WEP Warwick Evans Publishing

International Journal of Social Sciences and Public Administration

ISSN: 3005-9836 (Print), ISSN: 3005-9585 (Online)
Volume 10, Number 9, Year 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62051/ijsspa.v10n9.07



Reconstructing Women's Subjective Freedom: A Perspective on The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State

Xinge Ji

Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang 321004, China

ABSTRACT

In The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Engels systematically traces how women gradually declined from being at the core of socioeconomic development to becoming appendages of men, undergoing a process of deterioration characterized by the marginalization of economic power, restrictions on personal freedom, control over reproduction, and the alienation of sexual relations. He analyzes the roots of women's unfree condition from four dimensions: private ownership, the gender division of labor, the legal status of the sexes, and women's subjective consciousness. To enhance women's independence and creativity in the pursuit of freedom, give full play to women's subjective consciousness, and realize the goals of women's liberation, gender equality, and the free and all-round development of humanity, it is necessary to develop the productive forces and eliminate private ownership, encourage women to participate in social labor and realize the socialization of domestic labor, and establish marriage relations based on love, thereby creating an equal, free, harmonious, and well-rounded social environment for women.

KEYWORDS

The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State; Women's Subjectivity; Freedom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the long course of human history, gender relations, as an important driving force of social structure and cultural development, have not only shaped the diverse forms of human civilization but have also profoundly influenced the roles individuals occupy in society and the realization of their value. With the evolution of civilization, women's roles and status in the family and society have undergone a transformation from dominance to subordination, and their subjective freedom has been severely constrained. In The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (hereinafter referred to as The Origin), Engels, with profound historical insight and incisive theoretical analysis, reveals the condition of women's subjective freedom at different historical stages and the social roots underlying it. Upon entering modern society, although women's status has improved, they still face many challenges and difficulties on the path toward realizing subjective freedom. Therefore, reviewing history, analyzing the causes, identifying the institutional, cultural, and psychological factors underlying the lack of women's subjective freedom, and seeking effective paths toward its realization are not only matters of safeguarding women's rights and interests but also a profound appeal for social fairness and justice. This article analyzes the absence and reconstruction of women's subjective freedom from both historical and contemporary dimensions, with the aim of providing theoretical support and practical guidance for addressing contemporary gender issues.

Content from this work may be used under the terms of CC BY-NC 4.0 licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).
Published by Warwick Evans Publishing.

2. THE PROCESS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF THE LOSS OF WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVE FREEDOM

Women's subjectivity refers to women's conscious agency, as subjects, in continuously improving and developing their status, capabilities, ways of life, level of knowledge, and other aspects of their existence.[1] Only by using correct free will to guide the transformation of the objective world in the course of exercising their subjectivity and thereby attaining a truly autonomous and self-reliant state can women obtain freedom in their relations with nature, society, and themselves.[2] However, with changes in modes of production and family forms, human society has gradually generated numerous problems concerning women. At their core, these problems involve the loss of women's subjectivity-in other words, the loss of independence, freedom of choice, and creativity in women's pursuit of freedom.

On the basis of changes in modes of production and productive tools, Engels divided social history into the eras of savagery, barbarism, and civilization; correspondingly, systems of kinship and forms of the family also underwent an evolution through group marriage, pairing marriage, and monogamy. The family is a basic social unit formed through the marital relationship between men and women and the bonds between parents and children, and continual changes in family relations and marriage institutions affect women's status as subjects within family and social relations. After providing an in-depth exposition of Morgan's research, Engels argued that amid these historical changes in modes of production and marital forms, women were compelled to lose various rights, their social status gradually declined, and their subjective freedom progressively disappeared, reducing them to appendages of men.

Group marriage in the era of savagery was the earliest form of marriage and family in human history and also the period in which women's rights reached their peak. This marital system took matrilineal kinship as the bond of the clan, and women were at the core of socioeconomic development and the continuity of family life. Men and women in the era of savagery existed in a relatively primitive and simple relation of equality under conditions of very low productive forces and insufficient exploitation of natural resources. The natural environment gave rise to a natural division of labor between the sexes: women mainly engaged in gathering and cultivation, while men participated in hunting and defending against wild animals. Men and women jointly obtained the means of subsistence necessary for the survival and reproduction of the entire clan, "compensating for the inadequacy of individual self-defense through the united strength and collective action of the group."[3] (p.35)The number of clan members determined the overall strength and capacity of the clan, and women at this time undertook the dual tasks of producing the means of subsistence and reproducing the population, namely, childbearing. Thus, "women not only occupied a free position, but also one in which they could enjoy a high degree of respect."[3] (p.35)Because of their outstanding contributions to productive labor and reproduction, women attained a relatively high economic status and enjoyed men's profound respect and reproductive veneration. Moreover, owing to the lack of strict legal coercion and social norms, communal life involved relatively unregulated sexual relations. On the basis of the conception of kinship marriage, men and women could simultaneously form marital relations with multiple women or men of the same generation, while all offspring born from such relations traced descent and inherited property through the mother rather than the father. This laid the foundation for the gradual establishment and development of mother-right.

