



# Lecture 10: Wollstonecraft on Equal Rights



## A rationalist and feminist philosopher

Mary Wollstonecraft is a moral and political philosopher who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, England, and she was one of the first European feminist philosophers. Like Mary Astell before her, Wollstonecraft emphasised the importance of education for girls and women. They were both rationalist philosophers, seeing reason as the superior human faculty.

Recall that even though Astell saw many marriages as flawed, she accepted it as sacred; a divine institution. Astell also accepted the husband as master over his wife, which she saw as God's will, much like a monarch has a divine right to rule over the people. When a woman marries, Astell said, *she elects a monarch for life*. Nevertheless, it is not acceptable for a monarch, or a husband, to be a tyrant.

Wollstonecraft was more concerned with social and political structures. She was critical of the inferior status of women, not only in marriage, but also in society. She calls for a radical reform of the laws that subject women to their fathers and husbands. Instead of seeing women as 'mere ornaments of society', to be traded in marriage among men (from father to husband), she argued that women should have all the same political rights as men.

In an early work from 1787, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, she speaks of the parents' duty to ensure their children's moral and intellectual development. The human rational and moral capacities are the same, she argues. So why should the ideals of Enlightenment only apply to men?

## A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

With her famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, from 1792, Wollstonecraft becomes one of the first feminist philosophers. In this work, she argues for equal rights for men and women in politics and society. Her radical ideas did not lead to any political changes in her time, but her ideas were influential and controversial long after her death.

In her time, egalitarian social philosophy promoted equal political and social rights among all men. Wollstonecraft couldn't see any rational grounds for why this shouldn't be extended to *all* humans. Just as slavery is unacceptable among men, it should be unacceptable to enslave women. The liberation of women would, she claimed, benefit the whole of society, not only the women themselves.

*Make them free and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so; for the improvement must be mutual, or the injustice which half of the human race are obliged to submit to, retorting on their oppressors, the virtue of man will be worm-eaten by the insect whom he keeps under his feet.* (*Vindication*, ch. XII, On national education)

Women should be given all the political rights enjoyed by men, and this must include the right to vote. Given that women are born intellectually equal to men, then to deny them such rights would amount to tyranny. In the introduction to her book, Wollstonecraft states her demand: *justice for one half of the human race*.

In Wollstonecraft's time, women were restricted to the private sphere, and marriage was a patriarchal institution. She blames

society for what she refers to as *domestic brutes* and the *enslavement of women by their husbands*. True freedom, she says, means equality of the sexes. Wollstonecraft argues that marriage should consist in genuine *companionship*.

To achieve equality between the sexes, she insists, women need to be given the same opportunities as men when it comes to their intellectual and moral development. The key to this lies in *education*.

## Back to Plato: equal education for girls and boys

When Astell argued for the education of women, she suggested all-female colleges or retreats. Wollstonecraft, in contrast, suggests that boys and girls are given the same education. Since the rational capacity is the same for men and women, they should also be taught after the same model:

*...day schools, for particular ages, should be established by government, in which boys and girls might be educated together. The school for the younger children, from five to nine years of age, ought to be absolutely free and open to all classes.* (*Vindication*, ch. XII, On national education)

Like Plato, Aristotle and Astell, Wollstonecraft emphasises moral education and the importance of developing one's virtues. In particular, she speaks of virtues such as self-discipline, honesty, frugality, and social contentment. All virtues, she argued, are common, *human* virtues.

*Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature.* (*Vindication*, ch. II, The prevailing opinion of sexual character discussed)

## Would men snap off our chains...

'Women cannot, by force, be confined to domestic concerns.'

The key to equal rights and opportunities for women lies in education. Women should have access to a range of professional educations, including politics and medicine, and they should be able to become physicians as well as nurses.

The purpose of education is thus not only the intellectual and moral development, thus making women 'better citizens, wives and mothers'. Education could also help women become financially independent from men:

*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, as men accept of places under government, and neglect the implied duties; nor would an attempt to earn their own subsistence, a most laudable one! sink them almost to the level of those poor abandoned creatures who live by prostitution.*

From nature, there is nothing that justifies the inferior status that women are given in society.

In line with Astell, Wollstonecraft sees education as the key to women's *autonomy* and *self-respect*, as well as their intellectual and moral development.

**Discussion questions**

How would you summarise Wollstonecraft’s feminist position?  
What are her main points?

What is the role and purpose of education, according to Wollstonecraft?

In what way can we say that Wollstonecraft is a rationalist?

How would you compare Wollstonecraft to other philosophers, philosophical traditions or theories you know of? Are there any similarities or contrasts?

In particular, how do her ideas compare with those of Astell?

Do you see any relevance of these ideas today?

Read the speech by Sojourner Truth in the text box. How does she challenge the Western perspective on women at the time?



*“In the name of our sex I challenge men to justify the right they have presumed for themselves to hold back an entire half of the human race, barring them from the source of science and allowing them at most to skim its surface.”* German philosopher, **Amalia Holst**, *On the Vocation of Woman to Higher Intellectual Development*, **1802**



The Avengers Poster – gender reversed, by Kevin Bolk [deviantart.com/kevinbolk/art/Avengers-Booty-Ass-emble-270937785](https://www.deviantart.com/kevinbolk/art/Avengers-Booty-Ass-emble-270937785)

Early black women’s rights activist  
**Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)**

Born Isabella Bomfree, a slave in New York. Advocate for the abolition of slavery, and civil and women’s rights.  
<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sojourner-truth>



*“Ain’t I a Woman?”* The text is based on a recollection of her speech at the 1851 Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio.

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that ‘twixt the Negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! *And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?*

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of audience whispers, “intellect”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or Negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it. The men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain’t got nothing more to say.



Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)