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John Stuart Mill's Concept of Gender Equality: An African Philosophy Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explored an Afro-philosophical response to John Stuart Mill's concept of gender equality as an avenue for integral African development. This will be done by examining the intersections and divergences between Western liberal feminist thought and African philosophical perspectives on gender and personhood. While Mill's liberal feminist stance in his work The *Subjection of Women* was revolutionary within its Victorian context, this study argues that his theory contains inherent limitations when viewed from African communal and spiritual conception of human person. Mill's advocacy for women's rights and equality is evaluated in light of African cultural values and communal ethics, which prioritize collective well-being and relational ontology. The analysis reveals that while Mill's ideas on individual liberty and equality are influential, they may not fully capture the complexities of gender dynamics in African societies. African philosophical perspectives, such as *Ubuntu* and Igbo feminist thought, offer alternative frameworks for understanding gender equality, emphasizing the importance of community, cooperation, and mutual respect.

Key words: African Philosophy, Communitarianism, Complementarity, Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Relational Ethics

Introduction

The discourse on gender equality has occupied a central position in both Western and non-Western philosophical traditions. One of the most significant Western contributions to this discourse is John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), in which he advances a radical critique of the legal, political, and social subordination of women. Mill's liberal and utilitarian arguments form the foundation for much of what later evolved into modern feminist thought. However, these arguments are not without their limitations, particularly when assessed from a non-Western perspective (Isanbor & Ojebun, 2022). Mill's concept of gender equality rests on the principles of liberty, rationality, and utility. He argues that the subjection of women is not only unjust but also irrational and detrimental to the progress of society (Mill, 1997). While his thoughts were revolutionary within the context of Victorian England, they often carry Eurocentric assumptions about personhood, autonomy, and justice that may not translate neatly into non-Western cultural contexts, especially in African philosophical discourses. In contrast, African philosophical traditions emphasize relational identity, community, and moral responsibility. African feminism, rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and critical of both patriarchy and Western feminist hegemony, interrogates Mill's individualistic framework. Thus, thinkers such as Oyèrónké Oyìwùmí (1997), Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) and Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), argue for culturally grounded notions of gender justice that highlight complementarity, communal belonging, and negotiation. For this conception, Adidi and Tella (2020) argues that African masculinity and femininity are deeply rooted in metaphysical understandings of personhood, where identity is defined not merely by biology or rights but by moral and spiritual participation in community. This view challenges Mill's tendency to define equality solely in legal and rational terms. Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) brings a contemporary voice to African feminism, highlighting how patriarchal structures persist in both traditional and modern spaces, yet affirming that feminist ideals can and must be tailored to the African context.

This paper interrogates Mill's concept of gender equality from an African philosophical conception of the human person, by the understanding of human sexuality and sexual roles for the development of the sense of justice in human relations. It seeks not to dismiss Mill's contributions, but to critique and contextualize them in ways that make room for indigenous African perspectives on gender, personhood, and justice. Through a qualitative, critical, and comparative methodology, it constructs an African response that contributes to the global conversation on gender justice, recognizing both universal aspirations and the need for local relevance.

Methodology

This research adopts a philosophical-critical and comparative methodology. It is philosophical in its reliance on conceptual analysis, moral reasoning, and critical dialogue. It is also comparative because it seeks to juxtapose Mill's liberal feminist thought with African traditional and contemporary perspectives on gender. This methodology enables a

contextualized engagement with Mill's ideas while maintaining fidelity to the normative and ethical foundations of African thought systems. Sources for this research are both primary and secondary. Primary sources include John Stuart Mill's major texts, such as *The Subjection of Women* (1869), *Utilitarianism* (1863), and *On Liberty* (1859). These texts provide direct insights into Mill's conceptualization of liberty, justice, and equality. Secondary sources include scholarly analyses of Mill's gender philosophy as well as key texts in African philosophy and gender theory, such as Gyekye's (1997) Tradition and Modernity, Menkiti's (1984) work on personhood, and feminist critiques from Oyìwùmí (1997), Nnaemeka (2004), Adichie (2014), and Adidi and Tella (2020).