With the continuous development of the productive forces, human society entered the era of barbarism, and the pairing family emerged. This family form both retained certain characteristics of group marriage and transcended group marriage in some respects. On the one hand, the communal household economy corresponding to the development of the clan constituted the objective basis of women's dominant position, and women continued to possess relatively strong voices in the family and clan. Men and women remained in a relatively equal state. Although women's labor in agricultural production gradually became auxiliary labor, "the children still belonged only to the

mother, as before,"[3] (p.48)and the matrilineal clan system became consolidated. On the other hand, as marriage prohibitions became increasingly complex and the effects of natural selection became more apparent, the scope of joint marriage between the sexes within the clan gradually narrowed. At this stage, marriage assumed a transitional form in the shift from group marriage to individual marriage, namely, "a man has one chief wife among many wives, while for this woman he is the chief among her many husbands."[3] (p.48)Although pairing marriage established the prototype of a one-man-one-woman marital arrangement, the rights enjoyed and rules observed by men and women within the marital relationship were unequal. For example, women were required to maintain strict chastity during cohabitation and could be cruelly punished for compromising marital purity, whereas men enjoyed the rights of polygamy and adultery. In many areas, women were also robbed or purchased, and signs of the "commodification of women" initially appeared. This increasingly exclusive monogamous marriage system made exclusivity a reality by progressively excluding marriage among blood relatives. It not only reduced internal clan conflicts arising from multiple-partner relationships but also improved the physical and intellectual qualities of offspring. At the same time, however, it became possible for children to know both their biological mother and father; the superiority women had gained through reproduction throughout the clan gradually disappeared, laying a major hidden danger for the overthrow of mother-right and the loss of women's subjectivity.

By the end of primitive society, further development of the productive forces generated surplus products, private ownership organized around the family was gradually established, and the pairing family correspondingly evolved into monogamous marriage, closely connected with slavery in civilized society. The marital relationship of monogamy evolved from a relatively fragile state into a stable structure centered on men, with the inheritance of paternal property by children as its sole purpose and direct driving force. The clarification of descent promoted the formation of modern social ethics, and this long-term and stable contractual relationship between the sexes became a bond sustaining social stability and continuity. Engels therefore regarded monogamy as "one of the signs of the beginning of the era of civilization."[3] (p.65)However, this new family form was characterized by harshness and hypocrisy, namely, "monogamy from the very beginning had its special character, making it monogamy only for women and not for men."[3] (p.67)Women's status underwent a fundamental transformation under the marital model based on private ownership, and women's subjectivity was more thoroughly lost in capitalist society.

First, women's economic power was marginalized, the economic foundation of the superstructure of mother-right was dismantled, and the patriarchal character of society was strengthened. With the development of agriculture, animal husbandry, and metalworking, men's physical advantages gradually became apparent, and they became the primary creators and controllers of material means of subsistence; moreover, the wealth they acquired was visible and measurable. With the emergence of the individual household under monogamy, women's domestic labor lost its public character and became a form of private service. Although cooking, sewing, and caring for children and the elderly were crucial to the family, such labor did not directly generate economic value. Consequently, women could not obtain remuneration and accumulate wealth through participation in social production in the same way as men. Women lost their independence in economic life, while men relied on their economic power to control the new family order. Their complete domination and leadership over women restricted women's personal development and freedom.

Second, women's personal freedom was restricted, leaving them completely in a position of oppression, enslavement, and exploitation. Engels pointed out: "The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between husband and wife in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male."[3] (p.70)Women were subjected to strict surveillance and control in everyday life, confined to the private sphere of the family, and prohibited from participating in the athletic activities and public affairs in which their husbands engaged. Such restrictions on women's personal freedom not only constrained their social interactions and recreational activities but also prevented them from seeking

effective assistance when facing domestic violence and abuse. The loss of women's personal freedom was an important manifestation of the loss of women's subjectivity: women were no longer independent individuals possessing autonomous wills but had become genuine dependents of men.

