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**The Equality of Sexes in J.S.Mill Vis-A-Vis the Participation
of Women in the Nigerian Labour and Economy**

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Abstract

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) profoundly influenced the shape of the nineteenth century British thought and political discourse. His substantial corpus of works includes texts in logic, epistemology, economics, social and political philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, religion, and current affairs. Among his most well-known and significant pieces is 'The Subjection of Women' in which he argues for the equality of the sexes. In this paper, the researcher engages in an enquiry concerning the experience of women in the Nigerian labour and economy. Taking from the data from this enquiry, an attempt is made at studying the situation vis-a-vis J. S Mill's argument for the equality of sexes. While not suggesting any intention to trek all the allies of the experience of women in the Nigerian labour and economy, this piece adopts a new method to tackle the problem, by arguing for the equality of sexes as a credible tactic for the liberation and restoration of the dignity of women in Nigeria.

Key words: J. S. Mill, Equality, Participation, Labour, Economy



Introduction

A cursory analysis of the evolution of human history, right from the time when theogonies dominated as the cornerstone of human thinking, through the Ancient, Medieval and Modern Epochs to the Contemporary Era, reveals that women have for a very long time been relegated to the background of second class citizens or even insignificance. In the ancient Jewish society, Bauer (1970) observes that the status of a woman was paradoxical, swinging on a pendulum from significant respect to a confinement to an inferior status. According to Tonye (1995) the woman was included in the list of a man's many property, which include house, land, slave, ox and ass (Ex 20:17; Dt 5:21), as such, it was not surprising that she addressed her husband as slaves do: as master or lord. Horst (1993) points out that among the Jews, the woman was seen as a burden, a source of secrete anxiety to the father. It was such that the wise and devout Jew in his daily synagogue service prayed thus, "Blessed art thou, O Lord Our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a heathen, a slave or a woman" (Hannon 1967, pp.58-59).

The Greeks, in their classics, also have misogynic premises on women. The woman's status was one of both respect and inferiority. By law and custom, the woman was under the assertive authority of the husband. On marriage she passed from the seclusion and scrupulous custody of her father to similar treatment in her husband's house. According to McKenzie (1965, p. 936) "Marital fidelity was not imposed on the husband.... There are numerous allusions to the popular belief that woman is by instinct a nymphomaniac, it is assumed that no woman can be trusted to remain faithful unless she is closely watched". Thus, she was circumscribed to domestic service roles. In congruity with the Aristotelian biology, the man is said to be the active, life and form-giving principle in procreation. The man bequeaths the seed. The woman is passive, and only confers matter. As such he concludes that only men ought to be born, and if perchance women are born it is as a result of some failure or defect (Aristotle cited in Peschke 2004, p.437); he therefore estimated the woman as a *mas occasionatus*, a maimed man. Demosthenes reveals the Greek world's value for the woman when he said, "We keep... concubines for the daily requirements of the body, wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our household" (Demosthenes cited in Hannon 1967, pp.60-61). This was the acme and prime of her ambition. She must be silent as Sophocles expressed in his poem, "Woman, for woman silence is grace" (Sophocles cited in Tonye 1995, p.44).



In this paper, the researcher engages in an enquiry concerning the participation of women in the Nigerian labour and economy. Taking from the data from this enquiry, the situation is studied vis-a-vis J. S Mill's argument for the equality of sexes; while not suggesting any intention to trek all the allies of this experience, this piece adopts a new method to tackle the problem, by arguing for the equality of sexes as a credible tactic for enhancing a better participation of women in the Nigerian labour force and economy.

The Man John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was born in Bentonville area London. He was a British philosopher, political economist, civil servant and member of the Parliament. He was the eldest son of the Scottish philosopher and historian, James Mill. He was an exponent of utilitarianism and a forceful proponent in the fight for government intervention in social reforms. John profoundly influenced the shape of 19C British thought and political discourse. Writing of John Stuart Mill a few days after Mill's death, Sidgwick claimed, "I should say that from about 1860-65 or thereabouts he ruled England in the region of thought as very few men ever did: I do not expect to see anything like it again" (Sidgwick cited in Collini, 1991). His substantial corpus of works includes texts in logic, epistemology, economics, social and political philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, religion, and current affairs. Among his most well-known and significant works are *A System of Logic* 1843, *Principles of Political Economy* 1848, *On Liberty* 1859, *Utilitarianism* 1861, *The Subjection of Women* 1861, *Three Essays on Religion*, and his *Autobiography*.

