

The status of women

by

Bertrand Russell

A hitherto unpublished essay from c.1907

"The Status of Women" is not Russell's title, for the original manuscript of the essay bears no title. This lack may be explained by the donor's claim that it was written for his mother.

As noted in Russell II, Mr. Hallam Tennyson has given the Bertrand Russell Archives photocopies of the original manuscript of the essay and some 40 letters from Russell to Ivy Pretious Tennyson in the possession of him and his father Sir Charles Tennyson. The letters do not mention the essay, and the text itself seems to contain no clue as to its intended audience. The question whether the essay was in fact published must remain unsettled.

The manuscript very likely dates from 1906 to 1908. The handwriting is roughly of this period, as is Russell's concern with the subject matter. In 1907 (as Thomas Kennedy describes on p. 19 below) Russell ran for Parliament on behalf of women suffragists, and in 1908 he published an article on "Liberalism and Women's Suffrage" in the Contemporary Review.

The manuscript has been typed out with as little editorial intervention as possible. Any changes (other than from "&" to "and") are footnoted. Also footnoted are the changes Russell himself made on the manuscript. This is probably the first time such a practice has been followed for any of Russell's writings. It is not intended to be followed in toto by the editors of the Collected Essays. But as an experiment I have done so here in order to test readers' reactions. I would like to hear from any who derived any value from the footnotes, and from any who found them undesirable. The frequent footnote indices are themselves, of course, an intervention in the text, but there are ways of dispensing with them in more sophisticated printing.

The "self-reliant straightforward woman whom I think we ought to try to produce" in the last paragraph can be compared with the ideal woman depicted in On Education (Ch. II, last page) and with the chapter on The Liberation of Women in Marriage and Morals.

- K.B.

It has been the custom of almost all ages and nations to assign to women a status more or less inferior to that assigned to men. There can be little doubt that the dominion of men, like the dominion of aristocracies, was based originally upon superior physical force. But as civilization has advanced, such a basis has been increasingly felt to be inadequate, and other reasons have been found for preserving the

traditional practice. Those who challenge this practice must admit the immense weight of authority opposed to them; and although some societies in the past have had something approaching equality between men and women, no support is to be derived from their example, since they have all been either very barbarous or very corrupt. The weight of authority has, however, in modern times, been consciously or unconsciously set aside by advocates of various other changes, such as internationalism, democracy, and the emancipation of slaves. In all these respects, ideals formerly impracticable have begun to be in some degree possible, chiefly owing to the removal of material difficulties by the increase in the productivity of labour. The need of labour for producing the necessaries of life is a chief part of man's bondage to matter, which, apart from defects in human nature, renders the realization of imagined goods largely impossible. By the progress of mechanical inventions, this bondage has been much lightened; and many formerly unattainable ideals have therefore become in a greater or less degree attainable. ¹For this reason, if for no other, past experience must not be too readily accepted as a guide for the future.

The argument in favour of equality between men and women is merely an application of the general argument in favour of liberty. I shall try to show that this general argument applies with peculiar² force to women, on account of the intimacy of their relations with men. I shall then consider the special arguments adduced against liberty in this case, admitting that some of them have much force, but contending that they are not sufficient to outweigh the gains which may be hoped from the equality of men and women.

It is hardly necessary to dwell long upon the benefits of liberty in general. In the modern world there is a wide-spread³ recognition of the gain to character involved in acting upon one's own initiative rather than upon outside compulsion; and it is felt by most⁴ unbiassed persons that all forcible dominion is bad in itself, as well as degrading in its effects both upon master and slave. So much may be taken as admitted⁵.

But most people, in thinking of liberty, think first and foremost of political liberty, the freedom of states, the self-government of the citizens, and so forth. It is liberty in these forms that has been the battle-cry of revolutions and of parties of progress. Economic liberty,

that is to say, liberty from the tyranny of employers, is sought by socialists and by most labour-parties; but this is still liberty in a relation which, in spite of its importance, is not itself a very close relation. What I wish to urge is, that liberty becomes increasingly important as the relation concerned is more intimate; that, therefore, it is more important in the family than in the state, and most important of all in the relations of men and women. The more two people have to do with each other, the more desirable it becomes that they should not prey upon each other's spontaneity, not impair each other's self-respect and self-reliance. It must be admitted that this is not achieved at present except in rare⁶ cases; indeed people seldom even endeavour to achieve it. Very few have the self-control required in order to leave liberty to those whose possible mistakes are greatly feared. It is owing to this cause that the relations involving the most of mutual affection are very often those by which the characters of men and women are most degraded; and *why* those who have been most compelled to forego human companionship are so often the strongest and best of mankind.