Third, women's reproduction was controlled, and women "became the slave of the husband's lust, a mere instrument for bearing children."[3] (p.59)Under patriarchy, offspring were regarded as family property, and the fact that men controlled property determined that authority over children was likewise held by men. Brutal men possessed the power of life and death over their wives and children and immorally dominated their wives' reproductive freedom, unilaterally determining reproductive plans and reducing women to instruments of population reproduction. In addition, fathers determined the prospects and destinies of children as they grew up. Because of their subordinate and passive position, mothers lacked actual guardianship and educational rights over their children, while men had completely deprived them of autonomous decision-making power over children's surnames, upbringing, marriage, and other matters.

Fourth, sexual relations between men and women became alienated, serving merely as a means of satisfying male desire and losing the intimacy, respect, and emotional communication that should characterize relations between the sexes. Engels pointed out that among all ruling classes, the conclusion of marriage "remained a matter arranged by parents, a matter of weighing advantages and disadvantages."[3] (p.75)On the one hand, men were the sole agents able to dissolve marriage. Because women had lost economic independence and autonomy over their personal rights, they were compelled to deepen their dependence on men and were required to maintain strict chastity and loyalty to their husbands; women could thus be regarded as objects that men could discard at will. On the other hand, even men in the relatively civilized capitalist society covertly or openly used their privileges to indulge in sexual pleasures beyond social regulation. In a society in which sexual transactions were gradually "rationalized," the sanctity and dignity of sexuality disappeared, and men completely ignored women's emotional needs in satisfying their physiological desires. Women lacked autonomous choice in sexual relations, while their sexual health was increasingly violated through sexual violence and abuse. Sexual relations not founded on pure love produced enormous differences in the standards of moral judgment applied to men and women. Society readily labeled women engaged in sex work as "morally depraved," yet Engels profoundly demonstrated that male promiscuity "is an insult to women, but it rebounds upon men and insults men themselves,"[3] (p.69)because it in fact corrodes and degrades the character of men as a whole rather than the morality of women.

It can be seen that women's status and value declined sharply from the moment monogamy was introduced, and in some respects even disappeared altogether. Women changed from equal subjects alongside men in primitive society into objects of oppression. Their independent consciousness and self-will were eroded, and their intrinsic motivation to exercise initiative, freedom of choice, and creativity in material and spiritual life gradually weakened. Women thus found it difficult to attain genuine freedom in all social relations.

3. THE ROOTS OF WOMEN'S UNFREE CONDITION

The loss of women's subjective freedom is not an accidental phenomenon; rather, it is deeply rooted in complex social structures and institutional arrangements. To explore the roots of women's unfree condition, we must trace them to the rise of private ownership, the institutionalization of the gender division of labor, inequality in the legal status of the sexes, and the rigidification of women's subjective consciousness. These factors are intertwined and together have constructed a cage restricting women's free development.

3.1 Private Ownership: The Institutional Basis for Depriving Women of Equal Rights

Private ownership is the decisive factor in the loss of women's subjective freedom. Continuous changes in productive tools and the rapid development of the productive forces generated entirely new social relations: "wealth became private family property and increased with great rapidity, dealing a powerful blow to the society founded on the matriarchal gens,"[3] (p.57)and the surplus means of material production within the clan were transferred into the male-dominated "family" and, ultimately, into men's private ownership. Such private ownership was not limited to material wealth but extended further to ownership of slaves, wives, and children. After humanity entered capitalist society, the productive forces completed another cycle of spiral development. While human creativity and needs were more broadly released, the concentration of the means of production and social wealth in the hands of a small number of people generated oppression of the majority by the minority, further undermining women's subjectivity.

Under the economic and social form of private ownership, women were deprived of equal rights in both the family and society. On the one hand, the Marxist feminist Dalla Costa concluded through analysis that "domestic labor is a key factor in the production of labor power," that is, women's contribution lies not in producing exchange value but in producing labor power.[4] Women provide their husbands with a warm family environment and emotional comfort, which in fact provides a source and impetus for the generation of surplus value. The more women contribute to the family and their husbands, the greater the possibility that workers will further create surplus value through physical and emotional replenishment, and the more ruthlessly capitalists exploit workers and appropriate surplus value. The logistical support work that should have been undertaken by capital was all shifted onto women. Thus, if workers are the slaves of capitalists, women are the slaves of slaves. On the other hand, capitalist private ownership "has made everything into a commodity; it has replaced inherited custom and historical law with buying and selling and 'free' contract."[3] (p.85)The bourgeoisie, which controls large amounts of wealth, possesses immense privileges and a superior position. Under the conditions of the commodity economy of private ownership, social relations between people are manifested as relations between things; distorted notions of love driven by money cause women to be priced and sold like commodities, transforming the essence of capitalist love into an exchange of interests. As Marx and Engels stated in The Communist Manifesto: "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'."[5] (p.30)Women's autonomous consciousness is gradually eroded in such monetary transactions, and women's subjectivity is regarded as a form of "deficient subjectivity"; what they lack is precisely freedom.

