

# Mary Wollstonecraft: Contribution Towards Education

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## Abstract

Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer of the 18th century famous for her educational and social philosophy. She perceived education as improvement of the individual and improvement of the social order. The study helps us to know about the writings, thoughts and ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft on the field of modern education. The study also helps us to know about the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft on women's rights. Statement of the problem has been entitled as "Mary Wollstonecraft: Contribution towards Education". The objective of the study is to discuss about the contribution of Mary Wollstonecraft on the field of education. In this study the investigator used descriptive technique and secondary sources of data like journals, books, etc. to fulfill the present study. Wollstonecraft's vision of the perfect education was one that developed virtue and independence. In her writings, mainly *Thoughts On the Education of Daughters*(1787), *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*(1792), *Mary: A Fiction*(1788), and *Maria or The Wrongs of A Woman*(1798), Mary Wollstonecraft illuminates her principles for educating women.

**Key words: Mary Wollstonecraft, Education**

### 1.1 Introduction:

Mary Wollstonecraft, born in late April of 1759, was a product of an oppressive, abusive home. In her quest for knowledge and independence, Wollstonecraft perceived that man, not nature, 'was to blame for society's grievances. "Nature, or to speak with strict propriety, God, has made all things right; but man has sought him out many inventions to mark the work." She believed that the development of reason would enlighten man of his error; and only by his acting upon his reason, would virtue be gained and the injustices abolished.

Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer of the 18th century famous for her educational and social philosophy. Her works included "Vindication of the Rights of Man," and her best known work, "Vindication of the Rights of Woman" which was published in 1792 and consisted of the first sustained argument for female emancipation based on a lucid ethical system. Wollstonecraft was the first woman to pick up the mantle of egalitarianism challenging the prevailing ideology of the divine right of kings and the inherent natural rights of man and woman. She believed that the development of reason would enlighten man of his error, and only by his acting upon his reason, would virtue be gained and injustice abolished. Wollstonecraft perceived education as the apex in creating a new world order. She believed that the education females received in 18th century England dominated them to male authority by denying them the development of their ability to reason. She perceived education as improvement of the individual and improvement of the social order. The new educational

paradigm which Wollstonecraft envisioned was one based on reason and co-education. In her time period, any of the suggestions given by Wollstonecraft were considered extremist; yet today, over 200 years later, they formulate many of our educational precepts. Reading "Vindication of the Rights of Woman," one discovers that her argument for the emancipation of women is based on the right to education. She envisioned a national system of education whose focus would be on the formation of good citizens.

The educational thought of Mary Wollstonecraft was cultivated through her friendships, associations, and life experiences. Wollstonecraft was sparsely educated in day-schools<sup>8</sup> until her family moved to Hoxton. There her formal education began at the age of fifteen through her friendship with the Clares. Mr. Clare, a retired invalid clergyman, fostered in Mary a love of learning and critical thought, by awakening her intellect through instruction in literature<sup>9</sup> and foreign languages. The childless Mrs. Clare introduced Mary to Fanny Blood. Fanny, who was two years older than Mary, provided her with the love and companionship of a peer and inculcated within Mary the desire to write.

Mary Wollstonecraft was one such immortal whose writings hold meaning for the present and future. Historically she is known as the author of the 1792 classic, *Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, which "was the first sustained argument for female emancipation based on a cogent ethical system." Mary Wollstonecraft challenged the prevailing ideology of the moral and intellectual inferiority of women.

**1.2 Need and Significance of the study:** The primary trap that interpreters and critics alike fall into upon evaluating the works of Mary Wollstonecraft is that of judging her writings from a chronological standpoint, rather than as timeless documents whose value withstands any effects of antiquarianism. The award-winning Southern writer William Faulkner once penned, "There is no such thing as was, really, because the past is." Indeed, were we to regard the effects of great works as only being felt in the time period in which they were written, humankind would never advance; rather it would lay in a state of perpetual stagnation, as opposed to building a solid foundation on the shoulder of giants. The study helps us to know about the writings, thoughts and ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft on the field of modern education. The study also helps us to know about the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft on women's rights.

**1.3 Statement of the Problem:** Statement of the problem has been entitled as "*Mary Wollstonecraft: Contribution towards Education*"

**1.4 Objective of the Study:** The objective of the study is to discuss about the contribution of Mary Wollstonecraft on the field of education.

**2.0 Method of the study:** In this study the investigator used descriptive technique and secondary sources of data like journals, books, etc. to fulfill the present study.

**3.0 Result and discussion of the study:**

**Objective 1: To study about the contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft on the field of education.**

Mary Wollstonecraft was the first woman to pick up the mantle of egalitarianism, challenging the prevailing ideology of the divine right of kings and the inherent natural rights of man and woman. "I build my belief on the perfection of God." Through her writings, primarily *Vindication of the Rights of Man* and *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she advocated "the replacement of an aristocracy of inherited property and titles with a meritocracy based on reason." The emancipated woman would be an active participant in this meritocracy, sharing the same rights in the public and private arena of her oppressor, the male. Women would be given the same opportunities as men, with gender being relegated to secondary status.