Mill's education at the hands of his imposing father, James Mill, with the assistance of Jeremy Bentham and Francis Place (Barnes, 1986), fostered both his intellectual development and propensity towards reform. James Mill and Jeremy Bentham led the "Philosophic Radicals," who advocated for rationalization of the law and legal institutions, universal male suffrage, the use of economic theory in political decision-making, and a politics oriented by human happiness rather than conservatism. In his twenties, the younger Mill felt the influence of historicism, French social thought, and Romanticism, in the form of thinkers like Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, Goethe, and Wordsworth. This led him to begin searching for a new philosophic radicalism that would be more sensitive to the limits on reform imposed by culture and history and would emphasize the cultivation of our

humanity, including the cultivation of dispositions of feeling and imagination something he thought had been lacking in his own education (Heydt, 2006).

The Equality of Sexes in J. S. Mill

The radical nature of Mill's call for women's equality is often lost to us after over a century of protest and changing social attitudes. Yet the subordination of women to men when Mill was writing remains striking. Among other indicators of this subordination are the following:

1. British women had fewer grounds for divorce than men until 1923;
2. Husbands controlled their wives personal property (with the occasional exception of land) until the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882;
3. Children were the husband's;
4. Rape was impossible within a marriage; and
5. Wives lacked crucial features of legal personhood, since the husband was taken as the representative of the family (thereby eliminating the need for women's suffrage). This gives some indication of how disturbing and/or ridiculous the idea of a marriage between equals could appear to Victorians.

In *The Subjection of Women*, he compares the legal status of women to the status of slaves and argues for equality in marriage and the law. As a member of the parliament, he was the first person to call for women to be given the right to vote, and stood for political and social reforms like proportional representation, labour unions and farm cooperatives (Capaldi, 1964).

Mill argues that the legal subordination of women which has become a principle regulating the existing social relations between men and women is wrong in itself and an impediment to human improvement. He describes the relationship as that of active domination in which women conform to men's wills. He calls for the establishment of the principle of perfect equality, admitting no power, privilege or disability to any side (Capaldi, 1964). He compares the subordination of women to slavery based on a striking example of a social relation grounded on force that has survived despite generations of institutes grounded on equal justice (Mill, 2006). In the slave-like relationship, Mill argues that it is difficult to know the capacities and capabilities of both sexes; this is because it distorts the actions and perceptions of both sexes (Michael, 2010). The subjection of women is not just a violation of the principle of liberty, but an anachronism. The abolition



of legal chattel slavery in all the countries of Christian Europe is for Mill a proof that women's unequal status is a relic of the past that is discordant with the future and must necessarily disappear (Mill, 1940).

Mill (1965) quarrelled the poor wages given to women in the public sector. He argued that their poor wages were due to the prejudice of society which has made almost every woman an appendage of some men, making men to take the lion share of whatever belongs to both. Another cause for the low wages given to women, according to Mill is because of the surplus of women labour for unskilled jobs. The law and custom has also made it that a woman has scarcely any means of livelihood except as a wife and mother. Even while she worked as a married woman, her salary was owned and controlled by the husband. He maintained that the law of marriage deprived a woman of many of the normal powers of autonomous adults, from controlling her earnings, to entering into contracts, to defending her bodily autonomy by resisting unwanted sexual relations. To create conditions conducive to marriage of equals rather than one of master and slave, Mill (2006) argues that marriage law itself will have to be altered. Women will have to be provided equal educational and employment opportunities. And both men and women will have to become capable of sustaining genuinely equal and reciprocal relationships within marriage.

The public discrimination against women, Mill (2006) contended, was a manifestation of the desire for dominance. The generality of male sex could not yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal. Indeed, men's fear of living with an equal in the household was a driving force behind the resistance of granting women opportunities in the public life (Shiprupska, 1998). In this regard, Mill made a two-pronged argument about women's exclusion from the public life.

1. The first was based on the idea that it was a tyranny to them and,
2. Secondly, it was to the detriment of society.

As a way out of the situation, Mill proposes that public offices that are made open to men be made open to women as well. In favour of this opinion, he reviewed the manifest political talents of Queens Elizabeth and Victoria of England, Blanche of Castile, and other female rulers. He went on to suggest that women's aptitude for politics was rooted in their more rapid insight into character, their tendency to adjure, abstractions, imaginary entities in favour of attention to individuals, and the general bent of their talents towards the

practical (Rawls, 1971). All these qualities he argues make women fit for practice and a life of public action (Jaeger, 1983).

