

## **J.S.MILL'S ETHOLOGY AND HIS ENGAGEMENT WITH THE 'WOMEN'S CAUSE'**

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### **Resumo:**

Esse artigo analisa a posição assumida por J.S. Mill em relação a um importante tema da era Vitoriana: o papel da mulher na sociedade. Mill foi um importante protagonista no debate que ficou conhecido como 'a questão da mulher'. Além de ter apresentado em 1866, a primeira petição no Parlamento a favor do voto feminino, publicou em 1869 o famoso *The Subjection of Women* – que se tornou um marco importante do feminismo do século XIX. Argumenta-se que subjacente a sua postura em relação a esse tema estava uma visão específica de natureza humana, que localizava a origem das diferenças existentes entre homens e mulheres nas instituições e hábitos sociais. A análise etológica que o autor empreendeu foi determinante para o seu engajamento na questão em pelo menos três níveis: (i) retirou a legitimidade científica das teorias vigentes, que consideravam as diferenças de gênero inatas/naturais e, portanto, inevitáveis, e abriu, assim, um amplo espaço para reforma social; (ii) orientou a agenda de reforma sociais de Mill ao indicar as instituições e hábitos que produziam e sustentavam a desigualdade de gênero; (iii) forneceu munição para a defesa dessas reformas, ao revelar os resultados sociais benéficos que resultariam da emancipação política, social e econômica da mulher.

### **Abstract:**

This paper intends to analyze Mill's stance concerning an important Victorian issue: the role of women in society. Mill assumed a protagonist part in the so called "women question". In 1866, he presented the first petition in favor of women's suffrage and, in 1869, he published *The Subjection of Women* – an important benchmark in nineteenth century feminism. I argue that underlying his position in this debate was a specific view of human nature, which located the origin of the existent differences between men and women in prevailing social institutions and habits. Mill's ethological analysis was determinant for his engagement in the women's cause in at least three levels: (i) it withdrew the scientific credentials of the prevailing theories, which considered gender differences innate/natural, and thus, inevitable, and opened ample space for social reform; (ii) it oriented Mill's reform agenda concerning women by pointing out the institutions and habits that produced and sustained the existing gender inequality; (iii) it furnished ammunition for the defense of the reforms, as it anticipated the great social improvement that women's political, social and economic emancipation would produce.

**Palavras-chave:** J.S. Mill, etologia, emancipação da mulher, reforma social.

**Keywords:** J.S. Mill, ethology, women's emancipation, social reform.

**ANPEC:** ÁREA 1 – História do Pensamento Econômico e Metodologia.

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## **I. Introduction:**

In the 1860's and beginning of the 1870's a wide range of topics related to women's role in society was subject of intense social debates. There were heated discussions over the laws of marriage and the right of married women to hold property, over domestic violence, divorce, women's suffrage, and prostitution. There were also debates about the type of education given to women and on the pertinence of opening to them prestigious fields such as medicine, law and politics.

J.S. Mill, the most prominent political economist of mid nineteenth-century, and a very influent voice in the Victorian society, engaged arduously in these debates. He advanced a very critical view of women's condition at the time, and claimed for legal, economic and political equality between the two sexes.<sup>1</sup>

Underlying his position concerning women was a specific view on human nature and character formation, which attributed huge weight to environmental factors and contrasted with the prevailing naturalistic conceptions of the time. By adopting an egalitarian stance concerning the nature of the two sexes, and attributing the existing differences to custom, education and other external factors, J.S. Mill interpreted the subordinate condition of women in the Victorian society as an artificial social construct – and, as such, liable to be changed. As I see it, this specific view human nature constituted the backbone of his mature advocacy of women's emancipation and gave support to his reform agenda concerning women's position in society.

To shed light on J.S. Mill's views on human nature, and on how they furnished a firm soil for his reform agenda regarding women, I organized the remaining of this paper in the following way: In Section II, I analyze J.S. Mill's pliable view of human nature and the denaturalization of gender differences of character that it implies. This environmental view of the features of both sexes pointed to the importance of institutional reform in order to alter women's position in society. Thus, in section III, I discuss the reforms in the social institutions that Mill deemed necessary to emancipate women and promote equality between the sexes. In section IV, I examine Mill's anticipation of the (beneficial) ethological impacts that these reforms would produce; At last, in Section V, some final considerations are advanced.

## **II. J.S. Mill and his ethological view of gender differences:**

J.S. Mill believed in the equality among the sexes since his youth, and to foster women's emancipation was an important element of his social thought throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> His starting point was the assumption of a natural equality among human beings and his battle was for the establishment of social, political, economic and legal equality as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Collini (1984 & 1993) classifies J.S. Mill among the English 'public moralists' – who demanded from their contemporaries that they live up to their moral ideal. In fact, especially in the last decades of his life, J.S. Mill performed intensively this role; he was a Member of Parliament and was at the center of several important debates, all of which acquired a high moral tone. As a public man, he consciously used his intellectual and moral reputation to promote the causes he believed important to the (moral) progress of humanity.

<sup>2</sup> He was already an advocate for equality before he met Harriet Taylor, his long-life friend and, afterwards, his wife. His ideas on sexual equality were said to be the reason why Harriet got interested in him in the first place (Mill, [1873] 1981, pg. 252, Peart, 2015, pg. xxxvii and Hayek, 2015, pg. 57). Moreover, the correspondence between Mill and Harriet along the years of friendship and marriage are evidence that his was a very dear issue for both (Hayek, 2015, pg. 57-72; 111/2; 119/20; 133; 137; 163-165; 310). However, Stafford states that Mill began more conventional and sentimental about women, and that Harriet's influence was "[...] *no doubt a good influence who progressively raised his conscience*" (STAFFORD, 1998, pg 131). Thus, Mill had already embraced the idea of equality between the sexes, long before he published his *A System of Logic* (1843). Notwithstanding, I believe his position gained philosophical rigor after he elaborated his mature view on Psychology and Ethology in this book.

At the heart of this position concerning women was a pliable view of human nature, which explained the (undeniable) differences existent in the character of the two sexes, not by differences in their biological natures, but by the action of external factors such as education, economic and social institutions, the legal order, habits, among others (Mill, [1843] 1974, pg. 859).

J.S. Mill's most extensive scientific explanation about the process of character formation is found in Book VI of his *System of Logic* (henceforth *Logic*), and his views on this topic are illustrated in innumerable other works.<sup>3</sup>

As a follower of the associationist psychology, J.S. Mill believed in the existence of some universal law of association of ideas (the psychological laws or the laws of mind) and that the character of each individual was a result of the interaction of these laws with the specific circumstances experienced by him.<sup>4</sup> He even invented a science – Ethology – that determined “[...] *the kind of character produced in conformity to those general laws, by any set of circumstances, physical and moral.*” (MILL, [1843] 1974, pg. 869). Since many of these circumstances were common to a nation, J.S. Mill considered possible to infer the type of national character that tended to be produced by the specific set of circumstances prevailing in the country (Mill, [1843] 1974, pg. 863/4; pg. 870 e pg. 873).<sup>5</sup>

Consistently with this view, J.S. Mill considered that the correct scientific procedure in the explanation of features of character that prevailed at a specific time and place was to relate them, as much as possible, to the general circumstances of that society – that is, to the current social and economic institutions, to the legal order, to habits and to education – “[...] *the residuum alone, when there proves to be any, being set down to the account of congenital predispositions*” (MILL, [1843] 1974, pg. 873).

