

Document B: Revolutionary Foundations & Goals

Vindication of the Rights of Women

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) launched nineteenth-century feminism. Combining Enlightenment and Romantic ideas about society and gender, Wollstonecraft applied natural law and the rights of man to women's situation with a deeply felt passion arising from her own experience, including her travels in France during the French Revolution. Her emphasis on women's right to and need for education remained an important theme throughout nineteenth-century feminism.

I am fully persuaded that we should hear of none of these infantine airs, if girls were allowed to take sufficient exercise, and not confined in close rooms till their muscles are relaxed, and their powers of digestion destroyed. To carry the remark even further, if fear in girls, instead of being cherished, perhaps created, 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 will they have over us." This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.

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Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We should then love the with true affection, because we should learn to respect ourselves; and the peace of mind of a worthy man would not be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife, nor the babes sent to nestle in a strange bosom, having never found a home in their mother's.

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From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is produced by oppression.

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Be just then, O ye men of understanding! and mark not more severely what women do amiss, than the vicious tricks of the horse or the ass for whom ye provide provender—and allow her the privileges of ignorance, to whom ye deny the rights of reason, or ye will be worse than the Egyptian task-masters, expecting virtue where nature has not given understanding!

Source:

Mary Wollstonecraft, excerpt from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792). Reprinted in Carol H. Poston, ed., *Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, The Wollstonecraft Debate, Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), pp. 21-22, 25-28, 43, 57-58, 62, 147-48, 191-94.

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