

**(UN)TREATMENT OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN ROUSSEAU'S DISCOURSE ON  
INEQUALITY****Prabhjyot Kaur***Department of Education, University of Delhi***Abstract**

*This paper makes an attempt to look into the aspect of gender inequality—unequal status of men and women in a society or a group—in Rousseau's discourse on inequality. It discusses Rousseau's framework of inequality among men and then analyses this framework to check if it holds true for women. In this process, the paper discusses difference between gender and sex and how conflating the two leads to naturalization of inequality between men and women. The paper concludes by discussing whether Rousseau's treatment of inequality between men and women is an act of mere silence or an approval regarding gender inequality.*

**Keywords:** *Inequality, gender inequality, sex and gender differentiation, gender roles, subordination of women*



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**Introduction**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *A Discourse on Inequality* is an attempt to trace development of inequality among men and is considered as a classic text. Through this work Rousseau shows that inequality is a result of man's socialization and that in the natural world all men are equal. It remains to be seen if Rousseau also means women when he says all men are equal. This paper sets out to look into the aspect of gender inequality—unequal status of men and women in society—in Rousseau's discourse on inequality.

**Rousseau's discourse on Inequality**

In 'A Discourse on Inequality' Rousseau states that there are two kinds of inequality among men. The first are natural or physical inequalities, arising from differences in strength, intelligence and so forth. The second are moral or political inequalities, which derive from the conventions that govern society. It is because of the latter that some men are rich than others and some are obeyed by others; in his discourse Rousseau explains the origin of such political inequalities. It can be stated that gender differentiation comes under political inequality.

In order to apply Rousseau's ideas to inequality between men and women it becomes imperative to know the stages through which Rousseau's man passed through from the original state and trace the origin of political inequalities. In the original state man is a free agent and thereby close to nature; his desires do not go beyond his physical needs. Unlike Hobbes' man, he is not evil rather he is full of natural pity and cannot see fellow creatures suffer. From the original state man passed into 'nascent society'-- a stage closest to the ideal. The central feature of this stage was settled huts which facilitated co-habitation of males and females and thus introduced family. Thereby family is a creation of human will and agreement and not of human instinct. Creation of families in turn, introduced property. To gather property as well as to fight scarcity, man formed groups with other men outside family. It is at this stage that differences between the sexes increased as the women became sedentary and accustomed themselves to looking after the hut and the children and the men became ever more active as they moved around to find food and gradually to fulfill newly developed needs. In the process of fulfilling these needs man developed the desire to be better than others and it is in this desire that Rousseau sees the beginning of political inequality among men. From this stage man passed into the stage of social contract wherein political institutions conferred power on some men which led to division of men as strong and weak and gradually with the conversion of legitimate power into arbitrary power men were further divided into masters and slaves. At this stage man is totally corrupt and most distanced from the state of nature as he is dependent on others and is not conscious of his loss of freedom.

According to Rousseau the natural man is free in three senses; he has free will, has anarchic freedom and has personal freedom i.e., he has no master. When man becomes sociable he loses his freedom and gradually the sense of loss of freedom. Applying Rousseau's ideas to the two sexes, it can be stated that freedom, in all its meanings, should apply to women as well and whatever, is the justification for men getting certain privileges in any stage as individuals should surely be the justification for women getting the same. But such is not the case as Rousseau did not take men and women to be equals. His ideal stage of man's evolution is that of nascent society where conjugal love, co-operation and particularly the creation of gender roles make women subservient to men; representing the beginning of inequality.

### **Gender inequality**

Gender inequality may be seen as a) unequal status of men and women within a society or a group and/or b) different treatment of men and women in a society or a group in terms of liberties provided and access to opportunities, rewards and so on to the privilege of men. To

rationalize these differences on basis of biological differences between men and women is to disguise the social nature of these differences. Such notions propagate that differences between the sexes are natural and hence inequality between men and women is justified. Gender and sex are two different concepts; while difference between biological sexes is natural, gender inequality is social.

One of the most extensively read publication, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, evidently elaborates on this differentiation between sex and gender. In this book, Margaret Mead (1935) describes three cultures which have very different construction of gender showing what is believed to contribute to maleness and femaleness is subject to endless variation. The 'same' behaviors may be seen and understood very differently in different cultures. For instance, in one of the cultures favorable traits for both males and females were that of being gentle and cooperative and in another culture favorable traits for women were that of being dominant and for men were that of being more emotionally dependent.

Robert Stoller (1968), states that to determine sex one must consider the following physical conditions: chromosomes, external genitalia, internal genitalia, hormonal states and secondary sex characteristics. While gender is a term that has psychological and cultural rather than biological connotations; if the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', corresponding terms for gender are masculine and feminine; these latter may be quite independent of sex. This differentiation between sex and gender challenges the naturalness of gender inequality. Therefore, to look at and/or rationalize gender inequality as natural is to undermine the aspect of power and privilege that is achieved by men through the subordination of women.