In sum, capitalist private ownership causes the loss of women's subjectivity, the distortion of individuality, and the alienation of personality, depriving women of their independence and integrity as both natural and social human beings. Women's living conditions become alienated from their self-consciousness, and they lose the equal rights they should possess in relations between the sexes, within the family, and in society. Capitalist private ownership not only produces social instability and imbalance but also restricts the comprehensive development of the productive forces and the free development of human beings.

3.2 The Gender Division of Labor: A Social Mechanism that Fixes Women's Roles

If private ownership is the principal root of the loss of women's subjectivity, then the gender division of labor is the real key to women's personality alienation. In The Origin, Engels proposed the "twofold production" theory, namely: "The determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this, again, is of a twofold character: on the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence-food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that

production; on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species."[3] (p.4)The two forms of production became increasingly unbalanced with the emergence and development of private ownership. Social division of labor replaced natural division of labor, and domestic work and childbearing became the main productive activities of women confined to the family. The capitalist system not only failed to dissolve the internal mode of household production but instead transformed and reorganized it. In The German Ideology, Marx pointed out that the root of human alienation is the restriction of human activity by the division of labor, and that the family, with its initial natural division of labor, is an important sphere in which alienation occurs.

The gender division of labor assigns women to domestic work, increasingly excludes them from social production, and likewise produces alienation within domestic labor itself; that is, women develop a sense of rupture because their creations ultimately become alien to them, and they gradually lose human value, subjective status, and the possibility of defining themselves. First, the worker becomes alienated from the labor process; as Marx said, "The worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity; it belongs to another; it is the loss of himself."[6] (p.55)Women engaged in domestic labor experience a prolonged sense of constraint and oppression and find it difficult to obtain leisure time under their own control. Such labor, which they are compelled to perform, is precisely a process of losing themselves rather than expressing human subjectivity and human essence. Second, the worker becomes alienated from the product of labor. Although the results of domestic labor are ostensibly for the welfare of all family members, women are often unable to place themselves in a position of subjectivity from which to enjoy the satisfaction and value generated by these results, especially when some products of labor are provided exclusively for male family members. Third, labor becomes alienated from the human species-being. Human species-being consists in freely and consciously engaging in activity, constructing products according to multiple measures in production, and reflecting on oneself through that activity. Women's domestic labor reverses this relationship: rather than realizing their essence as human beings, women are treated as using labor merely as a means of survival and a way of making a living, as a non-autonomous activity undertaken in order not to be abandoned by a patriarchally dominated household. Under such circumstances, women also become alienated from their own species-being. Finally, human beings become alienated from one another. Genuine labor should be a process of satisfying one's needs, realizing self-worth, and pursuing comprehensive and free development, but under capitalist conditions labor has become a painful necessity, losing the natural expression of humanity and the expression of species-being. Women's domestic labor is taken for granted by family members, and feelings of estrangement, loneliness, and meaninglessness therefore often permeate women's daily lives.

The division of labor, especially the gender division of labor, makes women's activities increasingly narrow and one-sided, and restricts their participation in social activities, thereby hindering the development of their abilities and talents. Moreover, women's family activities produce domestic labor and its results as an alien power opposed to women themselves, which in turn dominates and suppresses women's independence, autonomy, freedom of choice, and creativity. Women are not only physically consumed by heavy domestic labor but also mentally depleted by endless and hidden "emotional labor."

3.3 The Unequal Legal Status of the Sexes: An Invisible Barrier to Women's Autonomous Rights

The superstructure corresponding to the capitalist economic foundation has likewise become a constraint on the exercise of women's subjectivity. Engels pointed out: "The bourgeois law which upholds male domination exists only for the purpose of maintaining the relationship between property owners and proletarians; it costs money, and because workers are poor, it has no effect on the relations between the worker and his wife."[3] (p.77)Capitalist law formally pursues equality, as reflected in legal provisions and legal principles, but significant differences remain in the substantive legal status of

men and women. These differences are rooted both in deep historical and cultural foundations and in the imperfect reality of capitalist law, and together they constitute a complex and subtle picture.

