

# Topicality of John Stuart Mill's Views on Violence against Women

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14394/etyka.1333>

 Elżbieta Filipow, Uniwersytet Warszawski

## Abstract:

In the paper, I show that John Stuart Mill in his work noticed the significance of the social problem posed by violence against women. To achieve that goal, I (1) sketch the theoretical background of his philosophy as a reference point for the issue of violence against women; (2) propose reading *The Subjection of Women* in a way that is to facilitate noticing the most important issues of violence and showing their topicality in today's world; and (3) provide several most significant examples of problems of violence against women that should be given some further reckoning. Thus, I prove that Mill's views on violence against women are up to date, and remain an important point of reference, making him still worth reading, even 150 years after his death.

*There's a moth, more than one in fact, that lives only on tears. That's all they eat or drink.*

The Silence of the Lambs

The year 2023 marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Stuart Mill's death. That should make us reflect on the significance of his work and the topicality of his thought, which includes liberal feminism and his views on women's equal rights. For Mill, the fight for sex equality was of utmost importance, which made him come across huge criticism when he propagated his progressive ideas. Unfortunately, he did not live up to the times when women received voting rights in the first countries that decided upon such amendments to their laws. Within numerous issues included in his feminism, Mill also stressed the difficult situation of

married women, who were not equal to their husbands by law. Although a lot of marital laws have changed since *The Subjection of Women* was published, it is still possible to talk about the topicality of one of the issues included in the essay, which is domestic violence: physical, psychological, economic, and sexual – all directed mostly towards women. The problem still has not been solved, which poses a crucial challenge for the future.

In my paper, I show that Mill in his work noticed the significance of the social problem posed by violence against women. He analysed the problem deeply, which is proved by the complex and nuanced way of its description. To achieve that goal, first I briefly sketch the theoretical background of Mill's philosophy. Then, I propose reading *The Subjection of Women* in a way that is to facilitate noticing the most important issues of violence and showing their topicality in today's world. Finally, I provide several significant examples of critique of his liberal feminism and problems connected with the violence against women that should be given some further reckoning. Finding solutions to them should become a crucial point in future social policies.

Thus, I prove that, despite the time passed, John Stuart Mill's views on violence against women are still up to date, which demonstrates not only the theoretical importance of his philosophy but also its crucial practical value. I demonstrate that Mill's thought and public activity remain important points of reference, making his work still worth reading, even 150 years after his death.

### **1. Theoretical Basis of John Stuart Mill's Views on Violence against Women**

In 2006, John Skorupski, an outstanding researcher into John Stuart Mill's philosophy, published his book titled *Why Read Mill Today?*, where he pointed at the elements of Mill's work that are still significant for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the passage of time. The book, however, lacks a detailed analysis of Mill's philosophy with regard to gender equality. In

my opinion, what makes an important postulate in reading Mill, and what is not analysed by Skorupski, is domestic violence, particularly against women. I propose a reconstruction of the theoretical background that forms the basis for Mill's views on violence against women. I should stress here that it is a simplified approach and I am aware of its shortcomings. My aim, however, is to present only basic elements of Mill's thought, which is to form only a general theoretical background for the main topic of my article: the significance of Mill's views on violence against women.

I suggest starting reading Mill from the second chapter of his *Utilitarianism* and what he posits as the basis of morality, which he sees in the principle of utility:

*The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals Utility, or the Greatest-happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain, by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure (Mill 1965, 281).*

According to that definition, acts of violence may be interpreted as wrong actions as they bring suffering to the human being that harm is done to. Thus, the violence itself is contradictory to the basis of morality made by the principle of utilitarianism. Some researchers into Mill's work notice a lack of symmetry in his concept of happiness, as well as lack of proportion between his analysis of pleasures and pain, as he stresses the pleasures more and treats the pain superficially (Brink 2013, 75). However, it is possible to read Mill's essays on the situation of women as the ones that present in more detail the issue of harm that women suffer in marital relations.