The scientist, if successful in this endeavor, will have found the causes of the current peculiarities of character, and will be in condition to evaluate “[...] *how far they may be expected to be permanent, or by what circumstances they would be modified or destroyed*” (MILL, [1843] 1974, pg. 868).

J. S. Mill uses this approach to analyze the prevailing gender differences of the time; and as it identified the institutions and social habits that were the root these, this analysis indicated the reforms in institutions that were necessary if equality among the sexes was to prevail.

## **II.1. Decoding the ‘nature’ of both sexes: an ethological analysis of *The Subjection of Women*.**

J. S. Mill's classic essay *The Subjection of Women* (henceforth *Subjection*) is his most complete work on the issue of women.<sup>6</sup> In this text he attacks the tendency of his time to consider all traits perceived in any group of people as being natural “[...] *even when the most elementary, knowledge of the circumstances in which they have been*

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Mill's views on human nature, see Mattos (2005).

<sup>4</sup> For J.S. Mill, “[...] *mankind have not one universal character, but there exist universal laws of the Formation of Character [...] it is by these laws, combined with the facts of each particular case, that the whole of the phenomena of human action and feeling are produced [...]*” (MILL, 1974, pg. 863/4).

<sup>5</sup> For a good discussion about the scope of Ethology and its applied branch, Political Ethology, see Kawana, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> J.S. Mill already professed several of the ideas presented in his *Subjection* (1869) long before he published the essay. Similar ideas can be found decades earlier scattered on several unpublished writings and fragments as in “Marriage” [1832/3?], “Papers on Women's Rights” [1847-50?], in a more organized (and radical) form in Harriet Taylor's “Enfranchisement of Women” [1851] – in relation to which Collini states that “[...] *there is no doubt that he [J.S.Mill] whole-heartedly subscribed to its contents [...]*” (COLLINI, 1984, xxxii). Furthermore, J.S. Mill defended the same ideas in several public speeches delivered in defense of women's suffrage, especially from the beginning of the 1860's on. I chose to center my analysis in this section on the *Subjection* because this is his most coherent and mature work on the subject – and I believe it is very representative of his thoughts on women.

placed, clearly points out the causes that made them what they are (MILL, 1869, pg. 277). It was his conviction that this erroneous philosophical attitude would only recede “[...] before a sound psychology, laying bare the real root of much that is bowed down to as the intention of Nature and the ordinance of God (MILL, 1869, pg. 263).<sup>7</sup>

I believe J.S. Mill’s project in this essay was precisely to apply his ‘sound psychology’ to the analysis of the ‘nature’ of both sexes. That is, to provide an ethological analysis of the gender condition at his time, revealing the real causes of the observed differences between the sexes. This objective becomes clear when he defends the use of exactly the same scientific procedure established in his *Logic* in the context of gender discussion:

[...] however great and apparently ineradicable the moral and intellectual differences between men and women might be, the evidence of their being natural differences could only be negative. Those only could be referred to be natural, which could not possibly be artificial – the residuum, after deducting every characteristic of either sex which can admit of being explained from education or external circumstances (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 277)

J.S. Mill basically takes as his starting point the ‘natures’ of women and of men as they manifest themselves at the time, and then analyses the current circumstances in order to see if they were such as to engender the alleged ‘natural’ feminine and masculine characteristics:

We cannot isolate a human being from the circumstances of his condition, so as to ascertain experimentally what he would have been by nature: but we can consider what he is, and what his circumstances have been, and whether the one would have been capable of producing the other (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 313).

Only those characteristics impossible to be related to the circumstances could, eventually, be considered natural peculiarities of each sex (Mill, [1869]1984, pg. 313). J.S. Mill aimed to show that the existing differences “[...] are such as may very well have been produced merely by circumstances, without any difference of natural capacity (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.305) – the ‘residuum’, if it existed, would be much smaller than usually thought

In a very famous passage, J.S. Mill states: “[w]hat is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others [...]” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 276). The parts that were nourished and stimulated bloomed and manifested themselves with all their force; while the parts that were repressed and inhibited, disappeared. Notwithstanding, he argued that many people confused the feminine character that resulted from these (artificial) actions with the very nature of women (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 276/277).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Twenty years before the publication of *Subjection*, Mill was already convinced that a ‘sound psychology’ would be the best antidote for the existent conceptions on women. In a letter to Harriet Taylor (21 February, 1849) when commenting on what he considered a “very bad article” on women, Mill affirms: “the badness consisted chiefly in laying down the doctrine very positively that women always are & must always be what men make them [...] I am convinced however that there are only two things which tend at all to shake this nonsensical prejudice: a better psychology & theory of human nature[...] & greater proofs by example of what women can do” (MILL *apud* HAYEK, 2015, 137) – Mill presents both in his *Subjection*. It is worth noting that he used the same ‘sound psychology’ to combat naturalistic explanation of racial differences. Many of his contemporaries considered the Black, the Irish and other ethnic groups as inferior by nature. J. S. Mill opposed these views by explaining their prevailing (low) moral and intellectual state of these groups by means of the institutions and external circumstances to which they were exposed.

<sup>8</sup> J.S. Mill argues that the qualities which different nations consider ‘feminine’ by nature differ from country to country. This reveals that they are empirical generalizations and not principles of human nature (Mill, [1869]1984, pg.312).

Among the moral traits usually presumed as naturally feminine were abnegation, self-sacrifice, disposition to serve, focus on the family, lack of interest in the general problems of humanity or society, and inconstancy, susceptibility and volubility. J.S. Mill did not deny the prevalence of these characteristics in women, but related them to education, habits, social pressure, among other circumstances.

In his view, the whole course of women's education aimed at instilling the notion that the ideal character of women was opposite to that of men: "[...] *not self-will and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others*" (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 271). Additionally, all morality preached that the duty of women was to serve, to live for others, "[...] *to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their [husband and children] affections*" (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 272). It was not surprising, then, that when compared to men, women were more abnegated and more willing to sacrifice themselves – since they were "[...] *universally taught that they are born and created for self-sacrifice.*" (MILL, [1869]1984, pg. 293).<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, J.S. Mill argued that, in England, there were few worthy alternatives for women other than marriage – this was practically the only way for them to obtain social admiration. Given this situation, he concludes "[...] *it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character*" (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 272). Additionally, in view of the fact that men considered "[...] *meekness, submissiveness, and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, as an essential part of sexual attractiveness*" (MILL [1869] 1984, pg. 272), women had been educated, and socially pressured, to adjust to this model; thus, the submission of the wife to the husband has come to be seen as natural.

Women's position in society also explained the alleged female bias in favor of their family interests, to the detriment of social interests (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg.321). In J.S. Mill's view, women dedicated their whole existence to guaranteeing the wellbeing and the success of the family, and were educated to think that these were the only people to whom they had any duties and the only ones worth their affection and attention. They also learned that they should not have any part in the public sphere, and that the general questions of humanity of society laid out of their proper sphere or realm (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 321) – no wonder they felt and acted accordingly.