The philosophical-critical method allows for a detailed examination of Mill's assumptions and arguments, especially regarding gender roles, personhood, and the principles of justice. The comparative aspect makes it possible to highlight the disjunctions and resonances between Mill's thought and African philosophical traditions' perspective (Isanbor & Ojebun, 2022). For instance, while Mill emphasizes autonomy and individual rights, African philosophy often stresses communal obligations and interdependence (Gyekye, 1997; Mbiti, 1990; Ramose, 2002). This methodology also incorporates a decolonial and feminist hermeneutic lens. This is important in evaluating the epistemic assumptions that undergird Mill's liberalism and the universalist tendencies of Western feminism. A decolonial reading examines the extent to which Mill's work reflects Eurocentric biases that may not align with African worldviews (Mohanty, 2003; Lugones, 2010). Feminist interpretative tools, such as Nego-feminism, are also employed to engage with gender relations in African societies through negotiation, relational engagement, and a commitment to cultural continuity (Nnaemeka, 2004). Moreover, this study is interdisciplinary. It draws from philosophy, gender studies, history, and African cultural studies. By integrating voices such as Adichie (2014), who speaks from a contemporary African experience, and Adidi and Tella (2020), who examines evolving male identities in Africa, the methodology accounts for both historical and current realities. This ensures that the African response to Mill is not merely theoretical but grounded in lived experience. Ultimately, this methodological approach allows for a nuanced philosophical interrogation of Mill's concept of gender equality while engaging African voices that offer alternative visions of justice, identity, and relational ethics.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this work draws from the communitarian and feminist traditions within African philosophy, while also critically engaging the liberal feminist underpinnings of John Stuart Mill's gender theory. This approach reflects a "Gestalt" orientation in philosophical analysis emphasizing that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In this context, gender justice cannot be reduced to legal rights alone, but must be understood as a configuration of moral, cultural, social, and spiritual elements. Just as Gestalt psychology emphasizes the holistic nature of perception (Wagemans et al., 2012; Mather, 2006), African feminist philosophy emphasizes the holistic experience of gender within interconnected systems of community, tradition, and spirituality. This theoretical framework critiques the atomistic assumptions of liberal feminism as presented by Mill (1869/1997), whose emphasis on rational autonomy and institutional reform represents a reductionist view of

gender equality. In contrast, African communitarianismas developed by Menkiti (1984), Gyekye (1997), and Ramose (2002)argues that personhood and justice emerge through relational and communal belonging. These insights align with the Gestalt view that a phenomenon must be understood as a structured whole rather than an aggregate of disconnected elements. In the African context, gender roles are historically shaped by cultural logics that do not always conform to Western binaries. Oyìwùmí (1997) and Amadiume (1987) illustrate how gender in precolonial Yoruba and Igbo societies was organized through age, seniority, and function not necessarily through biological sex. Their critiques expose the limitations of Mill's theory, which assumes gender is a universal and fixed category. This aligns with the Gestalt idea that shifting the configuration of perception can reveal new insights and disrupt entrenched assumptions.

Moreover, Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of Nego-feminism enriches this holistic framework by emphasizing dialogue, compromise, and the negotiation of gender justice within cultural systems. Her approach mirrors the Gestalt process of restructuring and reconfiguring elements into meaningful wholes. Similarly, Adichie (2014), through her narrative feminism, and Eromosele (2013), through literary analysis, reveal how emotional and psychological dimensions of gender must be included in the broader configuration of equality. Their works emphasize storytelling and embodied experience as essential to feminist epistemology. Adidi and Tella (2020) contribute to this holistic framework by analyzing masculinity, spirituality, and child welfare through an African ethical lens. His call for relational ethics and moral reorientation aligns with both communitarian values and Gestalt's holistic reasoning. Adidi and Obiagwu (2019) situate gender justice not only in legal reform but also in moral consciousness and communal responsibility. More so, other contributors to this theoretical foundation include Nzegwu (2006), who critiques rigid binaries; Steady (2006), who ties feminism to ecology and spirituality; Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), who integrates class and social transformation; and Uchem (2001), who connects theology to feminist ethics. These thinkers expand the philosophical "pattern" of gender justice in Africa into a dynamic, interconnected whole. Therefore, the theoretical framework adopted in this study is not linear or isolated but rather Gestalt-likepatterned, relational, and contextual perspective (Isanbor & Ojebun, 2022). It brings together African communitarian ethics, indigenous feminist epistemologies, and a critique of Western liberal models to interrogate Mill's gender theory and develop a culturally grounded response. This comprehensive configuration allows for a more nuanced and authentic understanding of gender equality within African philosophical discourse.

