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helen ...

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



" The Claim of Englishwomen to the Suffrage Constitutionally Considered".

By Helen Taylor. 1867

1. CLASIFICATION
 - a. Text type: This is an article published in the " Westminster Review" in 1867.
 - b. Cultural and historical background: It dates back to 1867, Victorian period (1837-1901), which corresponds with the reign of Queen Victoria. This was an extremely exciting period, sometimes called " the second British Renaissance". It was published after the amendment to the Bill presented by John Stuart Mill, backed up by 1500 signatures, including some of the most remarkable women at that time. His petition for women's suffrage was rejected.
 - c. Author: Helen Taylor was born in 1831. Her mother, Harriet Taylor, was particularly politically active, supporting women's rights. As John Stuart Mill's step-daughter, Helen helped him with his books and articles after her mother's death. In 1865 Mill got a seat in the House of Commons and presented a petition in favour of women having the right to vote in 1866. His petition was defeated. In 1867 she published this article and she was a founding member of the London Society for Women's Suffrage.
 - d. Addressee: I think that this article was thought to act as a support document for the incipient women's suffrage movement. She was preparing the ground for a more formal petition, as though Mill's petition containing around 1500 signatures was turned down. She was echoing the women petition while societies demanding women's vote were flourishing all around the country. I think this was intended to be a declaration calling for the women right to vote.
2. ANALYSIS Miss Taylor first published it as an anonymous article in the " Westminster Review" in January 1867 and it was reprinted afterwards. She based her position on the idea that since women were fully allowed by English law to hold all kinds of

properties, so they should to vote in the election of the Parliament representatives: " This petition [...] sets forth that the possession of property in this country carries with it the right to vote". So it was that even American politicians fought against slave's right to vote based on their inability to hold property. According to Taylor, it was " hard to see how, if the law of England endows a woman with property, it can, [...] deprive her of the essential privilege". Following the legal positivism developed by thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham (Westminster Review founder), she based her claim on constitutional grounds stating that women were only asking for the recognition of rights that " flew naturally from the existing laws and institutions of the country". She stressed the importance of this social movement, mentioning the number of women's signatures (fifteen hundred) which backed up the official petition presented to House of Commons by Mr. J. S. Mill in 1867, demanding the vote for women. In addition, she set a 10 to 1 ratio. For each woman that signed the petition, there would be ten that also supported the idea but for several reasons, were not able to express themselves. She thought that it should be taken into account when considering the petition and signatories should be regarded as representatives of larger social body. She then referred to what she called " domestic despotism", which did not allow women to openly speak their minds. Apart from grounding her petition on the British Constitution and the already recognized right to property and its management, she highlighted that women were perfectly adequate for the government and management as female sovereigns were. Ironically, Queen Victoria, was openly opposed to such kinds of political concessions to women. " Universal Suffrage" as the

word said, implied the personal representation, which comprised both men and women. That brought up the theory of "class representation" according to which all mothers, wives and women were part of a very large group by virtue of their female condition. Again, she underlined the odd position in which laws placed women who were property owners. She described that as an "anomaly of the system", as anyone entitled by law to hold and manage property, should also be able to take part in the political decisions, as they may have side-effects on their properties. She thought that this political exclusion was due to a prior period when women were not able to own properties and as a result, they were not included among the voters. English law "has long ago refused to drive women into marriage, as sheep are driven into a fold, by shutting every gate against them but the one they are intended to go through", this comparison drew a very clear image of the kind of "anomaly" Taylor was talking about. Women needed to be able to protect their possessions within the legal frame, and one of the very first steps was to be given the right to choose their representatives at the Parliament. She also analyzed what would happen if this petition was admitted and the vote to women was granted. She thought that in a way, men were afraid of losing their decision power and that was why they objected to the petition. They should not be afraid of independent women, as they were already acting that way, governing their own lives and properties. Occasionally voting, will not make any difference. Besides, she thought that politics at the time were full of "domestic" subjects, such as education, labour regulation, water supplies, etc.

3. CONCLUSION The Industrial Revolution (a period from 18th to 19th century) dramatically changed everyday's life in the United Kingdom.

Women taking part in the workforce with new kinds of jobs, tough working conditions, etc. were a challenge for the traditional idea of the women's role, and its relationship with the environment. Traditionally the woman's place was the house, children and home caring, playing an absolutely secondary role, subordinated to her husband. This article can be considered one of the major texts regarding the role of women in the Victorian society and the controversial right of women's suffrage. Taylor made a unique contribution to the suffrage movement. Apart from playing an active founding role in different women's suffrage associations with this article, she gave visibility to an old claim, organizing a widespread campaign getting thousands of signatures to back up the formal petition. In my opinion, Helen makes a mistake with regards to her consideration of the legal position of women and property, particularly in the case of married women. They were not able to exercise any rights over their property most of the times. It was their husband the one entitled to do so on her behalf. That "full property" she mentions as basic pillar for her theory is not such, except in the case of some widows and single women. However, Taylor was a pioneer in the movement for women's rights and her contribution was valuable in the battle for equality in the context of a shaky era such as the Victorian. This can be considered one of the milestones regarding the role of women, as it was one the early demands for women's suffrage in the United Kingdom. 4.

BIBLIOGRAPHY <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/vwwp/view?docId=VAB7170> <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/WtaylorH.htm> <http://www.historyofwomen.org>