

REVOLUTIONIZING WOMEN'S EDUCATION: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S FEMINIST VISION

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Abstract

*Mary Wollstonecraft emerged as a key figure in the infancy of feminist philosophy. She is celebrated for pioneering in championing women's rights and education's pivotal role in this transformation. She tackled the intricate social and political environments of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, eras known for their profound discussions on human rights and equality. Wollstonecraft's revolutionary masterpiece, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), refused the deep-rooted beliefs in women's subservience and supported their access to education and autonomy. Her critique of societal standards, especially the limiting roles expected of women in the home, placed education as a means to achieve personal liberty and progress for society. Despite encountering heated opposition and criticism throughout her existence, Wollstonecraft's concepts have indelibly shaped feminist thought and activism. This study delves into her contributions to feminist theory and educational reform, emphasizing her lasting impact on modern conversations on gender equality and women's empowerment. By exploring Wollstonecraft's biography, literary works, and the scholarly milieu of her era, this study highlights the continuing significance of her advocacy for education and advancing gender equality.*

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft, feminism, Women's education, Gender equality.

Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft emerged as a pivotal figure in the early stages of feminist philosophy, distinguished by her pioneering efforts to advocate for women's rights and the significance of education. Born in 1759, Wollstonecraft lived through pivotal societal and political transformations, such as the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which sparked intense debates on human rights and equality. Her influential writings are at the heart of her contributions, especially her revolutionary work, *"A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* (1792). This revolutionary text challenges prevailing notions of women's inferiority. In the introduction to *The*

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Cambridge Companion, Claudia Johnson describes Mary Wollstonecraft as a pivotal figure amid significant societal transformations. She was at the forefront of addressing all the key issues related to political authority, subjugation, liberty, social status, gender roles, marriage, parenting, and more, though only a limited selection is noted. Mary Wollstonecraft emerged as a key influencer in the quest for women's liberation, offering fresh perspectives on the role of education and feminist theory in advancing gender equality. Her pioneering work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, challenges the prevailing norms of her time and establishes a fundamental framework for understanding how education and feminist theory contribute to the pursuit of gender equality. She passionately championed women's right to education and independence, critiquing societal norms that confined women to domestic roles. Wollstonecraft viewed education as a path to personal freedom and a critical step towards societal progress towards fairness and justice. The female sex would become the companion and colleague of man, instead of his coquette or slave.

*To render mankind more virtuous,
and happier of course,
both sexes must act
from the same principle...
To render also the social compact
truly equitable,
and in order to spread
those enlightening principles,
which alone can ameliorate
the fate of man,
women must be allowed
to found their virtue
on knowledge,
which is scarcely possible
unless they be educated
by the same pursuits as men.*

Her perspective was controversial for her era, suggesting that women's educational deprivation was a central issue of their oppression. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft engaged in public discourse and wrote extensively on educational reforms and political morality. Despite facing severe criticism and ridicule in her lifetime, her influence has endured and significantly shaped the course of feminist thought and activism. Her writings continue to provoke discussions today on issues of gender equality, the importance of education, and the evolving status of women in society. During Wollstonecraft's era, the education of women differed significantly from that of men. Women's education focused on skills like sewing, singing, and engaging in