Further in the chapter, Mill describes differences between lower and higher pleasures, adding that 'those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give the most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties' (Mill 1965, 281). A person with higher capacities 'requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute

suffering'; however, due to his sense of dignity 'he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence' (Mill 1965, 283–284). Further in that passage, there appear the famous words: 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied' (Mill 1965, 284). Mill's reference to the sense of dignity that explains our categorical preference for higher pleasures happens to be interpreted as an element of the proof of a perfectionist approach to his concept of happiness (Brink 2013, 50; Rawls 2010, 414–415). When viewing Mill's concept of happiness from the viewpoint of violence against women, one crucial issue should be noticed: violence experienced by a victim significantly complicates, or even totally stifles, getting involved in a successful, happy life, in which one could realize their higher capacities according to their potential. The harm and the suffering are what degrades and humiliates the victim, hurting deeply the sense of one's dignity.

Another element connected with the perfectionist reading of Mill's ideas is the concept of self-development which is a 'part of overall argument connecting happiness with freedom'. People need freedom to be happy. They can develop only in the atmosphere of freedom and their 'self-development is a condition of the highest forms of happiness'. Spontaneity is a necessary condition to choose a lifestyle and the desired ideal (Skorupski 2006, 18). The indispensable condition of spontaneity cannot be fulfilled by a person constantly subjected to violence – such a person strives mostly for his or her own survival. To a large degree, attempts to obtain temporary safety deprive one of spontaneity, as reacting to dangers and attempting to avoid them become the main goal. Hence, the behaviour of a violence victim may be marked by some degree of stiffness or automatization, which is contradictory to individualism described by Mill in his essay *On Liberty*:

*He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than ape-like one of imitation [...]. Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of inward forces which make it a living thing (Mill 1969, 183–184).*

Therefore, violence experienced by women blocks their ability to self-develop and choose their life plans freely based on the principle of self-government. The development may be hampered because they focus only on minimalizing the experienced suffering. Such an atmosphere neither favours the development of individualism nor provides conditions for spontaneous actions, which is also very often connected with lacking safety.

When providing proof of the principle of utility, Mill indicates that what should be 'the criterion of conduct is the well-being of all, impartially considered, rather than a particular person's good' (Skorupski 2006, 99). It is not that one's happiness has absolute value and primacy over the happiness of others. That kind of impartiality would be our natural disposition. Such a concept of a good life leads to some egalitarian consequences: both sexes should have equal chances of having a good life. Skorupski proposes to view equality in Mill's liberalism as an equal respect of citizens who have equal civic and political rights. It means that 'no-one should demand deference, just because of who they are, where they come from, or what they do', that is, regardless of their chosen plan for life (as long as no harm is done by it to others). That is what is meant by respect for each person's freedom in conditions of mutual non-domination. The equality of respect, in these terms, is fundamental to Mill's liberalism. The only empirical assumption occurring here is that people in general have sufficient rationality and virtue to participate as citizens (Skorupski 2006, 102). It may be interpreted that according to Mill, such a normative threshold may be reached by both men and women. Violence, however, negates respecting other humans and undermines the equality of human beings at its base.

Another element of our successful life that Mill describes in his essay *On Liberty*, is personal independence which consists in our demand for a sphere where we feel freedom. What draws boundaries to that sphere is 'forcible paternalist intervention'. In his *On Liberty* (Chapter 1 Passage 8), Mill stresses that what justifies limitations to any other person's actions is preventing doing harm to others, which sets a limit beyond which freedom of action reaches its end. It is also connected to the view that

harm is a form of violence in human relations – if we hurt another human being, it is justified to impose relevant moral and legal sanctions on us. According to Skorupski, personal independence is not a ‘pre-moral notion’; it enables us to differentiate between ‘sovereignty over my own life and sovereignty over anyone else’s’. Where the private spheres of various people overlap, they become parts of public or common space. That implies, in turn, a necessity for every independent individual to have their say on the way the given space is used. Some acts in the public space may be prohibited ‘as they invasively privatise, take over, that space’ (Skorupski 2006, 61–62). Hence, if we invasively invade boundaries of the others – we violate their personal independence. It also means that even the private sphere was seen by Mill as the space where some individuals could be prone to harm done by violence.