Invisible barriers imposed by capitalist law on women extend across political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. In modern capitalist legal systems, voting rights and eligibility for election were subject to strict property restrictions, and during certain historical periods women found it more difficult than men to obtain these important political rights because of their economic status and property conditions. Legal protection for women in the labor market has likewise been incomplete. Women continue to receive unfair treatment because of traditional stereotypes that they are "suited to low-paid, low-skilled work," including large wage gaps and difficulties in career advancement, thereby losing some opportunities to compete equally with men in the workplace. In matters of marriage, capitalist law merely seeks a written record that both parties "voluntarily enter into marriage." Questions such as how such consent is reached, what consequences the contractual relationship produces, what the parties' actual economic positions are, and what forms of oppression the wife experiences within the relationship are treated as unrelated to the law. Women's health rights have also often been treated unequally. Although laws explicitly prohibit and punish acts such as sexual harassment and sexual violence, implementing these legal provisions in practice remains extremely difficult; in some countries, women have even been unable to obtain medical and healthcare services on an equal basis with men.

It can thus be seen that superficial and false capitalist law functions like an "invisible protective umbrella" that obscures society's unfair treatment of women and arbitrarily weakens women's various autonomous rights. As an expression of bourgeois will, capitalist law in practice merely protects the capitalists' private ownership. "In the family, the husband is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat."[3] (p.80)Men's economic advantage thus places them in a position of domination that requires no legal privilege for protection. Even where formal legal protections exist, they remain weak and ineffective for women. The unequal legal status of the sexes gradually undermines women's subjective consciousness, causing them to lose independence and creativity under the "discipline" of the visible or invisible superstructure and leaving them subordinate and unable to pursue genuine freedom.

3.4 The Rigidification of Women's Subjective Consciousness: The Ideational Cage Confining Women's Self-Realization

The overall ideological control exerted by patriarchal society over women has gradually rigidified women's own subjective consciousness, which is an important internal cause of their unfree condition. A strong sense of subjectivity is manifested in women's ability, on the basis of a clear understanding of their own characteristics, to recognize and consciously fulfill their historical mission, social responsibilities, and responsibilities in life, to participate actively in the transformation of social life, and to continuously realize their needs and values. However, "the overthrow of mother-right was the world-historical defeat of the female sex,"[3] (p.59)and the development of women's subjective consciousness has clearly lagged behind the socioeconomic and political development of capitalist society. As a result, women lack sufficient internal motivation to achieve autonomy and self-reliance and are unable to become masters of their own bodies and minds.

Men's control over women permeates every aspect of social life. Through continual submission to male power, women gradually weaken their own subjective consciousness and fall into a negative cycle of low status and blurred awareness. For most women, even if they can recognize their existence as individuals, they cannot face their own embodied existence and incompleteness. Some women acquiesce in the existing unequal gender division of labor, focusing their attention exclusively on the family and believing that the greatest task in life is to satisfy the material and spiritual needs of family members; their authentic identity as "women," together with all their interests and pursuits, disappears once they become mothers. From another perspective, women's lack of subjective consciousness is

also manifested in the othering of the female body. Distorted self-perception causes women to spend more time managing and restricting their bodies in order to satisfy male aesthetic standards, and such "shaping" ignores women's individual differences and internal needs. Compared with men, women are heavily criticized with respect to sexual freedom because they lack decision-making power over their own bodies, and women's sexual freedom is regarded as immoral and nonconforming. If women view and understand themselves only from the male perspective and cannot escape the rigidification of subjective consciousness, they will continually face the outcome of willingly accepting oppression and enslavement without recognizing it, while their bodies, spirits, and thoughts will be subjugated to the greatest extent.

Women's subjective consciousness and their status as subjects exist in a mutually reinforcing cycle. The rigidification of women's subjective consciousness weakens their status as subjects, which in turn pushes women's subjective consciousness step by step toward extinction. Therefore, as the German workers' movement activist August Bebel stated, "The future of women lies in their awakening,"[7] (p.231)women can attain a state of freedom in their interaction with nature, society, and themselves only by enhancing their subjective consciousness and consciously controlling their life activities, thereby becoming living beings capable of self-creation and self-determination.

4. PATHWAYS TO REALIZING WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVE FREEDOM

In The Origin, Engels reveals an important historical fact: the oppression of women is not "natural" but a product of social relations. We should strive to build a society in which women do not need to depend on or compromise with anyone; their existence is independent, complete, and meaningful. Such a society represents a profound practical application and development of Engels's conception of women's liberation in The Origin. It rejects all institutions and ideas in history that have led to women's oppression and provides women with opportunities and conditions for equal participation in social life. Engels thus outlined a grand blueprint for women's subjective freedom, deepening the theoretical understanding of women's subjective freedom while actively seeking practical paths toward its realization.

