

Mary Wollstonecraft

# A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

From *'The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft'* (1989), vol. 5, edited by Marilyn Butler and Janet Todd  
With a new commentary by Eileen Hunt Botting

*Mary Wollstonecraft* was an English writer, feminist, and moral and political philosopher, who advocated for the educational and social equality of women. Her works include *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), the novel *Mary: A Fiction* (1788), and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

MW's words are in This Font below !!

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EHB's words are In This Font below!

## Introduction

After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial. I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? – a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity – One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

Wollstonecraft begins the introduction to the book by setting up its fundamental philosophical question: are the differences between the sexes caused by 'nature' or by a 'civilisation' that has historically been 'very partial' to men? She answers this philosophical question by identifying the neglect of 'education' as the 'grand source' of the 'misery' in

society, especially women's 'wretched' inequality with respect to men.

Wollstonecraft contrasts the goals of women's current 'false system of education' and her own plan for a virtuous form of female education. The latter teaches women only to 'inspire love' by cultivating conventional feminine notions of 'beauty', while the former would teach them to 'exact respect' through the exercise of 'their abilities and virtues'.

In a treatise, therefore, on female rights and manners, the works which have been particularly written for their improvement must not be overlooked; especially when it is asserted, in direct terms, that the minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement; that the books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same tendency as more frivolous productions; and that, in the true style of Mahometanism, they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species, when improveable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural sceptre in a feeble hand.

Wollstonecraft describes her book as a 'treatise on rights and manners' - emphasising the deep connection between granting women rights equal to those enjoyed by men, and reforming the culture of society as a whole.

Wollstonecraft uses the prevailing 18th-century Orientalist stereotype of Muslims as misogynists, who treated their women as sub- or non-human. Her invocation of this Western-biased imagery contradicts her message of universal human rights. It is one aspect of her political thought that needs to be critically interrogated by readers today, so that we do not fall into the same trap of appealing to culturally biased stereotypes to buttress our arguments for the rights of humanity.

Yet, because I am a woman, I would not lead my readers to suppose that I mean violently to agitate the contested question respecting the equality or inferiority of the sex; but as the subject lies in my way, and I cannot pass it over without subjecting the main tendency of my reasoning to misconstruction, I shall stop a moment to deliver, in a few words, my opinion. - In the government of the physical world it is observable that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. This is the law of nature; and it does not appear to be suspended or abrogated in favour of woman. A degree of physical superiority cannot, therefore, be denied - and it is a noble prerogative! But not content with this natural pre-eminence, men endeavour to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration which men, under the influence of their senses, pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts, or to become the friends of the fellow creatures who find amusement in their society.

Wollstonecraft uses first-person voice to identify herself 'as a woman' to her largely male reading audience. This reminder of the author's gender is a powerful rhetorical move, because it allows her to deftly navigate the 'contested question' of

whether women are naturally inferior to men. She proceeds to grant that men are 'in general' physically stronger than women, but insists that it is an open question whether men in general are superior to women by nature in any other regard.

I am aware of an obvious inference: – from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against their ardor in hunting, shooting and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennoble the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind; – all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine.

This discussion naturally divides the subject. I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this Earth to unfold their faculties; and afterwards I shall more particularly point out their peculiar designation.

Wollstonecraft plays with gender stereotypes of her time to challenge their authority. While some complained of the rise of 'masculine women' engaging in hunting and other traditionally male sports, Wollstonecraft dismisses this fear as ungrounded. She wryly suggests that it might be good for women to imitate the so-called 'manly virtues' and become more 'masculine' if it would mean exercising the 'talents and virtues' that 'ennoble the human character'. By the end of the paragraph, it is clear that she is not arguing for women to become more like men, but rather for both men and women to become more virtuous, noble and worthy of their shared human station.

I wish also to steer clear of an error which many respectable writers have fallen into; for the instruction which has hitherto been addressed to women has rather been applicable to *ladies*, if the little indirect advice, that is scattered through Sandford and Merton, be excepted; but, addressing my sex in a firmer tone, I pay particular attention to those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural state. Perhaps the seeds of false-refinement, immorality and vanity, have ever been shed by the great. Weak, artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature unnatural manner, undermine the very foundation of virtue, and spread corruption through the whole mass of society! As a class of mankind they have the strongest claim to pity; the education of the rich tends to render them vain and helpless, and the unfolding mind is not strengthened by the practice of those duties which dignify the human character. – They only live to amuse themselves, and by the same law which in nature invariably produces certain effects, they soon only afford barren amusement.

