



Gender Equality in Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–1858)

Jo Ellen Jacobs
Millikin University

Whether men and women are intellectually or emotionally equal to men can only be answered in a culture in which women are given complete freedom, according to Harriet Taylor Mill. We cannot judge whether women are naturally more nervous or less rational until girls grow up with the same education, with the same expectations, the same opportunities for careers, the same access to money both in their work and inheritance, and with the same legal rights and responsibilities as boys. Only within a free society can we discover any gender differences.

Meanwhile, inequality is both unjust and inexpedient. According to Harriet Taylor Mill, a just society requires gender equality. If women have no legal power, they learn to use manipulation and sexuality to control men. This is degrading. Further, husbands who care about their wives are distracted from public virtues because their wives' concerns are the advancement of their individual family's status, not the common good. Finally, women who are trained by society to be subservient do not fight for equality because their subordination has numbed them to the importance of freedom.

The second claim about gender equality consists in the argument that since inequality is both intellectually and morally corrupting to both husband and wife, it prevents human progress. When women are trained only to become suitable partners in a "companionate" marriage, they learn enough to be charming, but not enough to be well-informed citizens or challenging intellectual partners to their husbands. Women's education does not develop their reasoning abilities. The result is that men's rational capacities are not exercised during the time they spend with their wives. Finally, gender inequality will stunt human development of the children in a family that practice this shortcoming. Until children are raised in an atmosphere of equality, until girls are taught as boys are, until wives have the same choices husbands have, society will not be as developed as it can be. Here, Mill recognizes that human development is not only about legal and legislative reform but must involve the politics of the family itself. As long as one-half of the species is forced to be underdeveloped, they will drag everyone down to their level.

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