

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)
extracts from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)



Mary Wollstonecraft's book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is widely considered to be "feminism's founding text." It was inspired by the refusal of the men who were then carrying out a revolution in France—many of whom took inspiration from Rousseau—to grant equal rights to women.

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 [women] 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 flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; . . . 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 . . . the civilized women of the present century, with few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

But what have women to do in society? . . . Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses. . . . They might also study politics. . . . Business of various kinds they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution. Women would not then marry for a support. . . . It is a melancholy truth—yet such is the blessed effect of civilization—the most respectable women are the most oppressed How many women thus waste life away . . . who might have practiced as

physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry . . . ?

But avoiding, as I have hitherto done, any direct comparison of the two sexes collectively, or frankly acknowledging the inferiority of woman, according to the present appearance of things, I shall only insist that men have increased that inferiority till women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures. Let their faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength, and then determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale.

Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves and the latter a plaything. The sensualist, indeed, has been the most dangerous of tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes by their ministers, whilst dreaming they reigned over them.

. . . if fear in girls, instead of being cherished, were treated in the same manner as cowardice in boys, we should quickly see women with more dignified aspects. It is true they could not then with equal propriety be termed the sweet flowers that smile in the walk of man; but they would be more respectable members of society, and discharge the important duties of life by the light of their own reason. "Educate women like men," says Rousseau, "and the more they resemble our sex the less power they will have over it." This is the very point I am at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.

. . . to improve both sexes they ought, not only in private families, but in public schools, to be educated together. If marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women ever fulfill the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men; in the same manner, I mean, to prevent misconstruction, as one man is independent of another. Nay, marriage will never be held sacred till women, by being brought up with men, are prepared to be their companions rather than their mistresses . . . So convinced am I of this truth that I will venture to predict that virtue will never prevail in society till the virtues of both sexes are founded on reason; and till the affections common to both are allowed to gain their due strength by the discharge of mutual duties.

Let an enlightened nation [France] then try what effect reason would have to bring them [women] back to nature, and their duty; and allowing them to share the advantages of education and government with man, see whether they will become better as they grow wiser and more free. They cannot be injured by the experiment, for it is not in the power of man to render them more insignificant than they are at present.