

5.5 Female suffrage and married life

From The Contemporary Review, Vol. 20, 1872. The writer, Julia Wedgwood, a campaigner for justiceto women, takes up a topical issue, and challenges some popular misconceptions.

All large proposals need contemplation from more than one point of view, and many of the strongest arguments for and against such a one as the Enfranchisement of Women are of a kind of which Parliament cannot take cognizance. Of these, the most important concern of the influence which the proposed alteration is likely to have upon marriage

There is a small body actively hostile to the demand from pure conviction, a large body who regard it with profound indifference, and one almost equally large, and more influential, composed of persons who have nothing that can be called conviction on the subject, who see that it would be more consistent with the fact of a woman occupying the throne that women should have a voice in sending members to Parliament - who are not afraid of the small infusion of female influence which would be added to the electorate while, according to the only plan already proposed to Parliament, men and women vote on the same conditions - but who yet contemplate the proposed change almost with disgust. They do not directly answer any arguments on our side. They feel that their premises are too different from ours for any issue to be joined between us. They look upon the demand as the mere badge of a party, which in its enthusiasm for untried theories ignores unquestionable facts. 'Whatever may be said as to the influence of education and tradition in blinding us to the claims of women', they urge, 'it is undeniable that while the facts of life are what they are, while the mother of a family is for so many years of the prime of life an invalid, the burden of supporting the coming generation *must* rest upon men. No arrangement can open professions to a woman who has a child a year. While nature shuts her off from the work of bread winning, it is vain for any human agency to endeavour to give her a place of which that is the condition, and worse than vain to encourage her to make a demand which could be conceded only as part of a consistent scheme including this impossible condition.' This line of argument rests wholly on a misconception of what the demand is, not in matters of detail, but in principle. If nature shuts women out from professions, nature will also, as long as the conditions of voting are the same for both sexes, prevent their voting at elections. We do not ask that any steps should be taken to secure a female electorate. We ask simply that a proviso should be withdrawn which secures an exclusively male electorate. We want no bridges built, we merely want a barrier pulled down. We do not say, 'Make the franchise attainable by a particular set of persons who cannot satisfy the test applied hitherto'. We urge only, 'Let it be attainable by all those persons who satisfy the test'. Nay, I am understating our claim. We might say, 'At least, do not make the test cease to operate just where it works most efficaciously'. Surely no one will deny that it is harder for women to earn their living than men - in other words, that their success in doing so is a greater achievement. If it be so, the success of women implies rather more of those qualities, whatever they may be to secure which the property test was imposed, than the success of men does. Is it not, therefore, unreasonable to enfranchise some persons on the ground that they have given a certain evidence of possessing these qualities, and leave unrepresented others, who have given exactly the same evidence of possessing them in a higher degree? And to ask for enfranchisement on other grounds than that this evidence has been given, remember, will not be an expansion of the principle which has been conceded. It will be the admission of another, at variance with it .

As men have hitherto monopolized the cultivation of the world, as they have, I should add, a stronger imagination, no woman's picture of a woman has had a chance of competing with theirs. Hence it has come to pass that certain aspects of female life have been put on record with a

distinctness and brilliancy which have virtually annulled all the rest, and the average man is rendered even less able to sympathise with a woman than she is with him. Thus it happens that as married people advance in life their standard is apt to be lowered. They have been constantly enlarging the region which by the very fact of their holding it in common is shut off from all moral influence.

They have in so doing cut themselves off from the most elevating joy which we experience in our passage through this world - that sudden generation of power, that sudden enlargement of view, which takes place when two human spirits come into moral contact, and the voice of conscience is echoed by sympathy. This is what marriage might be in every class of life, among the ignorant and hard-working just as much as among the cultivated and leisurely. Our falling short of this ideal has, in addition to all the weakness and imperfection of human nature, this obvious and removable cause, that we have built up an artificial barrier between men and women, so as to make moral sympathy between them impossible.

It is, therefore, in the interests of all we are said to endanger, that we seek to obtain for our sex that educating influence which belongs to political recognition. To make women feel that they belong to a larger whole, that they are connected with the past and the future, and cannot act as mere isolated individuals, must be best even for that particular aspect of their lives, under which alone men are inclined to regard them. It is quite true that the suffrage given to women as holders of property - given, that is, on the only terms which are possible without a return to the false principle of legislating for women as a class apart - would give whatever power it did give to those women who are not men's actual or probable wives. But if it tended in any degree to set before men and women a common ideal - if it awoke in both sides the sense that there was a larger life in which they were sharers, a life not exhausted by their mutual relations - if it made them feel themselves in any degree more capable of judgement of each other, and therefore of a truer sympathy - it would be a step towards a kind of union between average men and women such as is now seen only between the most exceptionally gifted specimens of the race.

It is easy to turn into ridicule the association of such a hope with the demand for female suffrage. There will always be some to whom it will seem gross exaggeration to ascribe much influence to any event which does not change the material conditions of life, who will look upon it as absurd to hope to mould character by large expectations. And yet the course of history and of every-day life shows that hardly any influence is stronger than that of expectation. People become, to a large extent, what their circle takes for granted that they are. Any measure which shall express a national ideal for women, which shall assume that men and women share the great interests of life, must, so far as it has any influence at all, tend ultimately to bind men and women together. And few who ponder over great evils will deny that all will be lightened and some removed when this reunion of interests is once achieved.

It is not mainly, therefore, because we think men incapable of doing justice to women, that we seek for a share in the government of that nation of which we form more than one half. We cannot, indeed, deny that the most generous of human beings must be incapable of doing justice to those who withhold from him their own statement of their case; and we consider that the decisions of average men for average women . . . vary between inconsiderate pampering and inconsiderate hardness -- both being exemplified in our police-courts by the damages given to women who want a husband on the one hand, and the light sentences passed on husbands whom their wives would thankfully get rid of on the other. But we seek to be numbered among citizens quite as much from our need of being awakened to higher duties, as from a demand for extended rights. We desire it more for what it would make us than what it would give us. This I conceive to be no exceptional plea, but the true ground on which any demand for the extension of the suffrage should be based. Apart from the educating power of responsibility, apart from the fact that men are ennobled by being made citizens, I doubt if any class could make out for itself a

claim of admission to the governing body. It must not, therefore, be treated as a preposterous suggestion (in the true sense of that adjective) that we shall be made fit to deal with political questions by being invited to do so. Our hopes from such aid are no more than are justified by the course of history.