aesthetic conversations, which Wollstonecraft found deeply troubling. She believed that "the most ideal education should be an activity that best enhances the body and cultivates the heart or, in other words, to help the individual develop the virtues that will make them self-sufficient." Wollstonecraft thought that through education, the mind could be shaped, leading her to see women's subjugation as wholly unjust and arbitrary. Wollstonecraft challenged the traditional roles assigned to women, advocating for their autonomy and self-sufficiency. She opposed the idea of marriage as a form of subjugation for women, arguing that women should have the freedom to pursue their objectives and not be limited to domestic duties. Wollstonecraft called for greater financial independence for women, stating that depending on men's financial support put women at risk of exploitation and suppression. She emphasized the importance of education as a means of empowering women, aiding their intellectual growth, enhancing their moral character, and encouraging their active participation in society. Wollstonecraft believed that educated women were better positioned to make informed decisions, assert their rights, and contribute to the betterment of their communities. However, she agreed with many other thinkers of her time, who were often called "*liberal*" for their stance on human rights. As we delve into her endeavours, it becomes clear that Wollstonecraft's ideas continue to resonate and drive current discussions on women's rights and the evolution of the education system. Mary Wollstonecraft's pioneering efforts have laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist thought and forward-thinking educational concepts. Her relentless push for women's rights and her in-depth examination of societal norms have solidified her status as an essential voice in the Enlightenment era. Despite facing numerous hurdles in her life and career, Wollstonecraft's legacy endures. Her contributions not only paved the way for future feminist theories but also contributed to broader debates on human rights and societal fairness. The principles she championed have had a profound impact on numerous feminists, educators, and activists striving to build a society where women have equal opportunities to achieve their intellectual and moral ambitions.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the educational philosophy of Wollstonecraft.
2. To evaluate Wollstonecraft's views on women's education and its societal impact.
3. To determine the enduring impact of Wollstonecraft's concepts on feminist theory and education.
4. To analyse the contemporary significance of Wollstonecraft's advocacy for gender equality.

Methodology

The study utilizes a comprehensive strategy to thoroughly investigate Mary Wollstonecraft's importance as a pioneer in feminist ideas and her efforts to promote the progress of women's rights. The approach includes qualitative and historical research techniques, integrating primary and secondary materials to fully grasp Wollstonecraft's existence, concepts, and lasting impact.

Wollstonecraft's Feminist Legacy

Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophy of feminism was deeply influenced by her life experiences, her era's intellectual climate, and her involvement in significant social and political matters. Born in a financially precarious family, Wollstonecraft witnessed the challenges faced by women who lacked financial autonomy and access to education. Her upbringing in a male-dominated family, with an abusive father and a submissive mother, underscored the oppressive gender norms of her time. These experiences significantly shaped her perspective on women's rights and the critical importance of women's education. The intellectual atmosphere of the Enlightenment played a pivotal role in shaping Wollstonecraft's ideas. This era, with its focus on reason, individualism, and the quest for knowledge, provided an ideal setting for her feminist philosophy. Influenced by Enlightenment figures such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Wollstonecraft critically examined their theories, especially Rousseau's stance on women's education. Rousseau suggested divergent educational paths for boys and girls, arguing that women's education should revolve around domestic skills, which Wollstonecraft vehemently disagreed with. Wollstonecraft (1967: 75), categorically submits:

*But I still insist,
that not only virtue,
but the knowledge of the two sexes
should be the same in nature,
if not in degree,
and that women,
considered not only as moral,
but rational creatures
ought to endeavour to acquire human virtues
(or perfections)
by the same means as men,
instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of half being.*

She contended that women, like men, were rational individuals entitled to the same educational opportunities to enhance their intellect and make significant contributions to society. The 18th century was a period marked by increasing

interest in educational reform, with scholars and educators discussing the aims and methods of education, often side-lining women from these conversations. Wollstonecraft contributed to these discussions, advocating for women to receive an education as comprehensive as that of men. Her drive for self-reliance led her to work as a governess and then as a writer, exposing her to the professional and intellectual barriers women faced. These experiences further solidified her conviction in the need for women's liberation through education and economic independence. Mary Wollstonecraft's involvement with modern social and political matters deeply shaped her philosophical beliefs. The ideals of the French Revolution, including liberty, equality, and brotherhood, had a significant impact on her perspective. Although the revolution aligned with her demands for women's rights, she was critical of its failure to apply these principles to women. In her trailblazing work, *"A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* (1792), Wollstonecraft criticized contemporary authors and thinkers, like Rousseau, who upheld patriarchal views on gender. She eagerly argued for women's education and their status as rational individuals, challenging the common belief in women's inferiority and reliance on men. At the heart of Wollstonecraft's philosophy were several fundamental concepts. She maintained that women are capable of reason and should receive education that reflects this. She believed that education would empower women to achieve independence and make significant contributions to society. Moreover, she championed equal rights for women, stressing the importance of providing them with the same opportunities as men in education, employment, and politics. Wollstonecraft argued that societal and political structures needed to be reformed to support gender equality. She criticized the traditional roles that confined women to the home, arguing that these roles restricted women's potential and deprived society of their valuable contributions. Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophy on gender was revolutionary for her era. Her emphasis on the rationality and equality of women laid the groundwork for future feminist movements. By challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for educational and economic opportunities for women, Wollstonecraft's ideas continue to inspire and guide discussions on gender and women's rights today. Her work stands as a cornerstone in the history of feminism, underscoring the lasting relevance of her arguments for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Mary Wollstonecraft on Women's Education:

Wollstonecraft defines education in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* education is the improvement of the individual and the improvement of the social order.

*By individual education,
I mean,
for the sense of the word is not precisely defined,
such an attention to a child
as will slowly sharpen the senses,
form the temper,
regulate the passions as they begin to ferment,
and set the understanding to work
before the body arrives at maturity;
so that the man
may only have to proceed,
not to begin,
the important task of learning to think and reason.*

Mary Wollstonecraft's support for educating women is a key aspect of her important piece, *"A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* (1792). She contended that women are logical individuals who can make reasoned judgments and moral choices and that education is crucial for nurturing these abilities. In *"A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,"* the critique of the education system stands out as a key focus. Mary Wollstonecraft was intensely worried about the way education in her era continued to support gender disparities, keeping women in lower positions. The education system failed to focus on the cognitive growth of women. Wollstonecraft contended that without intense mental education, women were unable to enhance their logical reasoning and ability to think critically. Wollstonecraft noted that the education system was set up to ensure women remained reliant on men. Through emphasis on outward achievements, women lacked the readiness for self-reliance or autonomy. She contended that this reliance was harmful not just to women but to the community at large, as it restricted the abilities women could offer. The education system mainly geared up women for their roles in marriage, perpetuating the belief that a woman's main aim was to marry and satisfy her spouse. That is, their education was for the sole purpose of being good wives to their husbands and effective domestic workers (Uzomah, 2017: 382). Wollstonecraft objected to this limited perspective, arguing that women ought to be viewed as self-sufficient beings possessing individual rights and abilities, rather than solely as partners and mothers. In her essay *"Thoughts on the Education of Daughters"* (1787), Wollstonecraft presented advice on the practical ways to educate women, suggesting that their education should focus on enhancing their logical thinking and ethical qualities, rather than just preparing them for marriage (Wollstonecraft, 1787). She critiqued the traditional teaching methods that aimed to produce appealing women to men, rather than nurturing their intellectual and ethical growth (Wollstonecraft, 1787). Her book *"Mary: A Fiction"* (1788) depicted women's challenges when not receiving

adequate education, pushing them into confined roles. Mary's ordeal, stemming from her lack of intellectual and emotional satisfaction, emphasized Wollstonecraft's view that education is vital for women's personal advancement and contentment (Wollstonecraft, 1788). This imaginary story backed her calls for educational changes, highlighting the negative impact of denying women the chance to develop their intellect and character. Through her persistent support for education across her writings, Wollstonecraft emphasized her belief that education is fundamental to women's liberation and progress in society. Wollstonecraft believed in education as a means to uplift women. Wollstonecraft advocated for holistic education that encompassed areas such as literature, science, and philosophy. She was convinced that this type of education would empower women to realize their complete capabilities and evolve into logical, self-reliant individuals. She contended that with this education, women would have the necessary tools to take part in societal affairs, make decisions based on knowledge, and help in advancing the well-being of the community. She contended that with education, a woman could excel as a spouse, mother, and member of the community. Through education, women could make significant contributions to society and attain individual satisfaction. To reinstate women to their proper place as equal rational partners in progress, Wollstonecraft (1967: 34), declares:

*I wish to persuade women
To endeavour to acquire strength of mind and body
and to convince them that soft phrases, susceptibility of heart,
delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste,
are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness...
and that those who are objects of pity
will soon be objects of contempt.*

By challenging the restricted and superficial education offered to women and advocating for broad educational reforms, she set the groundwork for future feminist movements and actions, showing that educating women is key to achieving gender equality and societal fairness. Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of the education system served as a strong condemnation of how social structures and norms reinforced gender disparities. Her proposals for a more equitable and demanding education for women were revolutionary in her era and still echo current debates on gender equality and changes in education. She imagined a society where women were recognized and treated as equals, entirely able to play a role in every facet of society.