But there is more than this to be said as to the importance of equality between men and women. It is not always sufficiently realized that love without respect is degrading, both to the one who loves and to the one who is loved. To the one who loves, it affords a constant temptation to think that the qualities whose absence makes respect impossible are not really important; to the one loved, it brings the complacent feeling that, since love has been obtained, further improvement is unnecessary. It tends, again, to make love patronising. A young man bitterly observed⁷ to me once that his father had always given him exactly the same quality of affection as he gave to his dog; and too often this is the quality of affection which husbands give to wives or wives to husbands. Such affection, when its object is a human being, is not good, but very bad; it involves the unpardonable crime of not desiring for the person loved the goods which in one's own case one recognizes as the most important. People are far too apt to be content with seeking happiness for those they love, reserving virtue for themselves. In this form, such a fault is rather feminine than masculine; but its correlative in men is the habit of regarding judgment and power as their own special prerogatives. In this attitude there is a deep-seated contempt, generally returned by its object; thus love fails to involve the working together for ends which both value, and both remain really alone. To any one who has once realized what human companionship is capable of being, almost

¹There is a question mark by this sentence in the margin of the MS.

²Russell originally had "special and peculiar".

³Russell originally wrote "general".

⁴Here he first wrote "generally felt by".

⁵"Admitted" is a second thought for "granted".

⁶He first wrote "very few".

⁷"complained" replaced "bitterly observed".

all existing marriages seem to involve something which is very near to in chastity.

But it is said that, however true this may be in the private relations, it is perfectly possible to have private equality between men and women without granting political rights to women. Although the bare theoretical possibility may be admitted,⁸ I believe this to be practically untrue; indeed I hold that the principal reason why it is desirable that women should have the same political rights as men is ⁹the effect which would result in their private relations. As to the effect upon politics, it is probable it would be ¹⁰small, and it is quite uncertain whether it would be good or bad. But the effect on private life seems to me almost undubitably very good and very important.

In practice, however theorists may find other grounds, the ground which weighs with almost all men against women's suffrage is the supposed inferiority of women in political capacity. I am not concerned, for the moment, with the question whether this inferiority really exists, nor yet with the question whether, if it does exist, it affords a valid ground for refusing the suffrage to women. The only thing I am concerned with at present is the effect upon private life of the acceptance of such an argument. This effect is, to make it be believed that, however excellent women may be in deciding strictly household matters, their views upon all larger issues neither are nor should be worthy of respect. Even in questions concerning their own sons - the choice of a school or a profession, for example - they are often supposed to be incapable of judging, although, as a fact, their greater¹¹ knowledge of their sons often outweighs, in the comparison with their husbands',¹² their smaller¹³ knowledge of the world. In all the more difficult decisions of life, in all cases of public duty, men who believe in women's unfitness for such issues are compelled to forego discussion with their wives, and to take on their own sole responsibility steps which affect their wives at least as much as themselves. By not being consulted, women soon become unworthy to be consulted; the love of power, which is ingrained in almost every human being, cannot find a legitimate outlet, and therefore turns, except in a few women of more than usual sincerity, to the arts

⁸The subordinate clause has been shifted to the beginning of the sentence but originally followed "untrue".

⁹"that" was struck out before "the effect".

¹⁰"very" was struck out before "small", which has a weak line underneath it (not quite an underline, or sign of italicization).

¹¹Russell first wrote "better".

¹²The MS has "husbands," but the possessive is required.

