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The Victorian Social Context: The Position of Women in 19th Century

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of women in Victorian Britain (1837-1901) and how the legal systems, social ideologies, and economic conditions affected women's lives on either side of the class division. The examination verifies how the theory of coverture denied married women legal personhood, and how the ideology of separate spheres kept women primarily within domestic roles.The paper further explores the Victorian sexual double standard, which both idealized female purity and placed women under intense scrutiny and severe judgment for imagined infractions. In spite of these restraints, the Victorian period saw the rise of significant challenges to conventional gender roles in the form of property rights, access to education, and ultimately political suffrage campaigns. This paper presents a refined view of the place of Victorian women within a time of substantial social upheaval, illustrating how women exercised agency despite facing deep systemic limitations by analyzing both limiting structures and liberal movements.

Keywords

Victorian Era, Separate spheres, Sexual double standard, Gender ideology, Legal constraints, Moral purity, Reform movements, Middle-class femininity

The Legal Status of Women

Victorian women lived in a state of deep legal subordinance. Prior to the enactment of the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, married women had legally little separate existence from their husbands under the doctrine of coverture. As legal historian William Blackstone famously formulated in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England:*

> "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything." (William Blackstone, pg. 442)

This doctrine of coverture had the effect that when a woman married, her property automatically came under the control of her husband. She was not allowed to own property, sign contracts, make wills, retain her own wages, or enter into contracts without the consent of her husband. Divorce was very hard to achieve,

particularly for women, who had to establish adultery plus another offense like cruelty or desertion, whereas men merely had to establish adultery.

The institution of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 created a civil court of divorce, which made divorce slightly more available, but remained strongly unequal in favor of women. The Custody of Infants Act of 1839, and its later extensions of 1873 and 1886, incrementally increased mothers' rights over custody of their children, although fathers had large legal advantages throughout the period.

The Doctrine of Separate Spheres

Victorian gender ideology was deeply influenced by the theory of "separate spheres," which placed men and women as essentially different individuals with different roles and responsibilities. Men held the "public sphere" of work, politics, and intellectual life, while women were relegated to the "private sphere" of home and family.
Sarah Stickney Ellis, the leading Victorian author on women's responsibilities, summed up this ideology in her bestseller conduct guide *The Women of England (1839):*

> "The women of England are not called upon to build churches, to head armies, to direct railways, or to govern states. They have quieter, but not less important duties to fulfil. To make home the seat of every comfort, to shed happiness around them on all within their reach, to instruct, to warn, to cheer, and to charm: these are the noble duties which belong essentially to woman."(Sarah Stickney, pg. 24)

This separate sphere ideology was asserted through religious education, medical and scientific explanations, educational routine, and bestsellers. Women were described as morally but not intellectually superior to men, temperamentally better qualified for child-raising tasks yet incapable of thought or public office.

Education and Intellectual Life

Educational prospects for Victorian women were strictly limited in relation to those of men. Whereas sons of the middle and upper classes were given classical education in preparation for university and professional life, daughters generally received training in "accomplishments" aimed at securing a husband—drawing, music, dancing, and possibly some modern languages.
As Elizabeth Missing Sewell, a teacher and writer, noted in her work *Principles of Education (1865):*

> "A girl's education is supposed to be completed when she can spell correctly, write a good hand, has some slight knowledge of French and music, can net purses and work in Berlin wool."

Higher University education continued to be nearly closed to women until late in the century. Bedford College (1849) and Queen's College (1848) were among the first to provide university education for women in London. The opening of Newnham College (1871) and Girton College (1869) at Cambridge, and Lady Margaret Hall (1878) and Somerville College (1879) at Oxford, were important developments.

Women did not receive full degrees at Oxford until 1920 and at Cambridge until 1948.
A few remarkable women did make notable intellectual contributions. Mathematician Ada Lovelace produced early computer programs, Mary Somerville composed important treatises on astronomy and mathematics, and Harriet Martineau developed sociological techniques. They were attained despite gigantic social obstacles and typically required exceptional family support or specific circumstances.