Egalitarianism permeated the Enlightenment's classical liberal ideology. The concept of equality illuminated Wollstonecraft's vision of womanhood. A harsh critic of slavery in the New World, she challenged the prevailing ideology of the moral and intellectual inferiority of women as well. Wollstonecraft believed that the education females received in eighteenth century England subjugated them to male authority by denying them the development of their ability to reason. Her vision of the virtuous republic would be based on the principles of egalitarianism whereby sex and property holdings would not impede an individual's economic gains and independence. Wollstonecraft, challenging government support of institutions perpetuating the economic, social, and political subordination of women, perceived education as the apex in creating a new world order. Education was the means to achieve this new society.

Wollstonecraft's life-long association with the Dissenters began in 1783 when she founded her school in Newington Green. The Dissenters, led by Dr. Richard Price, who became Wollstonecraft's mentor, were a small radical group whose political aims, according to scholar Eleanor Nicholes, were the secularization of politics, Parliamentary reform, and "the opening of careers to talent, regardless of rank or property." It was Wollstonecraft's loyalty and devotion to Price which spurred her to write the rebuttal to Burke's attack on Price in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*.

For Mary Wollstonecraft, one's own self-development of reason and quest for virtue could only be gained by acting upon reason, and this action gave meaning to life. Wollstonecraft's writings illuminate her personal endeavor in this quest, as she sought to improve society by guiding others along the same path. "The narrow path of truth and virtue inclines neither to the right nor left - it is a straightforward business, and they who are earnestly pursuing their road may bound over many decorous prejudices without leaving modesty behind."

Education was the means to develop reason, which to Wollstonecraft lay dormant in most of humankind. "Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself." Reason, to Wollstonecraft brought self-awareness, which she perceived brought one toward perfection, toward becoming more God-like. God, whose power of reason she feared, was all-knowing. He had the absolute ability to discern truth. "I fear God! . . . it is not His power that I fear - it is not to an arbitrary will, but to unerring reason I submit. . . ." In analyzing Wollstonecraft's *Analytic Reviews* (1790), scholar Virginia Sapiro observed that Mary Wollstonecraft

believed true virtue was "based on eternal and simple principles created by God and discovered by human beings." Wollstonecraft emphasized above all the individual and collective human ability to discover these principles and learn virtue. This perfection depends on the God-given mechanical means to discover God's will: reason. Wollstonecraft lived in the world bequeathed by John Locke. If there were no innate ideas, there could be no reckoning with God's will until one's mind developed. It is no wonder, then, that when Wollstonecraft defined the 'main business' of human life she underscored learning virtue."

Wollstonecraft's use of the term education, according to Sapiro, is misunderstood today, whereby education is perceived as schooling or instruction. Instead, she views Wollstonecraft's meaning of education to reside in the common terminology of her day, whereby it would embrace "our current conceptions of 'child-raising' or 'socialization.'" Yet Wollstonecraft defines education in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*: "Into this error men have, probably, been led by viewing education in a false light; not considering it as the first step to form a being advancing gradually towards perfection; but only as a preparation for life." Mary Wollstonecraft perceived education as improvement of the individual and improvement of the social order. She drew upon her own experience in addressing the ills of her society necessitating a new educational paradigm: Developing the ability to apply reason to problems in living which would supplant standardized schemes of instruction requiring little individual thought."

It was this audience that Mary Wollstonecraft addressed through her writings, challenging the pervasiveness of the underlying system of the social order, perceiving that the foundation of women's oppression lay in the denial of a true education. "But I still insist that not only the 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-one of Rousseau's wild chimeras." [Wollstonecraft's emphasis]

Wollstonecraft's vision of the perfect education was one that developed virtue and independence. In her writings, mainly **Thoughts On the Education of Daughters(1787)**, **Vindication of the Rights of Woman(1792)**, **Mary: A Fiction(1788)**, and **Maria or The Wrongs of A Woman(1798)**, Mary Wollstonecraft illuminates her principles for educating women. "It is time to effect a revolution in female manners time to restore to them their lost dignity - and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world." She believed that if women were not educated to become independent, their actions would be based on other persons' wills, not their own. Wollstonecraft not only perceived this as being destructive to women, but also detrimental to their families. They would become tyrants within their homes, poor mothers, and unable to cope if widowed, since they have never practiced independent thought.