John Stuart Mill's Gender Equality

A critical understanding of John Stuart Mill's theory of gender equality necessitates situating his work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), within its broader socio-historical and intellectual milieu. Mill's treatise emerged during a period characterized by the entrenchment of Victorian moral conservatism, pervasive institutional patriarchy, and the gradual yet contentious rise of liberal democratic ideals in Britain. Within this context, women were legally and socially subordinated to men, lacking access to property rights, education, suffrage, and meaningful public participation. The legal principle of coverture, for instance, effectively

nullified a married woman's legal identity, merging it with that of her husband and thus rendering her "civilly dead" (Shanley 1998).Mill's intellectual commitment to gender justice was deeply shaped by his relationship with Harriet Taylor, an early feminist thinker and his long-time collaborator. Taylor's influence permeated Mill's philosophical convictions, particularly his belief in the intellectual and moral equality of women's perspectives (Isanbor & Ojebun, 2022). Mill's advocacy for women's suffrage, educational access, and legal autonomy was considered radical for his time and constituted one of the earliest systematic liberal arguments for gender reform. Central to his thesis was the assertion that the subjugation of women was not a natural condition but a socially and legally constructed form of oppression (Mill 1997).

The economic backdrop of Mill's writing on the Industrial Revolution further contextualizes his views. While industrialization introduced limited labor opportunities for women, it simultaneously reinforced gender hierarchies through a bifurcated labor market and the idealization of domestic femininity. The Victorian archetype of the "angel in the house" relegated middle-class women to the domestic sphere, while working-class women were often subjected to exploitative labor under precarious conditions, largely without legal recourse (Davidoff & Hall 1987). Mill's arguments for gender equality were couched within the Enlightenment tradition of reason, liberty, and social progress, and his utilitarian framework underpinned his belief that a society that suppresses the potential of half its population cannot attain maximum happiness or justice (Mill 2002).However, despite the radicalism of his proposals within the British context, Mill's perspective was not without limitations. His theoretical scope largely revolved around the experiences of European, middle-class women and remained silent on the condition of women within the colonial empire. At the height of British imperial expansion, Mill did not extend his critique of domination to include colonial subjects, particularly colonized women.

Postcolonial feminist theorists such as Mohanty (2003) and Spivak (1988) have since interrogated how Western liberalism, including Mill's, often universalizes its categories while remaining complicit in colonial structures that subjugated non-Western peoples. Mill's failure to address the intersection of gender and colonialism illustrates the imperial blind spots embedded within even progressive liberal frameworks. From an African philosophical standpoint, it is crucial to recognize that precolonial African gender systems were diverse, dynamic, and often structured around principles of complementarity rather than binary hierarchies. Scholars such as Amadiume (1987) and Oyìwùmí (1997) have challenged Western assumptions by documenting how gender roles in precolonial Igbo and Yoruba societies, respectively, were fluid, functional, and socially constructed based on seniority, role, and communal responsibility rather than on biological determinism. Women exercised significant political, economic, and religious authority, and their societal value was not inherently inferior to that of men.

The colonial imposition of European gender norms through missionary education, legal reforms, and administrative structures disrupted these indigenous configurations. The colonial state reified patriarchal authority and systematically excluded women from formal governance and education, thereby reconstituting African gender relations in ways that aligned with Victorian sensibilities (Oyìwùmí, 1997; Nzegwu, 2006). Thus, while Mill's critique

of gender subjugation was groundbreaking within Europe, it failed to reckon with the transformations wrought by colonialism on African gender systems, making his theory culturally and historically partial. John Stuart Mill's theory of gender equality was a pioneering intervention in the Victorian context, articulating a liberal vision of justice that challenged entrenched norms of a male-dominated perspective (Isanbor & Ojebun, 2022). Nonetheless, its universalist assumptions and Eurocentric bias render it insufficient when applied across cultural and historical contexts such as Africa. A comprehensive response must therefore critically assess both the strengths and silences in Mill's work while foregrounding African epistemologies, historical experiences, and gender constructs.

The Conceptualization of Gender Equality

Gender equality, broadly conceived, refers to the state in which individuals of all genders enjoy the same rights, responsibilities, and opportunities across all sectors of society. According to the United Nations (2020), this means that the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female. In liberal thought, especially as articulated by John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), gender equality involves dismantling legal and institutional barriers that prevent women from fully participating in society. Mill (1997) argued that the subjugation of women was rooted in outdated customs and not in any natural difference, and that justice demanded the equal treatment of men and women in education, employment, and political life (Isanbor & Ojebun 2022). However, this liberal conceptualization of gender equality is often rooted in Western individualism, emphasizing autonomy, legal status, and rational agency. Mill's theory does not fully account for relational, communal, and spiritual dimensions that characterize many African societies. As critics such as Mohanty (2003) and Lugones (2010) point out, universalist frameworks of equality often erase cultural differences and impose Western norms under the guise of neutrality. In this sense, Mill's equality is defined more by sameness and competition than by contextual fairness or mutual recognition.