J.S. Mill also aimed at 'denaturalizing' the supposed inferiority of women in the employment abstract thought, in the arts and in realm of science by associating their deficiencies in these areas to the lack of objective conditions to exert and develop adequately these activities.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Ruskin, a very important moral voice in Victorian England, in his famous essay "Of the Queen's Garden" (1865) 'naturalizes' some of these moral attributes and presents an idealized image of women as morally superior to men. For him, the two sexes had different natural attributes, which suited them for different spheres of activities (Cordea, 2013, pg. 117) – with important implications for women's position in society. Men's domain would be the public sphere of work and politics, whereas women should be protected (by men) from the hostile external reality and from the inevitable hardening of character it produced; and should perform mainly in the private sphere of home, being a moral guide to men (Ruskin [1865] 1905, pg.121/122). Beyond this private sphere, only philanthropy was considered adequate to women (Millet, 1970, pg. 78).

<sup>10</sup> As is carefully documented by Gillin (2005), this was an important point of disagreement between J.S. Mill and Auguste Comte – who believed in the inferiority of women based on the biological explanations provided by phrenology. J.S. Mill did not reject totally the eventual role played by physiology (MILL, [1843], 1974, pg. 850/1), but he preferred to put psychology (not physiology) at the foundation of the sciences of man (Kawana, 2018, pg. 143/4). Furthermore, J.S. Mill's environmental view of human nature contrasted sharply with the naturalistic explanations of the inferiority of women that gained impulse in late nineteenth-century with the evolutionary biology. In his *Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin uses the theory of inheritance and the processes of sexual and natural selection to state that through time the two

He compares the production of the two sexes in the sphere of philosophy, sciences and arts and concludes that there are no first-rate works in these fields produced by women (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.314). However, he did not accept this as a proof of their natural inferiority. On the contrary, he asks, “[i]s there any mode of accounting for this, without supposing that women are naturally incapable of producing them?” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.314), and goes on to point out several causes that could easily explain the paucity of feminine intellectual production.<sup>11</sup>

He claims that women started to exert these activities only recently and had less time to reveal their talents (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 314); he explains their lack of originality by this late start, since it is much easier to be original when nothing has been done (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 315); and argues that, differently from men, women did not have access to the type of profound and detailed education that is necessary to excel in philosophy and science (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 316). In the field of arts – in which women of the higher class had been engaged for long time – Mill explains the difference of performance by the fact that women always exerted these activities as amateurs, not as professionals (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 317).

On top of all these (adverse) circumstances, J.S. Mill emphasizes that women suffered from chronic scarcity of time and of mental peace to exert these activities because of the exigencies of the superintendence of the house and of social obligations that fell upon them:

The time and thoughts of every woman have to satisfy great previous demands on them for things practical. There is, first, the superintendence of the family and the domestic expenditure [...]: it requires incessant vigilance, an eye which no detail escapes, and presents questions for consideration and solution, foreseen and unforeseen, at every, hour of the day, from which the person responsible for them can hardly ever shake herself free. If a woman is of a rank and circumstances which relieve her in a measure from these cares, she has still devolving on her the management for the whole family of its intercourse with others – of what is called society [...] All this is over and above the engrossing duty which society imposes exclusively on women, of making themselves charming (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 318).

In addition to these ordinary demands, there was also the social expectation that a woman is always available to help others. Thus, even when she did exert an intellectual

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sexes differentiated themselves and “[...] *man has ultimately become superior to woman*” (DARWIN, [1871] 1981, vol I, part II, pg.328). Against Mill’s environmental views, Darwin affirms: “[...] *education and environment produce only a small effect on the mind of anyone, and that most of our qualities are innate*” (DARWIN, *apud* RICHARDS, 1983, pg. 91). As noted by Richards (1983) this theory furnished a ‘scientific foundation’ for the current subordination of women. In view of the predominant ‘naturalistic’ gender theories in vogue, we can understand why she affirms: “*The refusal [...] to ground human nature in Nature stands out against this overwhelming nineteenth-century trend*” (RICHARDS, 1983, pg. 96).

<sup>11</sup> Charles Darwin presented a different view on this subject. For him, the male superiority was revealed by men “[...] *attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain — whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands.*” (DARWIN, [1871] 1981, vol I, part II, pg.327). The inferior production of women when compared to men “*in poetry, painting, sculpture, music, — comprising composition and performance, history, science, and philosophy*” (DARWIN, [1871] 1981, vol I, part II, pg. 327) was seen as a definite evidence of this natural inferiority. The view that women were intellectually inferior to men was at the time the common sense. Even women as Frances Power Cobbe, that cherished J.S. Mill’s *Subjection* and reviewed it most favorably, disagreed with Mill on this point. She affirms: “[...] *for the intellectual equality of women with men, we are sorry not to be able to follow Mr. Mill*” (COBBE, 1869, 1995, 69). She thought, as did Darwin, that the absence of any great work in poetry, history, music, etc., was a striking and undeniable evidence that women were, by nature, intellectually inferior to men.

or artistic activity, this occurred in her free time (which was very limited!) (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 319).

In face of all these difficulties encountered by women (and not by men), the fact that they have not excelled in activities that require continuous training and concentration, such as philosophy, sciences and arts, should be considered the expected outcome (Mill, [1869]1984, pg. 319).<sup>12</sup>

J.S. Mill also found the causes of other ‘feminine’ attributes such as talent with practical things, and intuition, nervous susceptibility, volubility and incapacity to use continuously their faculties in the activities women performed in their daily life. The routine of solving practical things, of changing continuously the object of their attention, and of not having pauses to think about anything for a long time was enough to explain these particular ‘feminine’ traits of character. (Mill, [1869] 1984, p. 305; pp. 307/8; p.310)

In this way, J.S. Mill concludes that women’s current social and domestic position, in addition to the education they receive and the social expectations and habits that fall upon them, provided “[...] *a complete explanation of nearly all the apparent differences between women and men, including the whole of those which imply any inferiority* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 320).

However, J.S. Mill did not restrict his ethological analysis to the case of women. He also used the existing circumstances, especially the hierarchical relation between the sexes, to explain the occurrence of several (morally condemnable) aspects of men’s character. The education given to the boys – that emphasized their presumed superiority over half of the human species for the mere fact of being of the male sex – and the tyrannical power that, afterwards, was given to them as husbands over their wives, together were considered an [...] *Academy or Gymnasium for training them in arrogance and overbearingness*” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 325). They were a school of “[...] *willfulness, overbearingness, unbounded self-indulgence*” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.289) and of despotism (Mill, [1869]1984, pg. 293/294). Furthermore, they were at the root of all the selfish propensities of men, of their unjustified self-preference and self-idolatry (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 324).

