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A hitherto unpublished essay from c.1907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 "it" 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 index 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. For 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 peculiar 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-spread recognition of the gain to character involved in acting upon one's own initiative rather than upon outside compulsion; and it is felt by most 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 admitted.

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 rare 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 observed 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

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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

But it is said that, however true this may be in the private re-

lations, 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, 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 the effect which

would result in their private relations. As to the effect upon politics;

it is probable it would be small, and it is quite uncertain whether it

would be good or bad. But the effect on private life seems to me almost

undeniably 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 ex-

cellent 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 greater knowledge of their sons

often outweighs, in the comparison with their husbands', their smaller

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 al-

most every human being, cannot find a legitimate outlet, and therefore

turns, except in a few women of more than usual sincerity, to the arts

of managing and "tact", of inventing false reasons and choosing times

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 measures, there is a mixture of good and evil to be ex-

pected, and therefore there will be valid arguments on both sides. Judg-

ment is needed to strike the balance; and judgment is usually an instinc-

tive 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 com-

pulsion. At every stage in this process, opponents have urged that

anarchy must result: in the decay of the mediaeval Empire, of the

Catholic Church, of the absolute dominion of kings, in the growth of

democracy and religious toleration, those 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

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9The 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 under-
neath 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 "lack".

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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 ex-
cluded 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 restrict-
ed 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 class\(^18\)
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 welfare\(^20\)
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 moral\(^21\) defects which,
at present, may be justly charged against a certain proportion of women.
The intellectual defects, also, are mainly those which result from\(^22\)
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 influence\(^23\) 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 those 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 of\(^24\) 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

\(^{18}\text{Russell originally had "any large class".}\)
\(^{19}\text{"apart from" was struck out following "reason,".}\)
\(^{20}\text{"interests" was replaced by "welfare".}\)
\(^{21}\text{"moral" was inserted.}\)
\(^{22}\text{"not" originally followed "from".}\)
\(^{23}\text{"influence" replaced "effect", which was followed by "on character of the".}\)
\(^{24}\text{"people of" was added.}\)
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 realize what human nature really is, and what are the ordinary conditions of life. The silliness and sentimentality, combined with undue demands, of 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 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 "statistically".
29Russell's spelling, not unusual at this time.
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
admitting\textsuperscript{33} 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 tragies,
is to be preferred to a pampered and protected "innocence."

I wish I had the art to depict\textsuperscript{34} 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\textsuperscript{35} omitting 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 kind
ness which belong with the\textsuperscript{36} maternal instinct, while everything is to
be done by education\textsuperscript{37} 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
seldom\textsuperscript{38} 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.\textsuperscript{39} To teach men and women to love equality and liberty is
the real\textsuperscript{40} 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 past\textsuperscript{41}.

\textsuperscript{33}"admitting" replaced "facing".

\textsuperscript{34}"depict" replaced "paint".

\textsuperscript{35}Before "omitting", a word which cannot be read was struck out.

\textsuperscript{36}"the" was inserted.

\textsuperscript{37}After "education", another word which cannot be read was struck out.

\textsuperscript{38}In place of "seldom", Russell first had "rarely".

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

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

\textsuperscript{41}The O.E.B. (1933) admits this form of the past tense, but adds that
it is now used rarely.