But as I purpose taking a separate view of the different ranks of society, and of the moral character of women, in each, this hint is, for the present, sufficient; and I have only alluded to the

subject because it appears to me to be the very essence of an introduction to give a cursory account of the contents of the work it introduces.

Thomas Day's *History of Sandford and Merton* was a popular series of children's books published in the 1780s. They were a model for Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), which aimed to educate girls in a more egalitarian fashion than was the norm of the time.

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists – I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.

Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.

Wollstonecraft here speaks as an exceptional woman – setting herself off from the vast majority of her 'own sex'. Like a female Socrates, Wollstonecraft aims to show her fellow women 'what true dignity and human happiness' are. In order to teach this wisdom, she must treat them 'like rational creatures' and help them to see how they have been stunted and mistreated in the current system of female education. Like Socrates in Plato's aforementioned allegory of the cave, Wollstonecraft wants to reveal to women the falsehoods that they have been taught to believe, and instead lead them to the truth.

This is a rough sketch of my plan; and should I express my conviction with the energetic emotions that I feel whenever I think of the subject, the dictates of experience and reflection will be felt by some of my readers. Animated by this important object, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style; – I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for, wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart. – I shall be employed about things, not words! – and, anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation.

Although Wollstonecraft claims that she is avoiding 'flowery diction', to a 21st-century reader this might seem insincere. It helps to recall that her unique (and untutored) style of writing was an inspiration for the elegant yet simple, vividly concrete yet emotionally bare language that we have come to associate with the British Romantic poets from William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats.

The Historical Pageant of the Women's Coronation Procession, 17 June 1911, organised by the Women's Social and Political Union, who were hoping to enlist the support of the new king in getting the Conciliation Bill of 1911 through parliament.

These pretty superlatives, dropping glibly from the tongue, vitiate the taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth; and a deluge of false sentiments and overstretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, render the domestic pleasures insipid, that ought to sweeten the exercise of those severe duties, which educate a rational and immortal being for a nobler field of action.

A resounding theme of the *Rights of Woman* is Wollstonecraft's conception of 'true taste' as opposed to the vitiated or falsely refined sense of good taste inculcated by the present system of education. The final chapter of the book provides a comprehensive look at how a reformed, national system of education would transform people's sense of taste - for what is good and valuable, from food to the arts - for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, - the only way women can rise in the world, - by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act: - they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures. - Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio! Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?

If then it can be fairly deduced from the present conduct of the sex, from the prevalent fondness for pleasure which takes place of ambition and those nobler passions that open and enlarge the soul; that the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire - mere propagators of fools! - if it can be proved that in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of their sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over, I presume that *rational* men will excuse me for endeavouring to persuade them to become more masculine and respectable.

Again, Wollstonecraft resorts to using an Orientalist stereotype - this time, the Western-biased image of Muslim women as trapped in polygamous seraglios or harems. While she clearly wishes her readers to denounce all forms of female subjugation in marriage, she fails to address Islam as a religion and culture worthy of respect, or entertain the possibility that some women might find freedom in polygamy or in religious traditions distinct from her own Dissenting Protestant Christianity.

Indeed the word masculine is only a bugbear: there is little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or fortitude; for their apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength must render them, in some degree, dependent on men in the various relations of life; but why should it be increased by prejudices that give a sex to virtue, and confound simple truths with sensual reveries?

In one of the most visionary lines of the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft suggests that gender is a social construction, not a phenomenon determined by nature. For her, the 'word masculine is only a bugbear' - a fantastical creation of the human imagination. Masculine and feminine are simply ideas that have gained traction in society through the use of language and other shared cultural practices.

Women are, in fact, so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence, that I do not mean to add a paradox when I assert, that this artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannise, and gives birth to cunning, the natural opponent of strength, which leads them to play off those contemptible infantine airs that undermine esteem even whilst they excite desire. Let men become more chaste and modest, and if women do not grow wiser in the same ratio, it will be clear that they have weaker understandings. It seems scarcely necessary to say, that I now speak of the sex in general. Many individuals have more sense than their male relatives; and, as nothing preponderates where there is a constant struggle for an equilibrium, without it has naturally more gravity, some women govern their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern.

Wollstonecraft concludes the introduction to the book by proposing a provocative social experiment: let men become more 'chaste and modest', and if women do not grow 'wiser in the same ratio', then she will accept the prevailing view that women are inferior to men in every way, including physical strength. In other words, she is proposing a test of her proposal for reform of education: if boys and girls were educated with the same moral and intellectual standards, wouldn't they exhibit the same virtues and capacities for knowledge? This is a social experiment we are still running today, as universal primary education - free, mandatory and coeducational - has become a United Nations standard for children around the world only since the turn of the 21st century.