African philosophy offers an alternative approach. Gender equality, from a communitarian perspective, is less about identical roles and more about complementarity, balance, and mutual respect. As articulated by thinkers like Gyekye (1997) and Menkiti (1984), personhood in African ontology is achieved through participation in the community, and roles are often distributed based on contribution and spiritual symbolism rather than mere biology. Oyìwùmí (1997) challenges the imposition of Western gender binaries on African cosmologies, arguing that Yoruba social organization, for example, was not structured around gendered hierarchies but around seniority and function.

Adidi and Tella (2020) provide critical insight into the psychological and spiritual dimensions of gender inequality. In his discourse on *Marriage, Depression, the African (Nigerian) Woman: A Philosophico-Theological Discourse,* he observed that marital structures, shaped by patriarchal expectations, and which often become sites of psychological oppression for women. He calls for a reconfiguration of marital ethics based on African moral traditions and spiritual values. This approach reveals that gender equality must address more than just economic or legal parity; it must engage with mental health, emotional well-being, and the spiritual integrity of women in African contexts. In another study, Adidi and Obiagwu (2019) examine

the role of domestic violence and its corrosive effects on communal relationships. They argue that such violence is not just a breach of individual rights but a moral and philosophical affront to communal harmony and personhood. This further extends the definition of gender equality to include protection from harm within the familya crucial aspect often overlooked by liberal feminism's focus on public life. Adichie (2014) supports the call for African-contextual feminism. In *We Should All Be Feminists*; she advocates for gender equality that resonates with cultural realities while challenging patriarchal abuses. Adichie insists that feminism in Africa should reflect the lived experiences of African women, not simply replicate Western feminist templates.

African scholars like Amadiume (1987), Steady (2006), and Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) echo this approach, suggesting that gender equality must encompass not only formal rights but also cultural legitimacy. For example, Amadiume's work on female husbands and male daughters in Igbo society demonstrates how African systems have long accommodated flexible gender roles without necessarily importing Western liberal constructs. Amadiume (1987/2015) further strengthens the theoretical framework by exploring the fluidity and complexity of gender in Igbo society. In Male Daughters, Female Husbands, she demonstrates that precolonial gender roles in Igbo communities were not strictly tied to biological sex but were socially and spiritually constructed around seniority and a societal functionperspective (Isanbor & Ojebun, 2022). Amadiume's analysis reveals that such roles challenged Western gender binaries long before postcolonial scholarship questioned them. Her work deconstructs the idea that patriarchy was universal and suggests that African societies had dynamic mechanisms for gender balance, supporting earlier claims by Oyìwùmí and herself that Mill's theory, based on rigid gender assumptions, cannot be simply transplanted to African contexts.In sum, defining gender equality from an African philosophical standpoint requires moving beyond formalistic legalism to a richer, multidimensional conception (Adidi & Shepkong 2024). It involves psychological wellness, spiritual affirmation, cultural sensitivity, and communal integrity. While Mill's liberal theory offers useful starting points, African thought deepens the conversation by anchoring equality in relationships, responsibilities, and moral harmony.

Afro-Philosophical Critique of J. S. Mill's Conception of Gender Equality

An African philosophical response to John Stuart Mill's concept of gender equality requires more than a simple agreement or disagreement demands a deep rethinking of the assumptions behind Mill's theory and a presentation of alternative values, worldviews, and gender practices. Mill's vision, rooted in liberalism, promotes individual rights and legal equality. While this has universal appeal, it is also shaped by Western epistemologies that prioritize autonomy over community, rationality over spirituality, and law over lived experience perspective (Isanbor & Ojebun, 2022). In contrast, African responses emerge from communal, relational, and often spiritual understandings of the human person and social justice (Adidi & Shepkong 2024). In many African traditions, gender roles were historically constructed based on functionality, complementarity, and moral responsibility, rather than strict biological essentialism. Scholars such as Amadiume (1987) have shown how precolonial Igbo societies recognized “female husbands” and “male daughters” categories that reflect a flexible and role-based approach to gender. This view is incompatible with Mill's binary thinking about men and

women and challenges the universality of his claims. Oyìwùmí (1997) further supports this position by arguing that Yoruba society organized social roles according to seniority and lineage, not gender. Her critique of colonial gender imposition reveals that gender categories in African contexts were often fluid, contextual, and linked to communal responsibilities rather than individual entitlements. Therefore, the liberal notion of equality that Mill advocates equality based on sameness and risks misrepresenting African gender systems that valued balance and mutual obligation.

