



# Mary Wollstonecraft 1759-1797

## Feminism

For many, Wollstonecraft is seen as a key figure at the beginning of modern feminism.

She is often not recognised for her early feminism but instead remembered for her penetrating assessment of the conditions of women.

A *Vindication of the Rights of Women* has been described as a cornerstone of modern feminism.

Wollstonecraft explained that her difficulty in the field of philosophy was because it was believed that women were "created rather to feel than reason", meaning the idea of a female philosopher just seemed wholly out of place.



Her book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* was aimed at middle classes and encouraged the rejection of 'lower class superstitions'.

In 1784, Wollstonecraft founded a school with her sisters and close friend. Unfortunately the school failed, but Wollstonecraft - who was largely self-taught herself - went on to become a successful teacher.

## Women's Education

Wollstonecraft believed women should have equal education rights to men, without this women were prevented from exercising genuine judgement or attaining genuine virtue.

## Marriage



Wollstonecraft believed in companionate, not patriarchal, marriage.

Wollstonecraft advocated that the domestic role in bringing up children should be valued as a civic virtue equal to patriotic duty in the public sphere.

Despite them both having theoretical objections to the institution of matrimony, Wollstonecraft married William Godwin in 1797, about six months before she died following complications during the birth of their daughter.

During their short time together, Wollstonecraft and Godwin continued to live very independent lives.



Mary Wollstonecraft sought a world where every individual was free from the shackles of superstition and false authority.

Wollstonecraft affirmed the original ideals of the French Revolution but also acknowledged the degeneration into excessive violence which she attributed to French culture which had been tainted by its legacy of feudal aristocracy and superstition.

## Political Philosophy

She criticised the limited views of politicians who tried to claim that the abolition of the slave trade would infringe the laws of property while ignoring the claims of justice, universal dignity, and human fellowship.

## Response to others' work

A *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was a direct challenge to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's assumption of female inferiority. She defied this and championed equal education rights.

A *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was in response to Edmund Burke's reaction to the French Revolution. She emphasized the contradiction in an advocate for human rights putting women in a separate category of merely sexual beings.

Richard Price greatly influenced Wollstonecraft, as did her interaction with Jacobinism.



Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)



Mary Shelley (1797-1851)

Wollstonecraft was a prolific writer whose interests covered subjects as diverse as education, politics, history, moral theory, philosophy, and religion.

She was a moralist, activist, and public intellectual who was fully engaged with the issues of her time. Because of this, she had a major contribution to the history of ideas around women.

## Outside of Philosophy

Travel writing was also an interest of hers, along with literary and social critique. She was also a novelist, as was her daughter, Mary Shelley.


# Mary Wollstonecraft



- Argued in favor of equal education for women and men
- *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
- Felt women and men should be subject to the same moral expectations
- Often considered one of the earliest feminist writings

Social Studies School Service

## Mary Wollstonecraft

- ◆ 1759-1797, from Britain (England)
  - ◆ Committed to gender equality and co-education
  - ◆ Wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*
  - ◆ Influences: Co-education, 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, Title IX
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- ◆ During this period, many males scolded women for reading because it would encourage wickedness
  - ◆ Wollstonecraft urged women to read arguing that Enlightenment should apply to both men & women.
  - ◆ Philosophers like Rousseau argued strongly for education but said that girls should be educated on how to be a helpful wife & mother
  - ◆ She wrote that women's education should not be secondary to men's
  - ◆ She urged women to enter male-dominated fields allowing Women to become productive members of society

A  
VINDICATION  
OF THE  
RIGHTS OF WOMAN:  
WITH  
STRICTURES  
ON  
POLITICAL AND MORAL SUBJECTS.

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BY MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT.

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