The Structure of the Nigerian Labour Force

There are so many write-ups on the trade union movement in Nigeria and its significant place in nation building, but among this corpus of literature there is but only a little reference to the active participation of women. Osiruemu, (2004) believes that this unveils the fact that socio-economic development in Nigeria is not treated from a gender point of view; neither do we consider the need for the use of gender as a socio-economic variable for understanding development in political economy.

In the years 1900-1985, union matters were regarded as male issues; Puttin (2004) reports that in 1984 of the 46 executives of the Nigerian Labour Union, only one was a female. This notwithstanding, women have also shown in the past, that they can exert a vital force on the Nigerian trade and labour union. In Southern Nigeria between 1929 and 1938 Nigerian women in Aba had demonstrated in protest and defence of their means of employment to force the colonial government to soft pedal its taxation policy. In 1946 Onitsha women protested against the establishment of Nsula Oil Mills. Between 1941 and 1947, Egba women in Abeokuta opposed the taxation policy on women and all forms of discrimination against women (Puttin, 2004). In 1953 Nigerian women formed a Federation of Nigerian Women Societies (FNWS) with the aim of making heard the voice of many voiceless Nigerian women.

The 1963 census figure put the number of the nation's workforce at 18 million, out of which only 4.4 million are women. This is born out of the fact that women did not benefit from formal education in substantial number. It was only from 1980 that the employment of women in formal labour sector witnessed a reasonable increase. The Federal Civil Service manpower statistics show that the percentage of women as of December 1981 stood at 12.1% of the total workforce, while by December 1982 the number had increased to 12.8%. The 1991 census reveals that women constitute about 50% of the Nigerian population and only 25% of the actual workforce. In the Federal Civil Service, which is the highest employer of the nation, women are mostly found in the junior categories. As regards the informal sector about 78% of women are engaged in petty trading, farming and hawking in



urban cities. Women's unpaid labour is twice that of men and its economic value is estimated to be about 30% of the nation's GNP (Osiruemu, 2004).

Although the Federal Government, through her policies, has made several efforts at improving the participation of women, she is very slow at implementing these policies. The provision of the section 90 and 144 of the Labour Act and Labour Code of 1974 was in favour of women. In 1981, during her first triennial congress in Kano, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) proposed that a Women Affair Commission be set up at its national level. This department was charged with the responsibility of –

- a. Ensuring equal pay for work of equal value
- b. Ensuring non-discrimination on job opportunities based on sex.
- c. Ensuring the observance of ILO convention on women labour
- d. To set up serving institutions including home economic centres

This notwithstanding, the problem has never been with making laws, but translating these visions into a concrete reality (Osiruemu, 2004).

Table 1: Adult (15+) labour force participation rate by sex

Gender	1990	2010
Female	37%	40%
Male	75%	69%

Source: The World's Women 2010

From the table above, it is obvious that there hasn't been any significant increase in the participation of women in the Nigerian labour force, even after 20 years. This squares with the view that women generally have higher rates of unemployment and especially of underemployment and disguised unemployment than men and find it difficult to re-enter employment once they lose their job (Lim 2002).



Table II: Employment Rates in Nigeria within age group

Age Group	Men	Women
15-19	25.5	11.7
20-24	59.6	28.1
25-29	90.1	39.7
30-34	97.7	41.9
35-39	98.9	51.6
40-44	98.8	57.2
45-49	99.2	67.0
50-54	97.9	69.5
55-59	97.6	61.0
60-64	78.5	41.9
65 +	49.1	29.6

Source: ILO (2010) cited in Nwakeze (2010)

From the above table, it is obvious that the unemployment rate for women is more than that of men in all age brackets. Nwakeze (2010) observes that the highest level of employed for men are within the ages of 45-49, while the highest percentage of women who are unemployed are within the ages of 50-54. This is not surprising since it is outside the child bearing age bracket 15-49. From this, it can be inferred that women get more actively involved in labour force after the age of child bearing.

Table III: Percentage distribution of persons by industry

Industry	Both sexes	Male	Female
Agriculture	54.5	61.4	43.4
Mining	0.0	0.0	0.0
Manufacturing	3.0	3.1	2.9
Utility	0.3	0.5	0.1
Construction	0.5	0.7	0.1
Trade	24.9	13.6	43.2
Transport	2.6	4.0	0.2
Finance	0.5	0.7	0.2
Service	13.7	16.0	9.9

Source: UNIFEM 2000

The table above reveals that women are more employed in agriculture and service than in the others sectors.