4.1 Goals for Realizing Women's Subjective Freedom

Women's liberation is one of the core goals of realizing women's subjective freedom. Women's liberation requires not only freeing women's bodies from the chains imposed by social, economic, political, legal, and other constraints on their development but also encompasses the profound significance of women's self-development and self-realization at the intellectual, cultural, and emotional levels. This process depends on the combined forces of women's enhanced self-consciousness and supportive social environments. Through education, communication, and practice, women must develop independent and autonomous values, free themselves from the constraints of traditional gender roles, escape the "family trap" jointly established by patriarchy and capitalism, and continuously strengthen the internal motivation to exercise their subjectivity and achieve genuine freedom. As social actors and an important component of the proletariat, women's liberation concerns not only women's own rights and status but is also a crucial part of proletarian liberation. Therefore, women's liberation should be integrated with the proletarian liberation movement and achieved simultaneously in the cause of overthrowing class divisions and all forms of oppression. As Engels stated: "The exploited and oppressed class (the proletariat) cannot emancipate itself from the class which exploits and oppresses it (the bourgeoisie) without at the same time forever freeing the whole of society from exploitation, oppression and class struggles."[5] (p.7)Therefore, only the thorough realization of national and social liberation can provide a solid and stable economic foundation and superstructure for the improvement of women's status.

In the process of realizing women's liberation, the intrinsic demand for gender equality must always be maintained. Men and women should attain equality with concrete connotations and substantive

content, rather than a formalistic equality abstracted by capitalism and protected by bourgeois law. This requires ensuring that men and women enjoy equal rights in such areas as economic opportunities, policymaking, law enforcement, and social attitudes, while respecting everyone's gender identity and expression with openness and inclusiveness. Marx stated that "the direct, natural and necessary relation of person to person is the relation of man to woman,"[8] (p.119)indicating that relations between the sexes have long possessed social significance beyond their purely biological meaning; their healthy development directly concerns the construction and coordination of social relations, the mobility and restructuring of social strata, and the operation and adjustment of social mechanisms.[2] Therefore, equality and harmony between the sexes are an important foundation for the sustained positive functioning of society, while social progress creates conditions for the healthy development of relations between the sexes. Gender equality follows its own law of development but can never transcend the level of social development. Economic prosperity, cultural openness, and improved laws all create a more favorable social environment for advancing gender equality and improving women's status. However, pursuing gender equality does not mean erasing natural biological differences or human diversity. Individual uniqueness and irreplaceability are precisely the primary prerequisites for women to exercise their subjectivity. Women's diverse life experiences, viewpoints, emotional expressions, abilities, and strengths make important contributions to social activities and promote cultural diversity. When women are encouraged and given opportunities to express their uniqueness, their subjectivity is fully manifested and respected, and the realization of personal and social value is brought into unity.

The free and all-round development of humanity is the ultimate value orientation of realizing women's subjective freedom. Specifically, women's free and all-round development includes multiple dimensions: first, the ability to satisfy material, spiritual, social, and other multidimensional needs; second, the simultaneous development of physical, intellectual, social, and other personal capacities; third, participation in social relations as individuals with independent social identities; fourth, possession of individuality distinct from that of others; and fifth, possession of sufficient discretionary free time. Only when women genuinely achieve all-round development and complete the transformation from subjects dependent on men to self-reliant subjects dependent on money, and ultimately to self-determining subjects characterized by more comprehensive and rational forms of development, can they use correct autonomous will to guide the transformation of the objective and subjective worlds. Marx stated: "The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation."[9] (p.610)Therefore, all measures that promote the realization of women's subjective freedom ultimately point toward the formation of an association of free individuals in the future. Women's free and all-round development is closely connected with the free and all-round development of humanity and the progress of society as a whole, jointly promoting social harmony and development. The free and all-round development of individuals is the foundation and driving force of human progress, while the free and all-round development of humanity provides individuals with broader space and more favorable conditions for development; the two mutually promote and constrain one another and form a harmonious unity.

4.2 Conditions for Realizing Women's Subjective Freedom

After clarifying the grand goals pursued in realizing women's subjective freedom, attention should be focused on the indispensable conditions for achieving those goals. These conditions do not exist in isolation but are intertwined and together constitute a solid foundation supporting women's movement toward freedom and liberation. They concern not only changes in socioeconomic structures but also profound transformations in cultural ideas, family roles, and individual choices.