The division into the public and private spheres may suggest that it is in the former that we are entitled to protect our own rights and, which is connected, to empowerment. There is an assumption that one’s rights can be claimed in the public sphere: their infringement is much more ‘transparent’ there as there are many more overt proofs. In the private sphere, however, infringement of one’s rights is much more ‘untransparent’ and it is much more difficult to execute remedy for their violation. Intimate relationships are more informal and boundaries between individuals may be ‘blurrier’, thus conceptualizing violence in close relationships may be ‘muddier’. It is often reiterated that liberal thought kept developing the division into the private and public sphere and the latter received greater significance for individual agency. Mill’s views, however, may indicate that the private sphere is also of some significance for both men’s and women’s independence and agency.

To sum up, the outline of some elements in Mill’s thought is to form the reference point for a discussion of the problem of violence against women. It is a moral harm: it undermines its victims’ dignity, impairs their agency and possibilities of self-government or choosing their life plans. It contradicts the principles of utilitarianism, liberty and social justice. Although the happiness of everyone is worth the same, which according to the principle of impartiality, renders a base of sex equality,

violence undermines the principle of utility and blocks developmental potentials in women subjected to it and, thus, stifles their chances of a good life.

## 2. Topicality of John Stuart Mill's Views on Violence against Women

Mill would definitely agree that personal independence is an indispensable element of a good human life, both for itself and its positive consequences. As such, personal independence should be respected as a law. There are some lines not to be crossed. Where personal independence gets violated, harm to the other human being starts. That seriously infringes the agency and the feeling of power over one's life. Hence, what poses a threat to women's feeling of power as individuals is the violence that they experience: physical, emotional, sexual, and economic – all types of violence at once or in various configurations. There is a famous quote in the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*: 'There's a moth, more than one in fact, that lives only on tears. That's all they eat or drink'. Culprits of various forms of violence are just like that: as those moth species, they thrive on tears only. And here, it should be probably added that violence thrives on the silence... of its victims. In his 1869 essay *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill described the most brutal and some slightly more subtle (if it can be defined so) manifestations of violence in relations between men and women, particularly in the marital one. In the first two chapters of the essay, Mill describes his contemporary form of marriage. In his opinion it originates from the former relation between the master and the slave, based on the law of the stronger one. The relation of marriage described by Mill yields a breeding ground for abuse by the husband, who is in a more privileged position in the light of the law. Putting it more explicitly: the law sanctions marital violence. The husband's despotic power over his wife (according to the law of that epoch) makes the woman accept all the compromises. And although honest people may make concessions free of (moral or physical) coercion, the law makes it possible to apply some despotic power that is not based either on the principles of liberty or the principles of justice (Mill 1970, 170–171).

According to Mill, one of the legal requirements that supports the legitimacy of the analogy between the woman and the slave is the lack of any legal possibility of being separated from the husband unless he leaves his wife or commits extreme cruelty or fornication. People, however, are not as evil as it is allowed by legal boundaries. If they were so, the society would be but 'hell on earth' (Mill 1970, 161). Hence, what is visible here is a signalled problem of no legal basis to separate a victim of violence from their oppressor, which remains up to date. These days, even if there is such a legal basis for separation, the issue is much more complicated practically. From today's perspective and from what is known about violence from contemporary research, real interventions, and therapies for violence victims, the sole issue of selecting the basis and making a decision on separation from the culprit is very complex.

