A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)

Born in 1759, Mary Wollstonecraft has long been considered one of the founding voices of the feminist movement in the eighteenth century. Her writings on the condition of women were derived as much from her personal experiences as from observations of the world around her. She encountered heartbreak and economic strife early in life, when her father squandered the family fortune. Wollstonecraft worked tirelessly to support her siblings, despite their own ineptitude and laziness. In 1786, the loss of her companion Fanny Blood to childbirth made Wollstonecraft begin to consider the particular dangers and difficulties that women faced. An affair with an American, Gilbert Imlay, left her further disillusioned when she discovered his infidelity.

After a short-lived career as a governess, Wollstonecraft found work as a reader and translator. She began to publish in the late 1780s as the French revolution stirred emotions on the continent and in England. The rejection of her affections by the Italian poet Fuseli, and the round of criticisms fired at her upon the publication of her radical pamphlet, A Vindication of the Rights of Men, inspired Wollstonecraft to tackle the issue of women's rights. She published A Vindication of the Rights of Woman in 1792, a pamphlet in which she broke ground by linking the economic difficulties facing women to issues of political equality. The Enlightenment, with its concerns about equality among men, had opened up the possibility for intellectuals to raise the question of equality between men and women. Yet most male writers who considered the subject believed that women were the weaker sex and resisted the idea that women were rational beings meriting political equality. Wollstonecraft challenged such notions by advocating equal education for women, which would permit women to assume their rightful position as equals to men in other realms. Wollstonecraft based her argument upon the grounds that both men and women possessed immortal souls that did not differ because of sex. Therefore, men and women shared equal capacities. At the same time, she also pointed to the harsh economic realities that most women faced, especially because of motherhood. Wollstonecraft's A Vindication refuted Rousseau's biologically based notions of the sexes, which Rousseau used as justification for advocating separate systems of education for men and women. In the excerpt below, Wollstonecraft attacks the alleged weakness of women and contends that women deserve more meaningful educations.

CITATION:

Questions
1. What solutions does Wollstonecraft offer?
2. Why does Wollstonecraft criticize contemporary methods of educating women?
3. How do men and women differ, according to Wollstonecraft? What abilities do the sexes share?
A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN
Mary Wollstonecraft

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 civilisation 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 wand 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 civilised women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

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 improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural sceptre in a feeble hand.

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 quality 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 preeminence, 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.

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 ardour 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 ennobles the human character, and which raises 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.

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 Merton" be excepted; but, addressing my sex in a firmer I pay particular attention to those in the middle class, use they appear to be in the most natural state. Perhaps seeds of false refinement, immorality, and vanity, have 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 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 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 taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and those beings who are only the objects of pity, and that 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 weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual
characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show 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.

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, or
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. 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.

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 libertin
e 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.

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?

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.