¹³Russell first wrote "less".

of managing and "tact", of inventing false reasons and choosing times¹⁴ when the lord and master is "in a holiday humour, and like enough to consent". All this, which is evil, and is traditionally urged against women, is as directly the result of oppression as are bombs in Russia. And all this, if the law recognized the right of women, as of men, to a voice in government, would tend to die a natural death, to be replaced gradually by equal comradeship, where the love of power, rampant on both sides in an unequal relation, is replaced by a domestic democracy in which the victory is to the one who has the best reasons to urge. But so long as women are debarred from all share in public life, so long most men will continue to regard them as unfit for the decision of large issues.

All these arguments in favour of women's suffrage may be admitted, and yet it may be held that the arguments against it are stronger. From all practical measures¹⁵, there is a mixture of good and evil to be expected, and therefore there will be valid arguments on both sides. Judgment is needed to strike the balance; and judgment is usually an instinctive feeling hardly capable of argumentative expression. I will admit at once that certain real evils are to be expected from the political emancipation of women, though I think these evils are less than many people suppose. But those who consider that the balance is on the side of evil do not, in my opinion, adequately realize the inherent excellence of liberty or the inherent badness of power and subordination. The whole development of civilization in modern times has been towards the growth of liberty, towards the endurance of any evil rather than forcible compulsion. At every stage in this process, opponents have urged that anarchy must result: in the decay of the mediaeval Empire¹⁶, of the Catholic Church, of the absolute dominion of kings, in the growth of democracy and religious toleration, ¹⁷those who loved the old systems have seen the final break-down of Law, and have predicted a dissolution of society into warring atoms. But at every stage these prophets of evil have proved to be mistaken.

The first argument to be considered is the argument that women are inherently inferior to men in one or other of the qualities required in politics. It is said that they lack public spirit, that their affections habitually obscure their judgment, that they have an innate love of intrigue and underhand methods, that they are more under the dominion of

¹⁴Russell here struck out what appears to be "& reasons".

¹⁵"From all practical measures" replaced "In all particular questions".

¹⁶Russell first wrote "break-up of the Empire".

¹⁷"opponents" originally preceded "those".

priests than men are. For these reasons, it is urged that those who dread superstition and corruption or who desire a statesmanlike large-minded conduct of affairs, ought to dread the extension of the suffrage to women.

Whether or not such accusations are just, it is to be observed, in the first place, that it by no means follows that women should be excluded from politics. The arguments are the same by which every step towards democracy has been resisted. Queen Elizabeth informed the House of Commons that it was incapable of understanding foreign affairs: in those days the necessary intellect and virtue was confined to the royal family. The Reform Bills of 1832, 1867 and 1884 were resisted on exactly the ground alleged by this argument against women. Even so liberal and broad-minded a publicist as Bagehot felt that the risks of the Bill of 1867 outweighed its probable benefits. And it cannot be denied that, if the main thing required were an intelligent electorate, all steps towards democracy would be a mistake. No one could pretend that a working-man has as a rule the same equipment for forming sound political opinions as a professional man or a man of leisure. And yet, when we come to particular measures, liberals at least must admit that a restricted suffrage would yield what are, in their opinion, worse results than those obtained by the present system. The reason, of course, is simple. From a mixture of natural selfishness and lack of imagination, few people, whether educated or uneducated, have much comprehension or sympathy for the interests of other classes than their own. Hence any class¹⁸ excluded from power is sure to be unduly neglected; and if this class is a large one, the detriment to the community is very great. For this reason,¹⁹ extensions of the suffrage even to people of less intelligence or education than its former possessors generally furthers the welfare²⁰ of the community as a whole. And beyond this gain as regards specific measures, there is the gain in liberty, in self-respect, and in the sense of responsibility resulting from a share in government.

This brings us to the second point which is to be urged in reply to the above objection to woman's suffrage. Granting still, for the sake of argument, the indictment against the majority of women as they are at present, it is to be observed that the alleged defects are those which are always to be found in inferiors. In spite of all the care which English education bestows upon truth-speaking, it is notorious that hardly any schoolboy makes any scruple of lying to his schoolmasters.

