



Domestic Violence in Harriet Taylor Mill (1807-1858)

Jo Ellen Jacobs
Millikin University

Domestic violence is a thread that can be traced throughout Harriet Taylor Mill's private and public writing. She began making notes about domestic tyranny as early as 1831-33 then from 1846-51 she and John Stuart Mill co-authored a series of newspaper articles on the subject. In 1851 the topic appears in her "Enfranchisement of Women," and finally in 1853 they wrote a pamphlet suggesting improvements to "Fitzroy's Bill for the More Effectual Prevention of Assaults on Women and Children."

Harriet Taylor Mill saw from the beginning that abuse not only damaged women physically, but also psychologically and often turned them into abusers of their own children. For her, abuse was not merely a theoretical question, but a personal one, since from 1840-1855 her sister Caroline was beaten by her husband. This intimate acquaintance with the problem may have sparked her desire to make this topic public and changing public opinion was easier through journalism than philosophical essays.

The newspaper articles from 1846-1851 were the first to demand that the public acknowledge the existence, extent, and effect of domestic violence. They were not merely factual accounts (as were other newspaper accounts of trials), but aimed to move the reader to feel the horror of this practice. Instead of supporting Victorian mores, these articles were meant to challenge them. Here, as in HTM's discussion of marriage, the private lives of families have political implications. The way power is shared or abused in the family is as important to the development of humanity as is the right to vote. Like slavery, unequal power in marriage is reinforced by physical force.

Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill also exposed the sexism inherent in the entire judicial system-from laws, to judges, to juries, to sentencing. The right to easy, cheap, no-fault divorce was imperative if women were to escape domestic violence. However, ultimately no legal or political reform would be effective without changing the private lives of families.

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