Developing the productive forces and eliminating private ownership are the most fundamental conditions for realizing women's subjective freedom. The development of the productive forces is the fundamental driving force of social progress and the evolution of civilization, and it promotes women's subjective freedom at multiple levels and in multiple dimensions. With the continuous

development of the productive forces, the social division of labor becomes increasingly refined, production efficiency increases significantly, and new industries and jobs continue to emerge. Women can therefore participate in broader areas of social production, laying a material foundation for the realization of subjective freedom. Beauvoir also emphasized that the technological characteristics of modern society "can eliminate the inequality in physical strength between men and women: only necessity can make abundant physical strength an advantage; excessive strength is no better than moderate strength."[10] (p.76)In addition, the increase in the productive forces means an increase in social wealth, providing strong guarantees for improving women's living conditions and quality of life. When women are no longer constrained by the struggle for subsistence, they can devote more time and energy to self-development and the realization of self-worth. Of course, developing the productive forces alone is far from sufficient to fully realize women's subjective freedom. Owen once stated: "Private property is the source of countless crimes committed by human beings and countless calamities suffered by them."[11] (p.11)The dual nature of capital reveals that while private ownership promotes the rapid development of large-scale industry, it also provides fertile ground for brutal exploitation and alienating divisions of labor, severely skewing the distribution of the means of social production. The feminist Evelyn Reed supported Engels's theory and argued that "hierarchy is inherent in, and coeval with, class society," maintaining that discrimination against women is rooted in the institution of private property.[12] (p.567-577)Therefore, only by eliminating private ownership, breaking the unequal pattern of ownership of the means of production, and creating a fair and just social environment for women can women's emotions be liberated from the confines of property relations and women fundamentally attain economic independence and personal dignity. The elimination of private ownership does not simply mean public ownership of the means of production. Marx held that its main purpose is not simply to abolish all private ownership, but to eliminate the social force that drives people to use private property to enslave the labor of others; this means fundamentally transforming social relations. It will eliminate class antagonism and exploitation and establish equal, mutually supportive, and harmonious relations among members of society. In such social relations, women will no longer suffer discrimination or oppression of any kind, will enjoy rights and opportunities equal to those of men, and will be able to fully develop their potential and creativity and realize both personal and social value.

Women's participation in social labor and the socialization of domestic labor are the first prerequisites for realizing women's subjective freedom. The enormous differences between men and women in the amount of economic property they possess and in whether they possess independent property are the origin of inequality between the sexes. Women's participation in the social division of labor and their choice of the social labor in which they wish to participate are therefore a key step toward breaking the constraints of traditional gender roles and realizing self-worth. In class society, women's status depends on whether they can become social adults, and the identity of the social adult is formed through participation in social production. As Marx pointed out, "the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations."[13] (p.56)This demonstrates the essential social character of human beings, namely, that human identity, value, and meaning are shaped and determined to a considerable extent by the social relations in which people are situated. By participating in social labor and integrating into networks of social relations, women can demonstrate their intelligence and abilities as autonomous and independent subjects through practical activity, expand interpersonal relationships through interaction with others, and experience the beauty of labor and life, thereby thoroughly freeing themselves from economic dependence and psychological attachment to men. It can be said that women's contributions and achievements in social labor directly affirm their subjectivity and promote the awakening of women's self-consciousness and the exercise of subjective freedom. At the same time, another problem faced by women must be addressed, namely, the assumption and distribution of domestic labor after women enter the public sphere. Domestic labor must therefore be socialized: the resources and goods required by households should be supplied through socialized means, and domestic labor should enter the market as part of social production, while the results of domestic labor should be transformed into

social resources for value realization and circulation. The socialization of domestic labor breaks the traditional division of labor in which "men work outside the home and women manage the household," enabling women to escape heavy domestic labor and devote more time and energy to personal development and social interaction. As Josette Trat stated, "Engels (and his predecessors) argued that women's becoming part of the labor force contributes to women's liberation, and there is now broad consensus on this: work ensures their economic independence, while social services reduce the burdens of domestic labor and childrearing." "Human development cannot be separated from control over free time as a prerequisite; likewise, the free development of humanity presupposes possession of free time."[14] (p.215)When women participate in social labor and domestic labor is socialized, this time becomes a valuable resource for pursuing all-round development and self-transcendence. More importantly, an increase in free time enables women to arrange their lives according to their own wishes and rhythms, thereby attaining the highest state of control over their own lives and subjective freedom.