Mary Wollstonecraft's Enduring Impact on Modern Feminism and Educational Reforms

Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist movement remains highly relevant in today's world. Her pioneering views on education and women's rights laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist movements, inspiring countless activists, educators and

scholars. The values she championed continue to influence discussions on gender equality, educational reform, and women's roles across various fields. Wollstonecraft's advocacy established a foundation for modern feminist groups, with her principles echoing in the work of organizations like UN Women and local feminist groups striving for gender parity. While Wollstonecraft focused on gender equality, contemporary feminism adopts an intersectional approach, addressing how gender intersects with race, class, and sexual orientation. Her theories on gender equality provide a framework for understanding and addressing these complex issues. The challenge of traditional gender roles, a major concern in Wollstonecraft's writings, remains central to contemporary feminism. Efforts such as campaigns for equal pay, shared parental leave, and the dismantling of gender stereotypes in media and society continue her mission to redefine gender roles and advance equality. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on women's economic freedom is still a cornerstone of feminist economic theory and practice. Addressing the gender pay gap, ensuring workplace equality, and promoting female entrepreneurship align with her vision. Her legacy of fostering public discourse on women's rights endures, with modern movements like #MeToo and Time's Up echoing her efforts to combat structural gender inequality. Initiatives like UNESCO's Global Partnership for Girls and Women's Education, aimed at removing barriers to education for girls globally, reflect Wollstonecraft's advocacy for equal educational opportunities. Her ideas on comprehensive education are mirrored in contemporary policies that promote female participation in STEM fields and holistic education that fosters critical thinking and problem-solving. The shift towards gender-sensitive teaching practices and efforts to empower women through education demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Wollstonecraft's vision, reinforcing her belief in education as a means of empowerment and leadership development.

Conclusion

Mary Wollstonecraft's revolutionary support for women's education has deeply shaped feminist thought and the wider movement towards achieving gender equality. Her ground-breaking text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, fiercely challenged the prevailing social standards of her time, which limited women to domestic roles and subservience. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on logical education for women established the basic principles for future educational changes and the advancement of women's rights. Wollstonecraft's feminist perspective went beyond just gaining knowledge; it aimed at enabling women to participate fully in society as autonomous, logical beings. She argued that education was not just a tool for personal improvement but a key element in securing social justice and equality. Her push for mixed-gender education, where boys and girls could learn side by side, was

ground-breaking and has had a significant impact on contemporary educational methods that strive for gender inclusivity. The modern importance of Wollstonecraft's concepts is clear in the continuous worldwide push to ensure fair opportunities for learning for girls and women. Her beliefs are in harmony with the goals of many global groups and strategies aimed at narrowing the educational divide between genders. Moreover, Wollstonecraft's focus on analytical thinking and ethical growth in education still influences today's teaching methods that value comprehensive growth over memorization. Wollstonecraft's work in promoting women's rights has greatly influenced current feminist movements. Her points about the intellectual and ethical strengths of women have been key in the fights for the right to vote, equal wages, reproductive freedom, and against violence based on gender. Her influence is seen in the work of modern feminists who continue to challenge gender stereotypes and push for changes in education and society at large. Mary Wollstonecraft was a pioneer in the cause of women's empowerment through education. Her feminist ideas have not only changed the educational environment but have also ignited a wider movement for gender equality. Her efforts are a strong reminder of the vital role education plays in personal and societal change. Looking back at her achievements, it's clear that the revolution she started is still in progress, and her ideas are as relevant today as they were over 200 years ago.

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