Gender Exploitation and Feminist Contractualism

Abstract: Current understandings of gender exploitation (Hampton, Sample) are inadequate, as they fail to capture its systematic character, i.e. the fact that gender exploitation is a relation between positions in a social structure rather than one between individuals. On Jean Hampton’s account, exploitation “is possible even in the most intimate relationship *if* one party relies upon the affection or duty felt by another party to use that other party to her detriment” (Hampton 2007, 20, my emphasis). Similarly, Ruth Sample defines exploitation as a matter of an individual “pursuing a transaction with another for the sake of advantage in a way that is degrading to one’s interactor” (Sample 2002, 276). Both of these definitions miss the structural character of gender exploitation by failing to capture two of its features: first, that women experience gender exploitation in virtue of their structural position as women, not in virtue of their (or their partner’s) contingent behavior and, secondly, that men cannot give up the privilege of their position as long as the position exists even if they wished to do so (a fact about the subjection experienced by married women pointed out by J. S. Mill).