But as a rule his mendacity ceases when he ceases to be subject to a dominion against which he rebels. Hence it may be legitimately hoped that liberty would in time eradicate many of the moral²¹ defects which, at present, may be justly charged against a certain proportion of women. The intellectual defects, also, are mainly those which result from²² the absence of responsibility. If we consider working-men, it is surely obvious that the suffrage is a tremendous force for their education in judgment and self-respect and the power of taking large views. And whoever has watched in men the influence²³ of responsibility on character can hardly doubt that in women the same cause would produce a similar effect. The contention, therefore, that women have certain faults in a greater degree than men, so far from making against their admission to equal rights, makes really in favour of it, as being the readiest and surest way of diminishing these faults.

But it must be further urged that the degree to which the faults in question are peculiar to women is commonly much exaggerated. In every section of the community, the average man cares only for the interests of his own class. Postmen vote for the interests of postmen, landlords for those of landlords, manufacturers for those of manufacturers, and so on. The number who conceive and pursue the interests of the nation as a whole is very small. This is one reason, as already urged, why it is important that people of²⁴ every class should have equal power, since a class excluded from power will have its interests almost certainly neglected. Thus this first argument against woman's suffrage must be dismissed along with the analogous arguments against all other steps towards democracy.

The next argument is much more serious. It is urged that, if politics were carried on by both sexes, the private relations of the men and women concerned would be bad in themselves, destructive of serious work, and inimical to trust and honour between colleagues. In this argument, I admit, there is a great deal of force. Let us see, however, what is to be said on the other side.

In the first place, the evils feared have always existed in a very large measure, and have been even fostered by the fact that a love of power in women, having no legitimate outlet, has always been forced into intrigue. Every reader of history can easily recall many cases of the evil influence of ambitious women. It seems to be forgotten that, although

²¹"moral" was inserted.

²²"not" originally followed "from".

²³"influence" replaced "effect", which was followed by "on character of the".

²⁴"people of" was added.

¹⁸Russell originally had "any large class".

¹⁹"apart from" was struck out following "reason,".

²⁰"interests" was replaced by "welfare".

women do not sit in Parliament, members of Parliament do not forego the society of women. For this very simple reason, it is quite doubtful whether the evil in question would be increased or diminished by affording an open and legitimate career for the women who wish their will to be effective in the course of public events.

A second point is that the argument we are considering does not apply against women voting, but only against women being eligible to Parliament or to public bodies. Although the two are allied, they are not inseparable, and it is perfectly possible to stop half-way. Indeed, our present practice illustrates the possibility, since we allow women both to vote for and to sit on many local bodies. But I do not wish to insist upon this, unless in an argument on the quite special question of woman's suffrage. For all the reasons alleged above in favour of equality between men and women apply with the same²⁵ force in favour of their eligibility as in favour of giving them the vote. And these reasons, in my opinion, are so strong that, even if some harm were to result, I should still consider it highly probable that the good would be greater. If, however, the evils in question were considered intolerable, almost all of them could be obviated by the simple device of declaring women not eligible till after the age of forty-five²⁶.

Another argument against woman's suffrage is, that it would tend to destroy the family, to encourage women not to marry, and not to have children if they did marry. The last of these points is the most definite and the easiest to deal with. We may observe (1) that the number of women actually in politics would in any case be very small,²⁷ so that the effect on the birth-rate would be statistically²⁸ negligible²⁹; (2) that the diminution of the birth-rate is marked in all civilized countries, and is mainly due to the combined effect of economic prudence and neo-mathusianism; (3) that, since this is so, it is plainly independent of the status of women; (4) that, if it is considered desirable to check it, the only way is either to destroy civilization or to remove the economic motive for small families; (5) that the latter can easily be done by the State, by assisting parents financially in the education and maintenance of their children, as is already done to a considerable extent by the schools; (5) that a diminution in the birth-rate is not in itself an evil, but only becomes an evil in so far as it affects the

²⁵"the same" replaced "equal".

²⁶"the age of forty-five" is weakly underlined in MS.

²⁷A question mark has been placed beside this, comment in the margin.

²⁸Russell misspelled it "statisically".

²⁹Russell's spelling, not unusual at this time.

better stocks more than the worse; (6) that, if it is an evil, it is one which natural selection is constantly keeping in check. This argument, therefore, is both irrelevant and unsound.