The Equality of Sexes in J. S Mill as a Tool for Enhancing the Participation of Women in the Nigeria Labour and Economy

Although the social situation of women in Britain at the time J. S. Mill wrote his work may defer slightly with that of women in Nigeria, the situation of inequality is a common denominator. When Mill speaks of equality for men and women, he is not saying that women should become men, but each should be given equal opportunities and accorded a dignity that goes with the quality of being human. Mill (2006) argues quite rationally and strongly for the equality of women in all trades, that each person, no matter the sex, should be able to rise to the same level. The fact that we have these assumptions (that men are superior to women, and thus should undertake better jobs) and have lived like this for so many years only makes it harder to see reason and easier for us to fall back on those assumptions. In Nigeria, this idea of 'we have been doing it like this for a long time', under the cover of tradition, has also affected efforts towards the liberation for women. As regards what we call tradition, Mill (2006) employs his philosophy of associationism to buttress his point, which claims that minds are created by associative laws operating on experience. This implies that if we change the experiences and upbringing of women and what men are made to believe about women, then their minds will change. This is for those who suggest that the subordination of women to men reflected a natural order that women were by nature incapable of equality with men.

Mill (2006) argues that women are raised to be how they are. They are the designs of their societies and not what they ought to be. The environment, he said, helped to create the current situation and isn't that women are frail and mindless. Give them some education and a chance and just you wait and see. Mill's idea here is a very significant strategy to be incorporated in the efforts towards enhancing female participation in the Nigeria labour and economy. There is the need for a socio-cultural re-orientation of every Nigeria man and woman. This would help to change the belief that women are meant only for non-market domestic activities. The argument here is not as to whether a woman should play her biological roles or not, rather it is seen from the point of view that such biological role of women as mothers should not hinder them from realizing their potentials in public endeavours. In working places, women should be made to carry out tasks based on qualification and competence and not sex differences. Places of work should be patterned along the lines of team work and mutual respect for both sexes.

Anything less of this, Mill argues would make it difficult to know the capacities and capabilities of both sexes and thus distort the actions and perceptions of both sexes (Michael, 2010).

Mill (2006) also discussed the ways in which the subordination of women negatively affects not only women, but also the entire society. This subordination stunts the moral and intellectual development of women by restricting their field of activities, pushing them either into self-sacrifice or pettiness. Men, alternatively, become brutal in their relationships with women. In the Nigerian society, the consequences of this inequality affect the entire society. At the organizational levels, sex inequality has produced negative effects such as suppressed talents, lowered productivity and reduced creativity. The brutality of men towards women is a daily experience.

Women are still judged in terms of sex stereotypes rather than their present or potential talents and contributions. This at the end of the day affects not only the women but also the organization to which they belong, because discrimination denies them the opportunity of making use of their talents. If women feel that their work is not appreciated or is discounted, or not rewarded because of their sex, the zeal that typifies many women can be replaced with apathy, disillusionment or less commitment to the job. Many of the most important scientific breakthroughs and artistic contributions have come from work environments that promote autonomy, independence and tolerate personal and professional defiance. But when women are treated as though their gender is more important than their productivity, it psychologically and physically creates in them timidity, insecurity and lack of self-confidence. This would certainly affect the productivity of the organization to which the woman belongs, and obviously national development. It is in this regard that Mill (2006) argues that the subordination of women which has become a principle regulating the existing social relations between men and women is wrong in itself and an impediment to national and human improvement.

Conclusion

In this work, the participation of women in the Nigerian labour force was discussed alongside J. S. Mill's essay on the Subjection of women. Available statistics show that, in Nigeria, both men and women work, but most aspects of their work and conditions of work are different. However, according to the United Nations (2010), the female labour force participation for women in



2010 was 40%, an increase of 3% from 1990. For the male, it was 69% in 2010, a decrease of 6% from 1990. This implies that the situation of Nigerian women is gradually changing for the better (Nwakeze, 2010), however, at a very low pace. This piece argues that we can improve on the condition of women through a socio-cultural re-orientation of both men and women. And that the full participation of women in the labour force would lead to better productivity and thus the advancement of the national economy.

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