The insulation of women from political life and from the collective objectives, restricting their interests to the family, besides limiting their own perspectives, also had harmful effects on the character of married men. They saw their aspirations diminished by the interaction with their wife (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 329 e pg. 331). J.S. Mill believed that the moral decay of promising young men once they got married was very common:

He ceases to care for what she does not care for [...] his higher faculties both of mind and heart cease to be called into activity [...] after a few years he differs in no material respect from those who have never had wishes for anything but the common vanities and the common pecuniary objects (MILL, [1869]1984, pp. 335/336).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, with reference to the existing social circumstances, J.S. Mill explains women’s alleged intellectual inferiority, exposes the reason for their presumed moral

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<sup>12</sup> Another cultural factor that, Mill thought helped to explain the scarce success of women in these activities was the fact that the ambition of becoming famous – an important motivation in the search for excellency – was a rare trait among women. Again, he did not consider this lack of ambition a natural condition. Ambition was stimulated in men, but considered “[...] *daring and unfeminine*” (Mill, [1869]1984, pg. 320) when found in women, being, thus, socially repressed.

<sup>13</sup>The idea that living with an inferior in mental endowment would lead to moral degeneration was already present in Taylor ([1851] 1984, pg. 408) and Mill repeats it in a speech in favor of women’s suffrage where he argues that to exclude women from the large subjects that concern society at large and to confine them to the household would be “[...] *in detriment of man’s own character*” (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 155). And adds: “[...] *unless women are raised to the level of men, men will be pulled down to theirs*” (idem).

superiority (usually related to abnegation and self-sacrifice and willingness to serve others), and, additionally, clarifies the causes of many of the ‘masculine’ traits.

This view of character formation clearly opposes the prevailing conceptions that asserted the natural intellectual inferiority of women and those that affirmed their natural moral superiority. In reference to these biological-based views, he affirms

I do not know a more signal instance of the blindness with which the world, including the herd of studious men, ignore and pass over all the influences of social circumstances, than their silly depreciation of the intellectual, and silly panegyrics on the moral nature of women (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 321).

J.S. Mill repeatedly criticized these dominant conceptions of his time, which considered the existing gender differences as ultimate facts, impossible of being either explained, or altered (Mill, [1843] 1974, pg. 859; Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 277 e 312; Mill [1873] 1981, pg. 270). Since these alleged natural/biological (thus, unchangeable) differences between the sexes legitimized the subordination of women in society, it is easy to understand why Mill considered these conceptions “[...] *one of the chief hindrances to the rational treatment of great social questions and one of the greatest stumbling blocks to human improvement*” (MILL, [1873], 1981, pg. 270).

J.S. Mill’s ethological analysis, on the contrary, implied that the presumed ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ features were not inexorable consequences of Nature, but, rather, social constructions, and, as such, could be modified.<sup>14</sup> Thus, gender equality was a feasible aim. J.S. Mill affirms in this respect:

[...] no one can safely pronounce that if women's nature were left to choose its direction as freely as men's [...] there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacities which would unfold themselves [...] (MILL, [1869] 1984, p. 305).

The ‘denaturalization’ entailed by this ethological analysis opened a broad scope for social reform – which Mill was anxious to explore.

### **III. Mill’s political engagement with changing women’s position in society:**

J.S. Mill’s concerns went far beyond understanding the social causes underlying the prevailing features observed in both sexes. His intention was not only show that the existent relation between the sexes had no natural base, but, above all, to alter the “[*t*]he ideas and institutions by which the accident of sex is made the groundwork of an inequality of legal rights, and a forced dissimilarity of social functions [...]” (MILL, [1871] 1965, pg. 765). This was an important feature of his reform agenda since J.S. Mill considered them “[...] *the greatest hindrance to moral, social, and even intellectual improvement* [...] (idem: 765).<sup>15</sup>

As a public man (and a public moralist), he was eager to change this undesirable and extremely unjust aspect of his society and to replace it “[...] *by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other*” (MILL, [1869], pg. 261).

On this, as on other issues, he called ‘science’ in support of ‘art’. His scientific views on psychology and ethology not only withdrew the credentials of ‘naturalistic’ conceptions of gender differences.<sup>16</sup> It also pointed out the main circumstances (marriage,

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<sup>14</sup> As Winch affirms: “Mill was anxious to give culture rather than nature the largest part in forming women’s behaviour because he sought to deny those certainties associated with innatism that were currently in use to justify the unequal treatment of women” (WINCH, 2001, p. 432).

<sup>15</sup> See also MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 261.

<sup>16</sup> In view of his ‘sound psychology’, it would not be admissible anymore to say that the ‘natural vocation’ of women was to take care of her husband and children. Nor to argue that women could not vote because they were ‘naturally’ incapable of abstract thought or of interesting themselves in collective problems of

education, social expectations, economic and political opportunities, among others) that were at their origin and reinforced the existent subordinate condition of women – and that should be modified if the desired situation of gender equality was to be achieved. In doing so, this scientific knowledge about the laws of formation of character furnished a solid foundation for his political agenda concerning women.<sup>17</sup>

### III.1 Enfranchisement of women

J. S. Mill's agenda for changing women's position in society was extensive, and had at its center their enfranchisement. He embraced this cause with enthusiasm and spoke up for women's vote in the same terms as existed for men (Mill [1869]1984, pg. 301). As a Member of Parliament, he presented the first petition in favor of women's right to vote (MILL, [1866] 1988, pg. 575),<sup>18</sup> and requested replacement of the word *man* for *person* in Clause 4 of the *Reform Bill* – which disciplined the qualifications for voters of the counties – in order to include women (Mill, [1867] 1988, pg. 161). Additionally, he delivered several public and Parliamentary speeches in favor of women's enfranchisement (Mill [1867] 1988; Mill, [1869]1988; Mill [1870]1988; Mill [1871]1988). Because of this engagement, J.S. Mill was greatly identified with the women's cause; and, since it was an unpopular cause, this attitude put at stake his reputation and prestige.<sup>19</sup>

His view of the human nature underlay his arguments in favor of women's suffrage. He reproduces some very common allegations like that “[p]olitics are not women's business, and would distract them from their proper duties” (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 153) and that “[w]omen do not desire the suffrage, but would rather do without it [...]” (idem), and uses ethological knowledge to reply to them. His ‘sound psychology’ disqualified the idea that women's natural intellectual or moral attributes suited them for some duties and disqualified them for others (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg.304/305). Accordingly, J.S. Mill rejected the current conception of “[...] a hard and fast line of separation between women's occupations and men's – of forbidding women to take interest in the things which interest men” (MILL [1867], 1988, pg. 155). His analysis revealed that the kind of education given to women and the social habits and expectations were at the root of this notion, and of the indifference that many women felt in relation to issues concerning society at large. The very exclusion from the right to vote was, for him, a decisive cause of this lack of interest in politics:

Education and society have exhausted their power in inculcating on women that their proper rule of conduct is what society expects from them; and the denial of the vote

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society; or to justify the closing of some professions to women with the argument that they were ‘naturally’ inapt for exerting them.

<sup>17</sup> In this point I have a slight disagreement with Guillin (2005, pg.34), for he argues that Mill did not develop a ethology capable of furnishing a foundation for his defense of women's equality, being force to use in his *Subjection* other arguments (basically his liberal philosophy) in support of this cause. In my view, despite the fact that ethology remained to the end an unfinished project, and although it was incipient, J.S. Mill's conceptions about character formation, and, thus, the formation of women's character, provided the backbone of his defense of women's emancipation. This does not mean to say that J.S. Mill did not use other arguments in his defense of gender equality – which he did – but I think the environmental view of the human character was its crucial element.