### **The absence of 'gender inequality' in Rousseau's discourse**

In nascent society, the invention of property and the division of labor represent the beginning of moral inequality. Though Rousseau explains the nature of domination and exploitation of the poor by the rich he does not pursue the other inequality—that between men and women. He does not explain how and why woman, who in the original state was able to fend for herself and live in a similar manner as man, becomes subordinate to man in nascent society. The state of nature which he entitles to man is different from the state of nature for woman; it is in the nascent society that he pictures the woman to be in the state of nature. In doing so he fails to transcend socially attributed characteristics and to strip off man (and woman) of all artificial faculties, to the state in which he (she) must have emerged from the hands of the nature --a project he sets out to accomplish in part one of his discourse. Rousseau himself gets embroiled in the web of 'facts' which he urges his readers to set aside in the beginning of

his discourse. He believes in natural inequality of woman wherein he assigns different nature, roles and duties to man and woman. He further believes that each sex should pursue the path marked out for it by nature in order to save both the sexes from destruction.

According to Rousseau, from this diversity springs the difference in the moral relations between the sexes. While one should be active and strong the other should be passive and weak. It is necessary that one has the power and the will and the other should offer little resistance. For Rousseau, it is the duty of the woman to obey and that of man to be dominant. He naturalises the inequality between man and woman by stating that this is not the law of love but the law of nature. In *Emile* (1950), while justifying different education for man and woman, he states that men and women neither are nor ought to be constituted the same, either in character or in temperament. He goes on to state that woman by nature is modest, attentive, reserved and that it is her aim to have children and nurture them as, the one to whom nature has entrusted children must take care of their needs.

Rousseau also states that men and women are made for each other, but their mutual dependence is not equal. Man is dependent on woman through his desires; woman is dependent on man through her desires and also through her needs. Man could do without woman better than woman can do without man. Not only does Rousseau put differences between man and woman into a hierarchy and naturalises it, he shows contempt for a man who does not possess 'man-like' characteristics. He labels 'effeminate men' as little dandies who are a disgrace to their own sex and to the sex which they imitate. For Rousseau an 'effeminate' man is feeble, timid and his soft way of life deprives him of courage and strength (1984, pp.86). According to him the woman who loves an 'effeminate man' is not following her vocation. Thereby Rousseau presumes a hierarchy between men as well.

**Conclusion: mere silence or an approval regarding gender inequality?**

Rousseau's silence on the inequality between sexes in 'A Discourse on Inequality' and his belief that such inequality as natural becomes stark when it is viewed in the light of the arguments for equality between the sexes by other thinkers such as, John Stuart Mill. In 'The Subjection of Women' (1869), Mill states that the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong, and is one of the chief hindrances to human improvement. He further states that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality wherein there is no power or privilege on the one side or disability on the other. Mill argues that the adoption of the system of inequality is not based on any deliberation or experience. It arose as women were bound to men due to the "value attached to them by the men" and women's inferiority in muscular strength, and was legalized through laws. He argues that this dependence is not an original

institution as all women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that “their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men”, it is morally correct for them to perform the duties of a woman, and that it is their nature, to live for others. According to Mill, this is not the real nature of women and one does not know what women's nature is, because it is so wrapped up in how they have been raised.

Mill states that the social subordination of women stands out as an isolated fact in modern social institutions which otherwise propagate ‘achieved status’. It is only for women that the higher social functions are closed and they are not allowed to compete for certain things due to the mere fact of their birth. Legal subordination (no right to property or to vote) makes them all the more dependent on their husbands in particular and men in general. Mill points out that it is not that women lack ability as the women who are allowed the same interests and freedom of development as men, have shown to be as efficient as men. He states that women’s disabilities in public spheres are only clung to in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life and deny them personal liberty as well as the liberty to govern their own affairs. All this shows that women are legally, socially and economically subordinated by men and that the inequality between the sexes is not natural.

Creation of gender roles and in turn inequality between the sexes, developed when families were formed, and took roots with formation of institutions, which conferred power to men within the family and outside, and gave them privileges which were not granted to women. These privileges lead to exercise of arbitrary power by men and further weakened the position of women. Since then the imbalance of power and political inequalities are maintained through different ways of socialization of man and woman. Not only does Rousseau overlook this conscious subordination, he assumes woman’s subordination to man as natural and thereby moral. He defines moral inequality as elevation of some men over others by consent and convention; as political rule, he himself becomes a party to it by avoiding the issue of inequality between the sexes, and putting the differences between man and woman into a hierarchy.

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