Employment and Economic Status

Victorian women's job opportunities were restricted sharply by conventions of gender and law. Work for wages was degrading and the sign of financial need, not personal drive, and middle- and upper-class women had to stick to the home.

For those who needed or wished to work, career choices were narrowed mainly to "feminine" professions: governessing, teaching, needlework, or operating a small ladies' school. Such jobs usually carried paltry remuneration and low status. Florence Nightingale explained the governess's situation:

> "What are we to do with our unmarried daughters? What position are they to occupy in life? They cannot be governesses forever; there are not houses enough to contain them. A happy marriage is the happiest calling for them; but all cannot receive this calling. What are they to do? They have not been prepared for a profession."

Working-class women experienced harsher conditions. Factory labour, domestic work, and farm labor provided long hours, hazardous conditions, and poverty pay. Women's mining labor was prohibited after 1842, but numerous others persisted in equally dangerous jobs. Working women typically received one-third to one-half of male pay for the same work, independent survival being almost impossible.

New professions started opening in the 1850s in a gradual fashion. The use of the typewriter provided work for women as clerks and secretaries. The growth of department stores, the post office, and telegraph networks produced new "respectable" employment for middle-class women, though usually with strings attached (for instance, postal women generally were expected to leave their jobs on marriage).

Domestic Life and Motherhood

For all Victorian women, household work was the top priority in day-to-day living. The ideal middle-class Victorian homemaker was presented as "the angel in the house," a moral one who was obligated to provide an environment of peaceful calm for the husband and kids. As Coventry Patmore glorified in his renowned poem of the same name:

> "Man must be pleased; but him to please
>
> Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
>
> Of his condoled necessities
>
> She casts her best, she flings herself."

In real life, middle-class homemakers coordinated sophisticated household operations, managing servants, budgets, entertaining, and childcare. Working-class women bore the double burden of paid work and domestic work, often running households on minimal means.
Motherhood was woman's supreme vocation, but it entailed great physical danger. "Maternal death rates were high all century, and about 5 women died for every 1,000 births. Women commonly had several children; families of 8-10 children were not unusual in the mid-century."(*Journal of the Royal Society*, pg. 11)

Childbirth itself was still often unmedicated until the 1850s, when chloroform became available, famously used by Queen Victoria when giving birth to Prince Leopold in 1853.

The Victorian era also witnessed the slow development of better contraception, although this kind of talk was still taboo. By the end of the century, the declining birthrate indicated rising family limitation, especially among the middle class.

Reform movements and the fight for women's rights.

In spite of the widespread regulation that was imposed, the Victorian period saw increasing resistance to conventional gender constraints. The women's movement gathered pace through the century, pushing for legal changes, education, work, and eventually political suffrage.

Early in life, pioneers such as Barbara Bodichon launched campaigns for the rights of married women to property. Her 1854 book, *A Brief Summary of the Laws in England concerning Women*, established the legal restrictions on women and led to the Married Women's Property Acts being passed. She also launched the first women's votes petition, which was presented to Parliament in 1866 by John Stuart Mill. Mill established strong arguments in support of the equality of women in his 1869 essay, "The Subjection of Women:"

> "The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes, the legal subordination of one sex to the other, is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other."

By the 1870s, the suffrage movement had gained considerable organizational muscle. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, led by Millicent Fawcett, sought to achieve reforms through constitutional channels, whereas the Women's Social and Political Union, established in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, pursued more militant tactics.

Women were increasingly coming into professions which had previously been male. In 1865, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson became the first woman to be awarded a medical license in Britain, and Sophia Jex-Blake founded a medical school for women in London in 1874. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 finally led to women entering the law.

Conclusion

The status of Victorian women was molded by deep-seated legal disabilities, limiting gender ideologies, low levels of educational and occupational attainment, and double sexual standards. Within these, however, women exercised agency and slowly increased the scope of action. By the end of the century, women had secured key legal rights, entered higher education in increasing numbers, entered into new professions, and established vigorous political movements which would secure the vote in the early 20th century.

The Victorian period's complicated legacy for women is both harsh restrictions and the beginnings of profound change. To understand this era is to see both the structural limitations that shaped women's lives and the individual and collective actions that slowly reshaped social possibilities for women.

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