<sup>18</sup> The content of the petition presented by J.S. Mill in June 7, 1866 was the following: “*For the extension of the electoral franchise to all householders, without distinction of sex, who possess such property or rental qualification as may be appointed for male voters, from Barbara L.S. Bodichon and others [...]*” (MILL [ 1866] 1988, appendix C, pg. 575).

<sup>19</sup> J.S. Mill's reputation underwent, indeed, vigorous attack. As affirms Peart: “[...] for his position on women, in particular the role of women in the Reform Act, Mill was vilified” (2009, pg. 12). Several cartoons of the time ridiculed him, the most famous of them being “Miss Mill joins the Ladies”– where he is portrayed as a woman – and “[...] descriptions of Mill from that time hence often carry the hint that he was feminine, weak and unoriginal” (PEART, 2009, pg.12).

is a proclamation intelligible to everyone, that whatever else society may expect, it does not expect that they should concern themselves with public interests (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 156).

Overall, he interprets the fact that many women did not wish to vote as evidence that they “[...] *are still under this deadening influence [of education and social pressure]; that opiate and benumbs their mind and conscience*” (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 156) and not of any natural lack of aptitude for politics.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, J.S. Mill identified this exclusion of political life as an important factor that reinforced the existent inequality among men and women. He rejected the prevailing view that women did not need to vote, because their husbands or other male relatives sufficiently represented them.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, his conviction was that until women had a voice in Parliament their needs and demands would be ignored (Mill [1867] 1988, pg. 161; Mill [1869] 1988, pg. 380). For him, “[...] *the line of separation between those who can protect themselves and those who are at the mercy of others, is the political franchise*” (MILL [1869], 1988, pg. 379). A tragic illustration of this was the fact that the laws and their enforcers were far more efficient in protecting property than in guaranteeing to women even their physical integrity:

They [women] have neither equal laws nor an equal administration of them [...] what do we see? For an atrocious assault by a man upon a woman, especially if she has the misfortune to be his wife, he is either let off with an admonition, or he is solemnly told that he has committed a grave offence, for which he must be severely punished, and then he gets as many weeks or months of imprisonment as a man who has taken five pounds' worth of property gets years (MILL [1870], 1988, pg. 403).

Therefore, for J.S. Mill, the one single remedy for the neglect of women's interests was their enfranchisement: “[...] *women can never hope that the laws and customs of society will do them full justice unless they are admitted to participate in political rights [...]*” (Mill [1868] 1988, pg. 283).<sup>22</sup>

However, the priority given to women's enfranchisement did not mean that J. S. Mill believed that this was the only necessary change in what concerned women. On the contrary, he thought many other institutional reforms and modifications in habits were necessary before the desired situation of equality between the sexes could prevail. However, the elimination of women's political disabilities seemed to be a crucial step (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 161). In this respect, J.S. Mill affirms: “*Let us gain the suffrage, and whatever is desirable for women must ultimately, follow*” (MILL [1869], 1988, pg. 379).

After conquering enfranchisement, other important reforms such as changes of the laws of marriage and of property of married women, the provision of better education for women and the opening of the job market to them would become more feasible.<sup>23</sup> In sum,

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<sup>20</sup> He argued, nonetheless, that a great number of women did want to vote and manifest that desire, and maybe thousands more desired it, but did not believe it worth asking for a thing they cannot have, or were afraid of judgment of men or of other women (Mill [1867] 1988, pg. 156).

<sup>21</sup> James Mill (J.S. Mill's father) endorsed this view and defended the exclusion of women from the right to vote. He affirms: “[...] *all those individuals whose interests are indisputably included in those of other individuals may be struck off without inconvenience [of the body of representatives] [...]* In this light, also, women may be regarded, the interest of all of whom is involved in that of their fathers or in that of their husbands” (MILL, 1995, pg. 2). Collini (1984, p. xxx) points out that J.S. Mill, already in 1820s diverged from his father in point, although he followed him in most of his other positions.

<sup>22</sup> He thought that women's admission in public life as voters would have as consequence that the “[...] *wrongs and grievances which specially affect women would no longer be considered too unimportant to be worth any serious attempt to put an end to them [...]*” (MILL [1870], 1988, pg. 388).

<sup>23</sup> As Collini states, J.S. Mill “[...] *never doubted that the key to the immediate relief of women's states was her possession of the vote*” (COLLINI, 1984, pg. xxxvi). Thus, he was of the opinion that energy should be centered on the fight for suffrage: “*Let us, then, continue to concentrate our exertions on suffrage; inviting*

for J.S. Mill “[t]he suffrage is the turning point of women’s cause [...]” (MILL [1869], 1988, pg. 380).

### III.2. Reform in the laws of marriage and property of married women

J.S. Mill’s views on psychology and ethology – that pointed to a natural equality of the sexes – undermined the very foundation of the hierarchical and patriarchal relations that prevailed in marriage at the time. Accordingly, J.S. Mill was very critical of the despotic power that a husband could (if he wished to) exert over his wife. At the root of this power to oppress were the Laws of Marriage and the Laws concerning married women’s property.<sup>24</sup>

In reference the latter of these laws, J. S. Mill affirms: “*Like felons they [married women] are incapable of holding property*” (MILL [1868], 1988, pg. 285). The husband had the right to all her property – regardless of if she acquired it by her own work or by inheritance. This law permitted, in the absence of a judicial separation, – which was hard to obtain – the husband to abandon the wife for a period, make her work to support herself and the children, and return after a while to take possession of everything she earned (Perkin, 1989, pg.12-16; Mill [1869] 1984, pg. 284; Mill [1867]1988, pg. 160).

In J.S. Mill view, this piece of legislation only survived for so long because women did not have political rights. The mere demand for enfranchisement of women led Parliament to consider changes in this law:

[...] Since the suffrage has been claimed, a bill allowing married women to hold property, which had been laid on the shelf for ten years with other uninteresting trifles, has been reintroduced into Parliament with good prospect of success [...] (MILL [1869], 1988, pg. 379).<sup>25</sup>

The several civil disabilities married women had in relation to single women, made them easy prey for abuse by their presumed protectors. J.S. Mill was very concerned with domestic violence against women and children perpetrated by husbands and fathers that made bad use of the despotic power that law gave them, especially because punishment for these abuses were mild and rare (Mill, [1867], pg. 158-159; Mill [1850], 1986, pg. 1155).<sup>26</sup>

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*all who wish for better education of women, all who desire justice to them in respect to property and earnings, all who desire their admission to any profession or career now closed to them, to aid our enterprise, as the surest means of accelerating the particular improvement in which they feel a special interest*” (MILL [1869], 1988, pg.380). J. S. Mill wanted to focus on franchise and separate this question from the quest for total equality in civil life (marriage, job opportunities, etc.) so as not to lose support of those that would not go all the way as to declare men and women as equals.

<sup>24</sup> Married women were subjected to several disabilities in mid-nineteenth century England. After marriage, she lost her legal existence, which was incorporated into that of her husband – “[...] *under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything*” (BLACKSTONE *apud* BARKER, 2015, pg. 7). That meant that: “[...] *the legal and economic exercise of that common personality and property is left to the husband* (BARKER, 2015, pg. 8). Furthermore, married woman had no right over her children, who belong to the father (Perkin, 1989, p. 18, Mill [1869] 1984, pg. 285).