However, what I would like to set as the starting point for further discussion on the topicality of Mill's thought is the issue of mental abuse, which – in my opinion – requires more detailed consideration, as it is much more imperceptible on the one hand and has a particularly negative influence on the victim's well-being on the other. Mechanisms and cycles of mental abuse make its victims lose more and more control over their lives and choices, which makes them addicted to their tormentors on various levels, including emotional or financial ones. The more numerous those networks of dependencies are, the more difficult it is to extricate oneself from them. Such dependencies keep getting even stronger when the culprit isolates the victim from other people: family members or people in a closer or further environment. As stressed by Theresa Comito, an expert on emotional abuse, when stuck in a cycle of violence, the victim may lose a lot. That includes such goods and capacities as former relations (with family members or friends), material goods, lifestyle, sense of security, identity, worldviews, or faith (Comito 2021, 34). For the sake of this article, such capacities may also be viewed as fundamental elements of a good life. There are also strong psychological mechanisms in a cycle of violence, including devaluing, humiliating, or terrorizing the victim, which cause great anxiety and general weakening of the victim's psychological and mental construction (e.g. intense fatigue, concentration shortages, or memory problems)



(Comito 2021, 13–31). In the worst cases, manipulations of the culprit may be characterized by *gaslighting*, which makes the victim doubt their own senses and memory, and – finally – makes them believe that they are mentally disordered. In other cases, psychological violence (experiences solely or mixed with others) may result in problems with mental health, particularly *post-traumatic stress disorder* [PTSD]. Here, it is worth mentioning that being psychologically dependent on the tormentor is connected not only with negative emotions. As Mill puts it aptly:

*it is part of the irony of life, that the strongest feelings of devoted gratitude of which human nature seems to be susceptible, are called forth in human beings towards those who, having the power entirely to crush their earthly existence, voluntarily refrain from using that power*<sup>1</sup> (Mill 1970, 162-163).

Being stuck in such a meticulous ‘network of entanglements’ makes the decision on separation not only hard to make but also hard to keep (a typical example of such a lack of consequence in victims of violence is coming back to the tormentor in the so-called honeymoon phase). Thus, using the principle of continuum to present the relationship between empowerment and what I call the ‘network of entanglements’ in the situation of violence, it should be said that empowerment and the feeling of having control over one’s life are at the nearest to where the entanglements are the least numerous. And when conceptualizing the ‘ideal type’ of empowerment from the perspective of relational ontology, it should be said that its ‘pure form’ would mean no signs of any violence in a relationship.

Another aspect of violence discussed in *The Subjection of Women* is sex-related abuse. Mill worriedly proves that a man may be such a brutal tyrant that he is capable of the greatest degradation of his wife by exploiting her sexually even against her will:

*however brutal a tyrant she may unfortunately be chained to – though she may know that he hates her, though it may be his daily pleasure to torture her, and though she may feel it impossible not to loathe him – he can claim*

---

1 That observation by Mill may also be viewed as similar to an intense psychological addiction to the tormentor, to whom the victim starts feeling positive emotions. It is called *Stockholm syndrome* in the literature. See: J. Herman, *Trauma. Od przemocy domowej do terroru politycznego*.

*from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations* (Mill 1970, 160).

By this, he presents the issue of rape in marriage that was non-existent in the legal order of his time. The husband and the wife were seen as one entity by the law of those times. If it was only the husband who had a legal personality after getting married, then the body of his wife was his property that he could have at his disposal in any way. Consequently, rape in marriage was legal by definition. It was also the most ruthless and cruel manifestation of masculine domination in marriage. Hence, what Mill does is describe a legally sanctioned system of domestic slavery (Shanley 2005, 118). It is worth paying attention to the great importance of the problem that Mill signalled as early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It should be said in a very straightforward way: until recently, the issue of rape in marriage was not considered by law even in those countries that are viewed as the most civilized ones (*sic!*)<sup>2</sup>. Even these days, some people in Poland do not consider it a form of violence that the culprit should be punished for (it is stereotypically thought that if a man is sexually aroused, he must indulge in a sexual act, or that even if a woman says *no*, she often thinks *yes* – as Rousseau controversially said). What poses a difficulty here is not only the problem with claiming one's rights in court, but also the issue of the victim's awareness of sexual violence in marriage: knowing that a crime has happened. The issue is so