Entering into marriage on the basis of love is a necessary emotional condition for realizing women's subjective freedom. "Modern individual sexual love" refers to "the most passionate love and the most steadfast fidelity"[3] (p.77)between spouses and is an intense and enduring loving relationship based on mutual affection and genuine freedom. Marriage based on love provides women with an emotional haven grounded in mutual respect, understanding, and support. Within such a marriage, love is not merely an emotional bond but also a foundation for mutual growth and mutual fulfillment. Women can feel valued and cared for in such marriages and thereby establish firm emotional independence. They no longer depend on the economic function of marriage or on social role positioning but define their position and value within marriage on the basis of sincere emotional ties. From another perspective, a marriage free from relations of interest is not only an emotional destination but also an accelerator of women's personal growth and self-realization. Women can remove the constraints of roles imposed by the outside world, devote themselves wholeheartedly to self-improvement and the exploration of their potential, develop personal interests, and pursue career aspirations. This not only promotes the comprehensive growth of women's skills and wisdom but also stimulates deeper reflection on the meaning of life. Ultimately, this process guides women step by step toward subjective freedom: women are no longer beings dependent on others or society but complete individuals possessing independent wills and autonomous decision-making capacities and freely pursuing happiness and self-realization.

5. CONCLUSION

Engels explores in depth, from a historical perspective, the concrete manifestations and deeper causes of the loss of women's subjective freedom and identifies the ultimate goals and basic conditions for realizing such freedom. The values of women's autonomy and independence, active choice, and creative agency have become even more significant in contemporary society. They concern the substantive advancement of gender equality, the continued optimization of social structures, and the ultimate realization of the free and all-round development of humanity. On the one hand, the material and spiritual foundations for women to exercise their subjectivity should be strengthened. The productive forces should be developed through technological innovation and industrial upgrading, more employment opportunities suitable for women should be created, and women's opportunities and returns from participation in economic activity should be increased. At the same time, gender-equality education should be strengthened to guide the whole of society toward sound gender perspectives and create a favorable social atmosphere that respects women and encourages their self-realization. On the other hand, realizing women's subjective freedom also depends on establishing long-term mechanisms conducive to the balanced development of men and women, ensuring women's rights in policymaking, resource allocation, career development, and other dimensions, enhancing women's voice and influence in politics, the economy, science and technology, and other fields, and forming a pattern of social development in which men and women participate jointly and

promote one another. In the new era of socialist China, women as members of society continue to face the contradiction of unbalanced and inadequate development. How to strengthen contemporary women's conscious agency in transforming the objective world has therefore become an urgent problem. Women's development in the new era should be closely integrated with national prosperity, national rejuvenation, and people's well-being. Efforts should be devoted to improving the status of Chinese women, effectively safeguarding women's equal development rights in terms of rights, opportunities, and outcomes, and exploring a path of women's development with Chinese characteristics that conforms to China's national conditions, thereby making an important contribution to the realization of women's subjective freedom, the free and all-round development of humanity, and the construction of a new form of human civilization.

REFERENCES

[1] Zhao, X. (2004). Women's subjectivity: A new interpretation of the Marxist outlook on women. Collection of Women's Studies.

[2] Chen, B., & Peng, Y. (2022). On the Marxist view of freedom and women's subjectivity. Marxist Philosophical Studies.

[3] Engels, F. (2018). The origin of the family, private property and the state. People's Publishing House.

[4] Bai, J. (2014). A new dimension of Marxist alienation theory: Gender alienation. Academic Exchange.

[5] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2014). The communist manifesto. People's Publishing House.

[6] Marx, K. (2000). Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844. People's Publishing House.

[7] Bebel, A. (1995). Woman and socialism (X. Zhu, Trans.). SDX Joint Publishing Company.

[8] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1979). Collected works of Marx and Engels (Vol. 42). People's Publishing House.

[9] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1995). Collected works of Marx and Engels (Vol. 4). People's Publishing House.

[10] de Beauvoir, S. (1998). The second sex (T. Tao, Trans.). China Books Publishing House.

[11] Owen, R. (1998). Selected works of Robert Owen (Vol. 2). The Commercial Press.

[12] Cline, J. A., et al. (2006). Feminist philosophy: Problems, theories, and applications (Y. Li, Trans. & Ed.). Oriental Press.

[13] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1995). Collected works of Marx and Engels (Vol. 1). People's Publishing House.

[14] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1998). Collected works of Marx and Engels (Vol. 30). People's Publishing House.