<sup>25</sup> Some people who rejected the rest of Mill’s proposals in relation to women admitted that there should be changes the marriage rules. For example, after saying that the subjection of women to men is the rule “*of every country and every age*” and is “*co-extensive with organized society*” (DIXON, [1869], 1995, pg.46) and after rejecting the idea of equality between the sexes, Dixon defends that progress should be made to guarantee justice to the wives. “*The day for Equity has come; the day for equality has not come.*” (DIXON, [1869], 1995, 48). He defends that the law of marriage (especially those concerning married women’s loss of rights) should be reformed, and affirms: “*In this direction there should be no scruple in pushing forward*” (DIXON, [1869], 1995, 53).

<sup>26</sup> J.S. Mill believed that this lack of punishment resulted in an under notification of this crime: “[...] *women, in the lower ranks of life [...] feel the most complete assurance that [...] a tribunal of men will sympathize and take part with the man. And accordingly they die in protracted torture, from incessantly repeated brutality, without ever, except in the fewest and rarest instances, claiming the protection of the law*” (MILL [1846], 1986, pg. 919). It was also was perceived by men almost as an ‘authorization’ to be violent: “*The*

J.S. Mill was anxious to alter the marriage laws and to establish equality of legal rights among the couple (Mill, [1869], 1984, pg. 293, pg. 297).<sup>27</sup> For him, the hierarchical and patriarchal relation existent in marriage was unjust, and deleterious for the happiness and moral development of the both the wife and the husband.

He endorsed that in marriage, as in business partnerships, there was no need to establish beforehand that one person would decide and the other obey (Mill, [1869]) – and this view greatly offended the Victorian values. In J.S. Mill’s own evaluation, more than giving women the right to vote, “[...] *what shocks and scandalizes them [men] is that a claim should be made for women to equality of rights in civil life, and especially marriage*” (MILL [1870] 1988, pg. 386).

In addition to advocating equality in this relationship and the possibility for married women to hold property, he advocated the possibility of separation on just terms (Mill, [1869] 1984 298).<sup>28</sup> When referring to engagements in perpetuity, of which marriage was the main example, J. S. Mill affirms that the law “[...] *should grant them [the parts] a release from it, on a sufficient case being made out before an impartial authority*” (MILL [1871] 1965, pg. 951) – incompatibility and unhappiness of the parts counting as ‘sufficient case’ for legal separation.<sup>29</sup>

### **III.3. High level education opening of job opportunities to women:**

Enfranchisement of women and changes in the laws marriage and the elimination of all the legal disabilities imposed upon married women, although imperative, were not sufficient to alter the subordinate condition of women in society. J.S. Mill believed it was crucial that women should have, additionally, equal educational and job opportunities as men – which was far from happening at the time.

Women did not have the same access to quality education as men, and J.S. Mill used this fact to reinforce his argument that the male relatives did not represent or foster women’s interests adequately. He affirms:

Are there many fathers who care as much, or are willing to expend as much, for the education of their daughters as of their sons? Where are the Universities, where are the High Schools, or the schools of any high description for them? (MILL [1867], 1988, pg. 159).

He pointed out that even the endowments that were destined for education generally (with no specification of sex) went almost entirely to educate boys.<sup>30</sup>

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*baser part of the populace think that when a legal power is given to them over a living creature – when a person, like a thing, is suffered to be spoken of as their own – as their wife, or their child, or their dog – they are allowed to do what they please with it [...] (MILL [1851] 1986, pg. 1186). Moreover, J.S. Mill adds, the mild application of law revealed “[...] *they are justified in supposing that the worst they can do will be accounted but a case of slight assault*” (idem). On his part, J.S. Mill demanded “[...] *severer penalties for killing or ill-treating a wife or a child than for killing or ill-treating, in a similar manner, any other person [...] The crime is greater; for it is a violation of more solemn obligations – it is doing the worst injury where there is the most binding duty to cherish and protect.*” (MILL [1851], 1986, pg. 1186).*

<sup>27</sup> Coherently with these convictions, when he married Harriet Taylor in 1851, J. S. Mill wrote a document in which he promised never to use the powers over his wife that the law granted him (Mill [1851], 1984, pg. 50).

<sup>28</sup> Although, in the 1830’s, he endorsed divorce if the couple was not happy (Mill, [1832/3?]), in his mature years he repeatedly avoided this theme.

<sup>29</sup> His position of defending that the happiness of the parts should be considered, and that there should exist a way out of an unhappy marriage, was probably influenced by the fact that as a young man J.S. Mill and Harriet Taylor fell in love, but she was married. They engaged in a platonic, although unorthodox, relationship that lasted twenty years, until John Taylor died and they could get married in 1851. For a description of this friendship and for the letters exchanged between the two from the early 1830’s on, see Hayek (2015).

<sup>30</sup> One example cited by J. S. Mill was that of the *Christ Hospital*, which endowment was for both sexes, but at the time educated 1100 boys and only 26 girls (Mill, [1867], pg. 159).

Additionally, it was a common idea at time that the education of women should be different from that given to men – not as profound or as detailed.<sup>31</sup> Harriet Taylor (J.S. Mill’s wife) affirms: “[...] *nothing is taught to women thoroughly. Small portions only of what is attempted to teach thoroughly to boys, are the whole of what is intended or desired to teach to women*” (TAYLOR, [1851]1984, pg. 409). She reacts against this ‘decorative’ view of women’s education, which aimed to furnishing a generic knowledge in poetry, art, maybe of science and, perhaps, even politics, so that women could understand their husband’s interests and hold intelligent conversations on these various topics (Taylor [1851] 1984, pg. 409).

J.S Mill agreed with Harriet Taylor and thought that girls should be educated in the same terms as boys (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 324; Millet, 1970, pg. 70). The purpose of education should be their own development and the acquisition of knowledge that would enable them to enter the job market – if they choose to – with the same qualification as men. That is, he intended an education that gave equal opportunities to both sexes.

However, high quality education was not enough since there was an interdiction to women in most prestigious occupations, even when they happened to be qualified for them: “*Hardly any decent educated occupation save one is open to them. They are either governesses or nothing*” (MILL [1867] 1888, pg. 159). Professions such as medicine, law and politics, among other, downright excluded women. In reference to this situation, J.S. Mill affirms: “[n]o sooner do women show themselves capable of competing with men in any career, than that career, if it be lucrative or honourable is closed to them.” (MILL [1867], 1988, pg. 160).<sup>32</sup>

Since there were scarcely any occupations that paid sufficiently for women to survive on their own, marriage was, most of the time, the only respectable option for young women – situation which J. S. Mill considered “[...] *a flagrant social injustice* (MILL, [1871] 1965, pg. 765). Hence, they did not have any real alternative when it came to marriage. Furthermore, after marrying, they depended entirely upon the husband for survival and had no way out of an unhappy, or even of violent, relationship. Even in the (rare) eventuality of justice conceding the separation, without access to good jobs they lacked an independent mode of supporting themselves and their children. Additionally, there were the problems of women that could not find a husband<sup>33</sup> and widowers, which frequently had a hard time to survive.