---

2 In the 1850s, there were some protests in debates on the divorce and conjugal property against the view holding that women were incapable of controlling their own property, which also included their own bodies. According to the law, neither the money nor the body of a married woman were her own property but her husband's. In the 1870s, feminists fought for a change of the law connected with wife abuse, so that she could abandon her husband and keep on living as a *feme sole*, even if she could not divorce him. In 1878, that resulted in the Parliament accepting the *Matrimonial Causes Act*, which made it possible for a wife who was a victim of violence inflicted by her husband to apply for separation in a local magistrates' court. The *Summary Jurisdiction (Married Women's) Act* of 1895 extended the law to women who left their husbands due to assault, desertion, cruelty, or neglect. If a woman abandoned her husband not being a victim of violence, the husband could apply for restitution of conjugal rights in court, and she had to return to marital bed and board under the penalty of imprisonment. In 1884, the Parliament abolished the penalty for disobedience of that regulation and abandonment was deemed to be an act of wilful desertion. In 1891, in the *Regina vs Jackson* case, the Court of Appeal ruled that the restitution of conjugal rights does not entitle the husband to hold his wife against her will. Numerous Anglo-Saxon jurisdictions, however, still kept unabolished marital exemption in their legal regulation on rape and thus, married women could not bring a case of sexual assault against their husbands. In the United Kingdom, marital exemption was invalidated by the House of Lords in the case of *R vs R* in 1991. In 50 states of the USA, marital rape was forbidden in 1993. See: M. L. Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England 1850 – 1895*, pp. 156 – 188 and J. Herman, *Trauma. Od przemocy domowej do terroru politycznego*, pp. 19 – 49.

complicated that it remains 'very blurry' as a crime – it is hard to prove and it is difficult to claim any remedy from the culprit<sup>3</sup>.

Let us pay attention to another important element discussed by Mill: becoming one legal entity upon getting married means that the wife's assets are taken over. Wealthy Englishmen protected their daughters from intercepting their property by their husbands through a system of private law which made it possible for women to have financial resources at their disposal (Perkin 1994, 76–77). Although aristocracy tries to get secured in case of potential misuse of their daughters' wealth by greedy husbands, the wives' property often happens to be taken over:

*[i]n the immense majority of cases there is no settlement: and the absorption of all rights, all property, as well as freedom of action is complete. The two are called 'one person in law', for the purpose of inferring that whatever is hers is his, but the parallel inference is never drawn that whatever is his is hers (Mill 1970, 159).*

That may be interpreted as noticing the fact that economic limitation makes a form of abuse. Presently, the problem of economic violence against women is discussed more and more often, as it frequently coexists with other forms of violence and makes leaving such a 'network of entanglements' more difficult.

Unfortunately, when describing the issues of economic limitations of women, Mill unavoidably tangles with some aporias. The first of them consists in the fact that if we were to analyse in detail the consequences of his suggestion that married women should rather devote themselves to being wives and mothers and apply for paid work in the second place, then it must be said that such presentation of the priorities might contribute, to a large degree, to the financial dependency of wives on their husbands, which – in turn – would mean a higher risk of economic

---

3 Attention should be paid here to the fact that it is not only a woman that may fall victim to sexual violence. Men may also be victims of such violence, although, stereotypically, it is assumed that women are victims more often. In the author's opinion, when taking only official statistics into account, it should be rather said that statistics may be understated.

violence for them<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the solution would work only in married couples of higher economic status: a situation where a married woman of working class is devoted to home life only was in those times practically impossible.

Apart from that, Mill could naturally see the problem of limitations on married women's right of property. Contemporary researchers into Victorian feminism provide the example of Caroline Norton, whose rights in marriage were constantly violated<sup>5</sup> (Walters 2005, 48–49). The issue of married women's property rights became also one of the subjects of discussions and battles held by feminists, particularly in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Shanley 1989). Unfortunately, Mill seems not to stress enough that women deprived of their right to have their earnings at their disposal (and not only the property that they had before getting married) cannot be fully independent individuals to make their own life choices. That problem seems to be more applicable to women of privileged classes. That is connected with another issue that seems to be overlooked by Mill: the class dimension of economic violence that is endemic for women of the working class. Unlike women of privileged classes, they are forced to do paid work so that their families can survive. Low wages make them often face numerous humiliations not only in their marital relations, but also in their places of work (where they may fall victim to abuse by their employers)<sup>6</sup> (Perkin 1994). Additionally, difficulties with getting a divorce (which, mostly, could be afforded only by the wealthiest Victorians) makes them more entangled in the network of dependencies, where there is a higher risk of serious abuse and violence. The issue of economic violence against women, however, is still very relevant, regardless of women's class background.