The vaguer fear, that the equality of women would tend to destroy the family, is rather harder to meet. I do not, however, for a moment believe that it has any soundness whatever. The Arab imagines it necessary to keep his wives veiled and practically imprisoned in order to prevent them from imitating his vices; but experience proves, in this as in other matters, that a greater freedom produces a greater fitness for freedom. No system hitherto devised has worked well, and it is not likely that any system to be devised hereafter will avoid much evil and great suffering. But the mistakes of the free are apt to teach wisdom, whereas the evasions of the slave teach only peevishness and deceit. It is not worth while to keep every one in a prison for fear a few should fall over precipices and be killed. And a principal reason why family life as it exists, though it is the source of the greatest goods, is also the source of the greatest evils in most people's lives, is just the absence of that respect³⁰ for each other's liberty which it is the purpose of women's emancipation to foster³¹. Under any imaginable system, some families will come to grief; but I do not believe the number would be nearly as great if those women whose energies require an outlet were more encouraged to find some other outlet than worrying the other members of their families. And as for the plea that women will not marry if they are able to support themselves, I think a very little experience would destroy this belief; and in any case it seems hardly likely that the best wives are those who are only harried into matrimony by mama's hints that they are not worth their board and lodging.

But not only are the evils to be feared, in this respect, less than many people suppose; there are great goods which are only to be obtained by encouraging young women to earn their own living. Whoever thinks it better to live in the real world, however bad it may be, than in a world of polite fictions, must have felt the superiority of those women who, for one reason or another, have at some time had to do battle with society in the kind of way that men do in making their careers. I do not think it desirable that women should continue all their lives in this battle,³² but I do think it desirable that every one should be forced to realize what human nature really is, and what are the ordinary conditions of life. The silliness and sentimentality, combined with undue demands,

³⁰"the absence of that respect" was originally "that absence of respect".

³¹"foster" replaced "dim", perhaps the start of "diminish".

³²Russell substituted "this battle" for "such a life, because".

which so largely characterize women's dealings with the people they are fond of, are far less common among those who have had to earn a living than among those who have always been sheltered. And the power of admitting³³ facts, without which people can neither act rightly themselves nor help others to act rightly, is very seldom acquired by those who have never faced the world on their own account. For all these reasons, the ideal of liberty, even at the cost of much hardship and some tragedies, is to be preferred to a pampered and protected "innocence".

I wish I had the art to depict³⁴ the self-reliant straightforward woman whom I think we ought to try to produce. George Meredith has attempted it; but he gets too much of his effect by ³⁵omitting virtues which one usually regards as feminine: most of his women are hard and rather coarse. The woman I imagine is to retain the sympathy and kindness which belong with the³⁶ maternal instinct, while everything is to be done by education³⁷ and way of life to cure the indirectness which comes of the instinct for being loved rather than for loving. And when the world contains women of this type, the companionship of men and women will become something which at present exists only in very rare cases, where on both sides good ends are desired, and reason takes the place of the desire to have one's own way. At present, men and women seldom³⁸ have any real companionship, or any real understanding of each other's best: brought together by a temporary attraction, they remain strangers, and as a rule hamper each other's development. In all this there is no necessity; it is due mainly to the fact that subordination rather than liberty is expected, and that women's follies and men's vices are pleasing to the sense of superiority of husbands or wives as the case may be.³⁹ To teach men and women to love equality and liberty is the real⁴⁰ beginning of all reform in personal relations; and until this is done people will continue to degrade and depress those with whom their lives are past⁴¹.

³³"admitting" replaced "facing".

³⁴"depict" replaced "paint".

³⁵Before "omitting", a word which cannot be read was struck out.

³⁶"the" was inserted.

³⁷After "education", another word which cannot be read was struck out.

³⁸In place of "seldom", Russell first had "rarely".

³⁹"be." is almost certainly what Russell wrote, but this part of the page has broken off and (presumably) been lost.

⁴⁰Because this part of the page is lacking, "real" is wholly conjectural; but it is almost certain that a word of this length belongs here.

⁴¹The *O.E.D.* (1933) admits this form of the past tense, but adds that it is now used rarely.