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<sup>31</sup> An important representative of this view was Ruskin. For him knowledge given to girls and young women should not aim at their own development or at the acquisition of abilities for the job market, but at preparing them to better exert the function of serving and guiding men. Education should strengthen their (alleged) natural features, such as, beauty, sense of justice, kindness and lovability (Ruskin, [1865] 1905, pg. 123-125). In this respect, Ruskin affirms: “*All such knowledge should be given her as may enable her to understand, and even to aid, the work of men: and yet it should be given not as knowledge, - not as if it were, or could be, for her an object to know; but only to feel and to judge*” (RUSKIN, [1865] 1905, pg. 125). Girls needed not a profound knowledge on the subjects, but an education in order to enable them to sympathizing with men’s interests, and to make them company, and, additionally, to be capable of accomplish with humbleness their proper duties (Ruskin, [1865] 1905, 128).

<sup>32</sup> Mill mentions the example of a woman that was able to get access to the medical profession, but soon after, the addition of a requirement of being public lectures (blocked to women) shut the possibility of further entrances. The same happened in the *Royal Academy* that, at first did not bar women, but as they started to be successful, decided to change their policy (MILL [1867]1988, pg. 159). Mill defends the opening of medical education for women also on pragmatic terms: “*Until que medical profession is opened up to women, there will never be an adequate supply of educated medical practitioners for nay but the rich.*”(MILL [1969] 1988, pg. 378).

<sup>33</sup> In England at the time, there were almost 500.000 more women than there were men – so inevitably many women did not have marriage as an option.

Against this economic subordination of women, J.S. Mill fought for the opening of well-paid professions as medicine, law, politics and public offices to the feminine sex (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 299-301 e 324).<sup>34</sup>

To the current economic allegation that this would overstock the market and drastically lower the wages earned in these occupations, J.S. Mill replied that even if this should happen, it could socially be well worth it, because of the emancipation it would mean for women:

[...] even when no more is earned by the labour of a man and a woman than would be earned by the man alone, the advantage to the woman of not depending on a master for subsistence may be more than an equivalent (MILL, [1871]1965, pg. 394).<sup>35</sup>

He also argues that the fact that there were very limited opportunities of jobs for women led to an overstock and very low wages on the professions opened to them (although less women worked than men) (Mill, [1871] 1965, pg. 395). Thus, the opening of other opportunities would most probably increase the wages in these 'female' employments. This increase of the opportunities in the labor market would additionally have a very important impact on population growth (an issue that was central to J.S. Mill's social concerns). He affirms:

I shall only indicate, among the probable consequences of the industrial and social independence of women, a great diminution of the evil of over-population. It is by devoting one-half of the human species to that exclusive function, by making it fill the entire life of one sex and interweave itself with almost all the objects of the other, that the animal instinct in question is nursed into the disproportionate preponderance which it has hitherto exercised in human life (MILL, [1871] 1965, pg. 765/6).

Although J. S. Mill was, at first, in favor of protecting women and children, by limiting their work by means of the *Factory Acts*, he changed his mind on this subject and ended up rejecting the idea of including them in this legislation (BLAUG, 1958, pg. 214/5; 224). He asserts in this respect:

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<sup>34</sup> J.S. Mill's position went against ingrained moral prejudices of the time. For most people the work of women in these professions involved great risk of moral degradation. An anonymous writer of a review of Mill's *Subjection* reveals this social sentiment in his reaction to the suggestion of opening all job opportunities to women. He states that it was not desirable to look at this question from the view-point of best utilization of resources, "*the moral question is also of supreme importance*" (ANONYMOUS, [1869], 1995, pg. 45). He states that competition guarantees that women will go to the trades where they can earn money, but will not refrain them from following to "[...]trades which are demoralizing, though not unprofitable." (Idem: 45). He continues: "*As a fact, we have been compelled to exclude them by legislation from duties by which they could earn money to the prejudice of public morality, and there is no presumption in leaving such questions merely to the play of the market. If women are to be doctors, lawyers, and preachers according to their tastes, it may probably be necessary to enforce regulations against certain obvious dangers as much as in the case of mines and field labour. If women are hot-house plants, as Mr. Mill says, we must be very cautious how we suddenly plant them in open air.*" (Idem: 45).

<sup>35</sup> Harriet Taylor uses the same argument: "[...] woman would be raised from the position of a servant to that of a partner [...] how infinitely preferable is it that part of the income should be of the woman's earning, even if the aggregate sum were but little increased but, rather than that she should be compelled to stand aside in order that men may be the sole earners, and the sole dispensers of what is "earned". Even under the present laws respecting the property of women, a woman who contributes materially to the support of the family, cannot be treated in the same contemptuously tyrannical manner as one who, however she may toil as a domestic drudge, is a dependent on the man for subsistence." (TAYLOR [1851], 1984, pp. 403/4). As a palliative for this overcrowding of the job market and depression of wages, she suggests the abolition of child labor (idem:404). J.S. Mill seemed to agree with Harriet on que question of the power work gave to women, notwithstanding the existing property laws. He states: "[w]omen employed in factories are the only women in the labouring rank of life whose position is not that of slaves and drudges [...] For improving the condition of women, it should [...] be an object to give them the readiest access to independent industrial employment [...]" (MILL, [1871] 1965, pg. 953).

[...] the classing together, for this and other purposes, of women and children, appears to me both indefensible in principle and mischievous in practice [...] Women are as capable as men of appreciating and managing their own concerns, and the only hindrance to their doing so arises from the injustice of their present social position [...] If women had as absolute power as men have, over their own persons and their own patrimony or acquisitions, there would be no plea for limiting their hours of laboring for themselves, in order that they might have time to labour for the husband, in what is called, by advocates of restriction, his home (MILL [1871], 1965, pg. 953).

However, he maintained that the state had the obligation to protect children: “[...] *Freedom of contract, in the case of children, is but another word for freedom of coercion*” (MILL [1871] 1965, pg. 952).

Although he defended the opening of jobs to women, regardless of the effect on the salary of men, he did not think it was a positive thing as *a permanent tendency* that married women who are mothers of children (and he stresses this does not apply to single women) should have to work for their subsistence.

In a clear concession to the Victorian values, J.S. Mill held that, in the *context of equality in marriage*, the existing sexual division of labor would be the most desirable (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 297). He regarded that when a woman married, she opted (and option presupposed the existence of alternatives) for this ‘profession’ in detriment of all others (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 298). However, probably having women like Harriet Taylor in mind, he qualifies this general rule, and defends that, even in the case of married women:

[...] there ought to be nothing to prevent faculties exceptionally adapted to any other pursuit, from obeying their vocation notwithstanding marriage: due provision being made for supplying otherwise an falling-short which might become inevitable, in her full performance of the ordinary functions of mistress of a family[...] (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 298).

Hence, be it in marriage, in law, in education or in the labor market, J.S. Mill proposed a series of reforms in institutions and modifications of customs and habits, which he believed would change the subordinate condition of women in his society.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, he uses his ethology in support of this ample reform agenda concerning women.

