a method and foundation for the social reforms he sought to implement, proves insufficient for dealing with structural inequalities, rendering it ineffective in the case of women. This is because, while utilitarianism encourages equal consideration of interests, it also imposes a conditioning on freedom that stems from the very notion of civilization itself. In the context of Mill's value theory, individuals are expected to exercise their freedom in a manner that aligns with the pursuit of a qualified ideal of happiness, one that is in harmony with society. This approach is predicated on the incompatibility of abrupt solutions that disrupt order and do not promote the maximization of general happiness.

Millian's project appears to encounter limitations at the point of intersection between freedom and utility. The application of the principle of utility appears to be ineffective in addressing women's desires, as these desires are shaped and repeatedly distorted by the patriarchal system. Consequently, the pursuit of happiness for women might merely represent the internalization of the subjugation they encounter in their lives. As Julia Annas (2005) has demonstrated, Mill's work appears to lack a comprehensive understanding of the necessity for significant transformations in the realm of human desires if sexual equality is to be realised and manifest. In the absence of such fundamental shifts, even utilitarian egalitarianism risks perpetuating existing models and stereotypes, effectively serving merely as a mechanism for maintaining the *status quo*.

This standpoint is further compounded by the discernment that the ideological framework of liberal feminism is confined to the paradigm of European modernity, thereby overlooking the fact that its foundational principles are rooted in the institution of slavery. This characteristic alone would prevent the recognition of men and women historically excluded from the civilizing process from achieving full inclusion, even after the abolition of slavery. It is contended that to focus on the issue of education without acknowledging the traumas engendered by a world built on the invisibilization, exploitation and physical and mental expropriation of other individuals would be unproblematic. As Françoise Vergès (2020, p. 93) observes, the notion that societal transformation can occur through a shift in mindset, leading to acceptance of differences, is founded on an idealistic conception of social relations.

In addition, there is evidence of other ambiguities in the application of his ideas (Held, 1987; Annas, 2005). The philosopher did not advocate interventionist strategies to improve government or to ensure the inclusion of women in the public sphere. When discussing women's political participation, he states that "having a voice in the choice of those by whom one will be governed amounts to a means of self-protection to which all are entitled, even if they are forever excluded from the function of governing" (CW XXI [1869], Chap. 3). This statement suggests the presence of a distinction between the exercise of the right to vote and the right to hold elective political office, which may indicate a limitation in his defense of female participation in politics. Moreover, Mill's analysis does not delve into the intricacies of

the sexual division of labor. While he advocated women's entry into the workforce, he did not address (and in certain passages, reinforced) the encumbrance imposed by the accumulation of functions related to unpaid domestic work, reproductive work, and professional life (CW XXI [1869], Chap. 3). In a similar manner, when advocating for female education, Mill's positions are not solely defended as means of personal fulfilment but also as a catalyst for enhancing the quality of education for future generations. The author's perspective does not challenge the nuclear family model. Instead, it highlights the central role of women in household management, overlooking the fact that inequality in the distribution of these tasks also contributes to the social asymmetries experienced.

It has been posited that, in the context of the advocacy for women's rights, Mill's writing exhibited more of a political than a philosophical character. Consequently, certain statements may not fully articulate his convictions on the subject, but rather present a strategically moderate version, adapted to the conservative public of the time. Conversely, other interpreters, such as Julia Annas (2005, p. 69), contend that by attempting to harmonise conflicting positions and accommodate diverse viewpoints, Mill inadvertently obscured the clarity of his theory.

It is evident that, whilst his concepts are indicative of the inception of the feminist movement, they are not immune to a fundamental ambiguity. This is characterized by an oscillation between a reformist stance, which is anchored in the utilitarianism and liberalism he advocated, and the proposition of a more radical and profound rupture with the patriarchal structure. This conflict reflects the tensions in the thinking of a progressive man of the 19th century who, at the same time as wanting social reforms, also recognized the need to preserve the institutions in place.

While there are evident limitations and imperfections in his proposals, these do not appear to be significant enough to invalidate his underlying premises, particularly when considering the comprehensiveness of these ideas within the historical context of his era. The emphasis on incremental reform, commencing with the individual and progressively extending to institutions, cyclically, should not overshadow the radical nature of his ideas, even if it may reveal the inadequacy of the methodology employed.

The proposal to reconfigure women's rights was a fundamental step for feminism, as it called into question the patriarchal power structure. Mill's defense that the freedom to pursue happiness should be qualified and based on equal opportunities for individuals, regardless of gender, is also proof of his commitment to revolutionary ideals. Consequently, Mill's work can be situated within a radical tradition of feminism, although his approach and methods are not entirely radical in terms of breaking with established structures. This means that Mill's feminism is a process that is disruptive in some of its foundations, but reformist in its *modus operandi*.

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