---

4 Such a solution is proposed by Mill in *The Subjection of Women* but in his essay *On Marriage*, he claims that, from the economic point of view, it is better for married women not to work. In consequence, it would mean that their situation in marriage is a violence relation by definition. See: Mill *On Marriage*.

5 As for Caroline Norton, the violation of her property rights was that she was an author of her writings but did not have the right to her own earnings. Only her husband, being the one who had legal personality, could take payments for the work she had performed.

6 Such abused women working in the trade or as domestic servants have been described by Joan Perkin in her work on the situation of women in the Victorian Era. See particularly Chapters 8 to 10.

Summing up, reading Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, the reader often notices the timelessness and topicality of some of his observations. The philosopher describes various forms of violence in the family that are presently known under such specific names as physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, or economic violence. He focuses on men mostly as the ones who cause violence against women, although there are also references to the violence caused by women to men – mostly those tame and meek ones. As it is held by Mill, a wife's revenge may make her husband very miserable when the woman uses such manipulation as 'the power of the scold, or the shrewish action'. He adds quickly that it happens to 'the least tyrannical men' and the means that are used by their wives is usually the weapon of 'the irritable and self-willed women'. The 'amiable women' do not use such means, and the ones who are 'high-minded' disdain them. Hence, such violence, which would be called nowadays mental or emotional one, is used by women against 'the gentler and more inoffensive husbands' (Mill 1970, 166-167). Another example of the nuanced issue of violence is the problem of parental violence against children, which is equally topical today. Here, the problem of power over a weaker, dependent member of the family appears again. In this case, those are children reliant on their parents, who can turn home into a safe haven or into hell on earth.

It is worth noticing that Mill deals with the issue of violence being 'democratic', which also exemplifies the fact that he debunks the myth, popular even today, that family violence occurs only in lower social classes. Naturally, it is not true. Mill, however, is not fully consequent in that view – there are fragments of *The Subjection of Women* that imply that men who are low in the professional hierarchy 'take it out' brutally on their wives and children. That is suspected to result from the fact that they are mistreated by other men in the public sphere, which makes them very frustrated. Hence, although Mill is not fully consequent here, he still notices nuances connected with psychological mechanisms of violence, which have been examined in much greater detail by now.

### 3. A Critique of John Stuart Mill's Liberal Feminism

I present below an outline of Mill's liberal feminism in a wider panorama of contemporary philosophical thought, particularly feminist theory. I mention several frequent charges against Mill's liberal feminism but I realise that such a choice is selective, incomplete, and has a limited cognitive value. The first criticism is connected with the fact that liberalism maintained the division into the public and private sphere, which made the private one, which is family relations, ignored. Theoreticians of justice keep accepting, implicitly or explicitly, that 'the natural family connection is made of a traditional, patriarchal family, where women deal with unpaid housework and reproduction' (Kymlicka 2002, 386). According to Mill's concept, thus, although women are capable of the same achievements in every field of action, the ones who get married perform duties connected with housekeeping and child upbringing. Consequently, limitations to gender equality become more and more visible as the disregard for family. Criticism of work division at home is an element that the majority of researchers who are 'friendly' towards Mill's liberal feminism often 'excuse themselves of'. I must admit that those shortcomings in Mill's views pose a weak point in his theory and as such cannot be defended according to contemporary feministic thought. It is worth noticing, however, that the fact that such accusations are held means that there has been a real change in the perception of housework and division of gender roles, which stands out as a sign of progress.

