

# **THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN**

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The subjection of women by John Stuart Mill & Carrie Chapman Catt

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**JOHN STUART MILL & CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT**

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JOHN STUART MILL

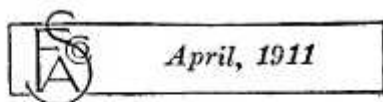
WITH A FOREWORD BY  
CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT



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## FOREWORD

MILL'S "Subjection of Women" may well be pronounced a worthy Immortal since it must ever be regarded as the most complete statement of fundamental principles which the woman's movement has produced. Mill's statement has been continually amplified and illustrated through the passing years by the ever increasing army of advocates, but no one has discovered a missing basic truth or succeeded in making an important addition. With the presentation of universal principles of human rights is woven a bold and startling analysis of a condition which had attracted little attention in 1869, the date of its appearance, because the world accepts whatever is, as right. Time has proved that it was a prophecy as well. Modern readers not infrequently condemn the use of the word "subjection" in the title and "slavery" in the context, as exaggera-

tion, and refuse to credit this great essay with the revolution in public opinion which unquestionably it wrought.

In defense of these expressions and the general character of the essay, it must be said that the position of women in society at that time was comparable to that of no other class except the slave. As the slave took the name of his master, so the woman upon marriage gave up her own and took that of her husband. Like the slave, the married woman was permitted to own no property; as, upon marriage, her property, real and personal, and all she acquired subsequently by gift, will, or her own labor, was absolutely in her husband's control and subject to his debts. He could even will away her marriage portion and leave her destitute. The earnings of the slave belonged to the master, those of the wife to the husband. Neither slave nor wife could make a legal contract, sue or be sued, establish business, testify in court, nor sign a paper as a witness. Both were said to be "dead in law."

The children of the slave belonged to the master; those of the wife to the husband. Not even



after the death of the husband was the wife a legal guardian of her own children, unless he made her so by will. While living he could give them away, and at death could will them as he pleased. He dictated the form of education and religion they should be taught, and if the parents differed in religion, the wife was forced to teach the husband's faith. Like the slave, if the wife left her husband she could take nothing with her, as she had no legal claim to her children, her clothing, nor her most personal possessions.

The law in many lands gave husbands the right to whip their wives and administer other punishments for disobedience, provided they kept within certain legal restrictions. Within the memory of those living in Mill's day, wife-beating was a common offense in England and America, husbands contending that they were well within their "rights," when so doing.

The wives of humane, affectionate husbands and the slaves of kind, considerate masters scarcely noticed the legal restraint put upon them, but upon wives and slaves, of fickle, ignorant, and brutal husbands and masters, always numerous,

the oppression of the law fell with crushing force, and neither had legal redress.

Such subjection to law and custom almost universally put upon women in 1869, and so closely paralleled by the law controlling the affairs of the slave, could fittingly be described by no other word than "bondage." Public opinion trained by centuries of familiarity with these customs stood guard over established usage and by its unwritten law forbade escape. Education, always considered the most certain sign of individual advancement, was either forbidden or disapproved, for women. No colleges and few high schools, except in the United States, were open to women. Common schools were less usual for girls than for boys and the number of totally illiterate women vastly exceeded the number of illiterate men. Religion was recommended to women as a natural solace and avenue of usefulness, but they were not permitted to preach, teach, or pray in most churches, and in many singing was likewise barred! The professions and more skilled trades were closed to them.

With that curious intolerance which has ever

condemned the advent of new ideas, society declared, upon the one hand, that women were utterly incapable of receiving a higher education, were devoid of talent or genius and were intended by God and nature to occupy the position assigned them by law and custom; yet, upon the other, it took good care to close every opportunity which might have enabled women to prove the contrary. Those women who here and there had been renowned for intelligence, literary, or other achievements were pronounced the exception which "proves the rule."

Looking backward after forty-two years of activity in the so-called woman movement, during which the most glaring of these discriminations against women have been removed and nearly all have been modified, the tyranny of these former customs seems so obvious that at first thought it may appear that Mill's essay was an unneeded factor in the change. Instead, it was just the influence required to initiate a liberal movement for the general emancipation of women. The system had the endorsement of universal custom, and the approval of the greatest men of the