#### ***IV. The beneficial ethological consequences of the proposed reforms***

J.S. Mill not only used ethological knowledge to identify the needed reforms, but also use it as ammunition in the defense of these reforms. He argues that the new institutional setting proposed would emancipate women in several levels – producing extremely positive moral and intellectual effects, both on women and men.

The enfranchisement of women, and the social legitimation of their participation in public affairs that it would signalize, would be a powerful means of involving women in politics and in the discussion of the highest problems of society – with favorable impacts on their own moral status and that of men (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 156). Instead of being a drag upon men’s ideals, women would become partners in the search for diminishing social problems and ameliorating society. Furthermore, J.S. Mill believed their participation in political life would pressure politicians and the Parliament to

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<sup>36</sup> As summarizes Baker: “*For Mill, the basic structure of liberal gender relations should include dissoluble marriages, the equal legal personality of men and women (including the ability to sue, hold property, and to take part in the judicial process), occupational liberty, political enfranchisement, and free and equal access to education*” (BARKER, 2015, pg.5).

confront the greatest evils of society (MILL [1870] 1988, pg. 387).<sup>37</sup> Additionally, enfranchisement would give voice to their own specific demands – eliminating, by this way, their political subjection. J.S. Mill believed the consequences would be invigorating to the whole sex:

[Women who vote] will receive that stimulus to their faculties, and that widening and liberalizing influence over their feelings and sympathies, which suffrage seldom fails to produce on those who are admitted to it. Meanwhile, an unworthy stigma would be removed from the whole sex [...] They would no longer be classed with children, idiots, and lunatics, as incapable of taking care of either themselves or others, and needing everything should be done for them, without asking consent [...] it would be a boon to all women (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 157).

The demanded changes in the laws of marriage and of married women's property would mean the establishment of equality of civil rights among the couple. This would have the effect of improving the husband's character greatly, since there would be no territory left for the exercise of absolute and arbitrary power. As consequence, undesirable aspects of human character, as self-indulgence, egoism, and tyranny – nurtured by absolute power – would have to be repressed, and would, eventually, disappear by disuse (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.288/289). Women, on their side, instead of having some parts of their nature fostered and stimulated, and others stifled and curbed, would be able to develop more spontaneously all facets of their nature.

In this new environment, women would probably become less abnegated and willing to self-sacrifice, but as a compensation, men would display in a greater degree these characteristics (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 293), and it would follow that, “[...] *a good woman would not be more self-sacrificing than the best man* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 293). Family life would cease to be a school of despotism, willfulness, self-indulgence overbearingness and would become a “[...] *a school of moral cultivation* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 293).

The positive ethological impacts of the other institutional and cultural changes proposed would also be enormous. Women would be educated to have the same capacities, and the same understanding of science, business and of the questions concerning public life as the men of their social class. They would also have the same possibilities as men of obtaining further training and development of their skills (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 327). The opening of all professions, and the fact that women would be prepared to occupy them, would greatly expand the scope of choices available to them: marriage would cease to be the only worthy alternative in the menu.

However, not only the women who desired to access the job market would benefit from these changes. J.S. Mill considered that the mere fact of being in condition to compete in the labour market altered the status of women, even of those who opted to marry and stay at home. For him, the *power* to work and sustain herself was “[...] *essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has not independent property*” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 298).

Equal education and equal opportunities in the job market would allow women to choose not to marry; would be a safeguard for those who, for some reason, did not find a husband; would provide an alternative for widowers and for women that already educated their children and had time for other occupations; and would guarantee a way out for

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<sup>37</sup> “*Women, I think will find it hard to believe that legislation and administration are powerless to make any impressions on these frightful evils [...] I should consequently expect, from the political influence of women, a considerable increase of activity in dealing with the causes of these evils*” (MILL [1870] 1988, pg. 387).

women that, unsatisfied in marriage, decide to separate from their husbands (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 298). Accordingly, this new environment would eliminate the economic subjection of women.

The equal opportunities for both sexes in the job market would also have beneficial impacts on men's character because of "[...] *stimulus that would be given to the intellect of men by the competition [of women]; or [...] by the necessity that would be imposed on them of deserving precedency before they could expect to obtain it* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 326).

Together these political, legal, educational and economic reforms would rescue women for the subordinate condition in which they lived; and the liberty of choice thus acquired would have extremely positive effects on female character. On the impact over moral capacities and interests of women, J.S. Mill affirms:

[...] the mere consciousness a woman would then have of being a human being like any other, entitled to choose her pursuits, urged or invited by the same inducements as any one else to interest herself in whatever is interesting to human beings, entitled to exert the share of influence on all human concerns which belongs to an individual opinion, whether she attempted actual participation in them or not – this alone would effect an immense expansion of the faculties of women, as well as enlargement of the range of their moral sentiments (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 327)

Thus, these changes would stimulate women's moral and intellectual faculties, would widen their horizons and objectives, and would increase their public spirit and sense of social duty (MILL, [1869]1984, pg. 337).

From being an obstacle to the pretensions of those that wanted to promote the public good, they would become stimulators and co-participants in these noble objectives, "[...] *doubling the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity*" (MILL,[1869]1984, pg. 326).<sup>38</sup> Additionally, in this emancipated situation, women would be happier and more fulfilled (MILL, [1869]1984, pg.336).<sup>39</sup>

In this way, both sexes would have their moral and intellectual faculties improved, and the gender differences would diminish enormously. However, it would not lead to the extinguishment of all the differences between human beings. There would remain, regardless of the sex, the individual diversity of aims, interests and values – that J.S. Mill so profoundly valued and desired to advance.

## **V. Final Remarks:**

This paper sustains that J.S. Mill's environmental view of human nature was central to his stance concerning women's position in society. His ethological analysis was important in at least three different levels:

- (i) It showed that both sexes were, in great lines, similar by nature, and that most of the gender differences were results of the social circumstances to which the two sexes were exposed. Thus, it revealed that the current features of each sex had no Natural basis. They were results of social interaction and, as such, could be modified. This openly challenged the view that the subordinate role occupied by women in society – that implied political, civil and economic disabilities – had its foundation on 'natural' gender differences.
- (ii) It identified the several social circumstances and institutions - laws of marriage, education, the political and economic disabilities imposed on women, among others

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<sup>38</sup> J.S. Mill emphasizes that there would be a huge social gain: "[...] *consisting in an increase of the general fund of thinking and acting power, and an improvement in the general conditions of the association of men with women*" (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.336).

<sup>39</sup> It is important to remember that, for Mill, "[...] *human improvement and happiness [...] do not consist in being passively ministered to, but in active self-development.*" (MILL 1869] 1988, pg. 375).

– that were at the root (or reinforce) the existing inequality between men and women. In this way, it indicated the institutional reforms to be promoted if gender equality was to prevail – furnishing a scientific foundation for J.S. Mill’s reform agenda concerning women.

- (iii) Additionally, it revealed the moral improvement, both of men and women, which would derive from the proposed reforms. In this manner, it supplied ammunition for J.S. Mill’s fight for equality and for the elimination of the disabilities imposed upon women.

Having this environmental view of human nature as a reference and foundation, J. S. Mill, as a public man, put the whole weight of his reputation and moral authority to advance the reforms that he believed would ultimately lead to the women’s emancipation and, by this means, to a great the improvement of society.

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