Another exemplary accusation is brought by Susan Mendus. She attacks Mill's concept of marriage as a union of minds, where the most important task of the partners in a relationship is an attempt to reach perfection. Human sexuality is viewed here as something inferior or, putting it more strongly, even animalistic. In Mill's concept of marriage, sexuality is substituted with intellectual and spiritual perfection. As Mendus holds it, that makes his liberalism *morally depressive*. Thus, what a perfectionistic marital relation is accused of is its dominating intellectual/spiritual dimension. Such *depressive intellectualism* disregards our physical nature that is a bond between us and animals (Mendus 2005, 135-156). When attempting to defend Mill's model of marriage as a union of minds, it is

necessary to rethink if it is legitimate to say that the philosopher excludes or depreciates physicality if he passes it over in silence in his concept of perfection. In other words, his silence may not mean exclusion nor depreciation, but rather the prudishness and hypocrisy of the Victorian era.

Alison Jaggar presents one more accusation in which she criticizes liberal feminism for its *normative dualism*. It means that functions and actions of the mind are superior to those of the body, which leads to political solipsism and political scepticism. Depreciation of bodily actions situates, e.g. reproductive functions at a normatively lower level and, hence, diminishes the value of motherhood and women's caring roles. Moreover, Jaggar holds that the self of liberal feminism is *a male self*, which is rational and autonomous (Jaggar 1983, 28). To answer this charge we may refer to Mill's concept of a developing individual and demonstrate the twofold character of his idea of nature, where a pivotal role is played not only by its intellectual/individualistic side but also the affective/social one. The latter is connected with capabilities of caring as the ones that are crucial in an individual's proper development (including the moral one) and, at later stages, in self-development that makes it possible for an individual to live in society.

The theoretical scope of Mill's liberal feminism is limited to problems of privileged Victorian women and ignores the nuances of economic injustices of working women. Those are mostly married women that make a reference group here – they have a more advantageous social status but a limited access to paid work. Presently, liberal feminism is criticized for its serving mostly white, heterosexual women of the middle class (Tong 2002, 58). Liberal feminists defend themselves by showing that numerous women of ethnic minorities, working class, or lesbians have been joining them: black women, for example, were members of the suffrage movement. Nowadays, liberal feminists are more sensitive to the ways that a woman's race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity influence gender discrimination (Tong 2002, 58–60). I believe that, when viewing a model of violence relation in its psychological aspect, it may be accepted that Mill goes beyond the frames of 'a white middle class woman

and man's marriage'. The model has its potential of intersectionality and such an approach is defensible.

#### **4. Conclusions and Further Research Directions**

The paper has aimed at demonstrating that John Stuart Mill's views on violence against women continue to be relevant. Violence against women is a moral harm: it impairs their agency and possibilities of self-government, which contradicts the principles of liberty and social justice. It contradicts Mill's principles of utilitarianism: it contributes to an increase of suffering in individuals and sex inequality, blocks women's developmental potential and, thus, their chances for a good life. I believe that Mill is worth reading for both the theoretical and practical significance of his thought. As shown by the example of domestic violence, the experiences of Victorian women, which are known to us thanks to Mill's essays, are still translatable to our contemporary social experience. It proves that Mill's thought and activism is still an important point of reference for us today, in spite of the 150 years that have passed since his death. Critiques of Mill's liberal feminism not only show that it remains a crucial point of reference for contemporary feminist thought but also indicate the development of feminist theory itself. The topicality of Mill's thought and its critiques may, thus, be viewed as a symptom of feminist thought being still very prolific and far from being forgotten.