African feminism, as developed by thinkers such as Nnaemeka (2004), is not adversarial but negotiating. Her concept of Nego-feminism emphasizes dialogue, flexibility, and compromise in the pursuit of gender justice. Rather than rejecting African culture, Nego-feminism works within it to challenge harmful practices while affirming communal values. This directly contrasts with Mill's confrontational legal reform model, and it illustrates how African women pursue justice not only through courts but also through kinship, ritual, and social negotiation. Adichie (2014), though influenced by Western feminism, also argues for culturally relevant gender advocacy. She affirms that African women deserve the same rights and freedoms as men, but she insists this must be grounded in context. Adichie challenges patriarchal norms in family and religion, but she also speaks in a language that resonates with African audiences. Eromosele (2013) adds that Adichie's treatment of sex and sexuality opens up critical spaces for African women to reclaim agency over their bodies and experiences, something Mill's theory leaves underexplored. Adidi and Tella (2020) offers a particularly relevant African male perspective. He argues that achieving gender justice in Africa requires rethinking African masculinity. Further, in his analysis of child labor and the Child Rights Act, Adidi (2024) broadens the discussion of gender to include the ethical treatment of vulnerable populations. His use of African hermeneutics connects children's rights to larger community values, thereby integrating gender, age, and social vulnerability into a single ethical discourse. This holistic approach reflects African traditions where justice is never fragmented but interwoven across all layers of society.

More African scholars also reinforce this culturally grounded view of equality. On this, Steady (2006) promotes an African ecofeminism that ties gender justice to environmental sustainability and spiritual renewal. Nzegwu (2006) criticizes the Western assumption that equality requires uniformity. She argues instead for a system that respects difference while upholding dignity. Uchem (2001) brings theology into the conversation, calling for a feminist theology that challenges patriarchal interpretations of religion and affirms women's full humanity. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) and Okonkwo (2010) also emphasize that African feminism must address class, colonial legacies, and indigenous systems of oppression. They advocate for a gender discourse that recognizes the material and spiritual realities of African women. Such a discourse must be rooted in social transformation, not just formal equality. An African response to Mill must therefore do three things: first, it must acknowledge Mill's relevance belief in education, autonomy, and justice are compatible with African values. Second, it must critique his limitations, particularly his assumptions of universality, individualism, and secularism (Adidi & Shepkong 2024). Third, it must offer alternatives grounded in African philosophy: personhood as relational, justice as harmony, and change as negotiation. By emphasizing community, spirituality, and cultural continuity, African responses do not simply reject Mill;

they decolonize and re-contextualize his ideas. They show that gender equality, to be meaningful in Africa, must be built not only on rights and rationality but on communal ethics, historical memory, and spiritual well-being.

Conclusion

Mill's advocacy for women's rights in the 19th century represented a significant milestone in the history of feminist thought. His liberal emphasis on liberty, education, rationality, and legal equality challenged entrenched patriarchal structures in Victorian society. However, as this paper has shown, Mill's framework is limited by its Western, individualist, and secular assumptions, which may not be wholly applicable in African contexts. Through the application of African communitarian philosophy, this paper has revealed how African ontologies of personhood, justice, and social harmony offer alternative paradigms for understanding gender equality. These frameworks capture the need to pursue gender equality not simply through legal reform but through cultural transformation, spiritual renewal, and moral reorientation. These perspectives have allowed this study to interrogate Mill's theory critically while also constructing a grounded African response. The paper concludes that while Mill's concept of gender equality remains historically significant and ethically compelling in certain aspects, it must be reinterpreted and adapted within African contexts. An African philosophical response requires more than the adoption of liberal values demanding the development of an indigenous feminist philosophy that affirms dignity, justice, and the moral centrality of community. This philosophical interrogation affirms that gender equality in Africa must be decolonized, contextualized, and culturally authentic. It must reflect the continent's historical complexities, spiritual frameworks, and ethical commitments.

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