When reconstructing fragments of Mill's *Subjection of Women*, I have tried to show how the issue of violence against women poses a threat to them as autonomous individuals. Mill is a good observer of his reality and notices various systems of violence – physical, emotional, sexual, and economic – and their subtle nuances connected with psychological mechanisms that have been discussed in much more detail in the modern literature. However, he is not fully consequent when discussing violence against women. He mostly misses the problem of class, disregarding the fact that women of the lower classes are more prone to violence and, potentially, may be entangled in it 'in a deeper way', which is caused by their lack of financial independence to a large degree. Here, it should be stressed that the issue of economic violence, sketched by Mill, is still up



to date. In my opinion, minimizing the harm resulting from women's financial dependency is an indispensable condition of empowerment, regardless of the class background. Naturally, the more privileged people may possess better immaterial resources and 'starting conditions' to deal with various limitations created by violence, e.g. social capital that can be obtained in the process of education and getting professional qualifications, which may help to get out of the economic violence, or high social skills that facilitate asking for help and finding a way to leave an abusive relation. It does not mean, however, that such situation is acceptable and does not call for a social change. On the contrary, if such inequalities and abuse keep occurring, it means that there is still much to do for us as the society that strives for justice.

To sum up, the problem of violence, in spite of the years passed by, remains unsolved and is 'a lesson of history' that we still have not done. That means, as Mill put it, that we have not matured enough to call ourselves a civilized society. Solving that problem should become subject to further reckoning. In my opinion, economic and sexual violence (i.e. legal definition of rape) in particular requires further exploration due to the fact that in social consciousness these types of violence are subjected to mythologization, which leads to their devaluation as social problems. The economic violence, in a broader sense, and violence on the labour market – with notoriously lower payments for women – also require further research and practical solutions. What poses another problem is women trafficking, which is also a wider form of economic violence. It is, however, very difficult to measure (Lisowska 2013). Finally, the crucial issue is cyberviolence and using new technologies as a tool of violence. Solving the problem of violence should become one of the key points of future social policies and bring about practical results in forms of policy making and execution in Poland and worldwide.

**Bibliography:**

Brink, David O. 2013. *Mill's Progressive Principles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Comito, Theresa. 2021. *Przemoc, której nie widać. Jak rozpoznać i przerwać cykl przemocy psychicznej*. Translated by Sylwia Pikiel. Sopot: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.

Herman, Judith. 2020. *Trauma. Od przemocy domowej do terroru politycznego*. Translated by Maria Reimann. Warszawa: Czarna Owca.

Jaggar, Alison. 1983. *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. NJ: Rowman and Allenheld.

Kymlicka, Will. 2002. *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction. Second Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lisowska, Ewa. 2013. *Przemoc ekonomiczna wobec kobiet*. Instytut Spraw Publicznych.

[http://rownoscplci.pl/uploads/filemanager/Nowy%20folder/przemoc\\_ekonomicznawobec kobiet.pdf](http://rownoscplci.pl/uploads/filemanager/Nowy%20folder/przemoc_ekonomicznawobec kobiet.pdf)

Mendus, Susan. 2005. "The Marriage of True Minds: The Ideal of Marriage in the Philosophy of John Stuart Mill." In *Mill's The Subjection of Women. Critical Essays*, edited by Maria H. Morales, 135-156. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Mill, John Stuart. 1969. *The Six Great Humanistic Essays of John Stuart Mill*. New York: Washington Square Press.

Mill, John Stuart. 1965. *Mill's Ethical Writings*, edited, with an introduction, by J. B. Schneewind. New York: Collier Books.

Mill, John Stuart. 1970. "The Subjection of Women," In *Essays on Sex Equality*, edited and with introductory essay by Alice S. Rossi. Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press.

Perkin, Joan. 1994. *Victorian Women*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rawls, John. 2010. *Wykłady z historii filozofii polityki*. Translated by Sebastian Szymański. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne.

Shanley, Mary L. 2005. "Marital Slavery and Friendship: John Stuart Mill." In *Mill's The Subjection of Women. Critical Essays*, edited by Maria H. Morales, 114-34. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Shanley, Mary L. 1989. *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Skorupski, John. 2006. *Why Read Mill Today?*. London-New York: Routledge.

Tong, Rosemarie, P. 2002. *Myśl feministyczna. Wprowadzenie*. Translated by Jarosław Mikos, Bożena Umińska. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Walters, Margaret. 2005. *Feminism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.