Mary Wollstonecraft believed that the test of virtue was not in an individual's beliefs but in his or her actions and fulfillment of his or her duties. During her short life she illuminated this precept through the pen. *Thoughts On the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Oil*

illustrated Wollstonecraft's desire to educate her sex. By utilizing her experiences from the girl's school at Newington Green, Wollstonecraft wrote this collection of short essays on duties which a middle-class woman would encounter, which included the caring and education of infants and children, and handling servants. Wollstonecraft presents her audience with some radical, instructive ideas including advice about breastfeeding, "The mother ought to suckle her children." She also advised them to help children develop their minds, "Above all, try to teach them to combine their ideas. It is of more use than can be conceived, for a child to learn to compare things that are similar in some respects, and different in others. I wish them to be taught to think-thinking, indeed, is a severe exercise.

The philosophy that Mary Wollstonecraft presented to women in *Thoughts on The Education of Daughters* was considered radical in her era; with essays on various topics which Wollstonecraft thought eighteenth century women would confront, such as: "The Nursery" (breastfeeding), "Moral Discipline," "Exterior Accomplishments" (stressing true education and independence), "Artificial Manners," "Dress," "The Fine Arts," "Reading," "Boarding School," "The Temper," "Unfortunate Situation of Females, Fashionably Educated, And Left Without A Fortune," "Love," "Matrimony," "Desultory Thoughts" (on treating illness & death), "Disappointments," and "On the Treatment of Servants." The intellectual awakening of the adult female was important to Wollstonecraft. In her essays, she chided women about poor parenting, their inadequate education, and their emphasis on dress. She coaxed them to breastfeed their young, to attend to the development and instruction of their children, and to make note of the importance of thought, reading, good speech, and writing. She encouraged them to develop self-control and to consider remaining single. All of these concerns were elements of her philosophy and her program to educate women to exercise reason and practice self control. In *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft spoke to the adult female from her own personal experiences. She recommended remaining single as a viable option, basing it on her own experiences as an independent woman. She warned women about the disadvantages of being a teacher, while admitting that there were few occupations available which had not been taken over by men.

In her time period, any of the suggestions given by Wollstonecraft were considered extremist; yet today, over two hundred years later, they formulate many of our educational precepts. Wollstonecraft, in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) offered some pedagogical principles illustrating her wisdom and prescience: 1. Encourage children to ask questions; 2. Use storytelling in teaching by telling stories and having children reconstruct them. 3. Cultivate in the sexes interest in writing and and the fine arts. Mary Wollstonecraft published *Original Stories from Real Life*, with *Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* in 1788. *Original Stories* was based on her experiences as governess to the Kingsborough daughters, twelve year old Caroline and fourteen year old Mary. Her close encounters with the Kingsborough children and their parents influenced her perceptions on the instruction of children.

*Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) has been considered more of a political treatise than an educational document. Yet *Vindication's* substance reveals that it is both a political argument for the emancipation of women and a social argument for the the education of

women, as Mary Wollstonecraft first claimed, Reading *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, one discovers that Wollstonecraft's argument for the emancipation of women is based on the right to education. Mary Wollstonecraft uses this position to diplomatically challenge the British establishment for the acquisition of this right, arguing that many of society's ills were the result of women's environment [inadequate education and socialization process].

In Wollstonecraft's vision physical exercise would become part of the curriculum, as well as "the elements of religion, history, the history of man, and politics." "Botany, mechanics, astronomy, reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history, and some simple experiments in natural philosophy, might fill up the day; but these pursuits should never encroach on gymnastic plays in the open air. . ."

Wollstonecraft had a keen awareness of children. "Throughout the whole animal kingdom every young creature requires almost continual exercise." She recommended various devices for obtaining children's interests for instructive purposes. "Conversations in the Socratic form" would be utilized in teaching the social sciences. In Wollstonecraft's vision of the perfect school, boys and girls after the age of nine would be divided into two separate schools, comparable to the present day twentieth century academic and vocational tracks. Students slotted for domestic employments or mechanical trades would attend one school where they will attend class together in the morning. The afternoons would be spent with boys and girls in separate classes, each learning their trade. The second school would be comprised of students with superior abilities or wealth. These students were to receive instruction in the dead and living languages; science; history, politics and literature. Hence, Mary Wollstonecraft intimated that all professions be open to women, while stressing equality, within each class between male and female.

Wollstonecraft perceived her vision of education as inculcating reason and virtue, which would provide compassionate, responsible, reflective citizens willing to create an egalitarian society. To say that Mary Wollstonecraft's influence extended only as far as her argument for female emancipation is concerned, would be to undermine her impact. Her influence, though it may be seen to its greatest degree in female education, permeated such various topics as the management of infants and early childhood education. Writing in an era where it was common for children to be reared by servants or in boarding schools, Wollstonecraft stressed the importance of parental nurturance and the environment in child development. She continually emphasized the importance of treating children as individuals who evolved through a process of education, rather than an acquired product.

#### **4.0 Conclusion:**

Mary Wollstonecraft's educational vision can be seen in a modified version of her concept, as it evolved into the concept of the common school of America and into the structure of today's school. She envisioned co-education and a common curriculum in an egalitarian public school system. She envisioned teaching strategies incorporating questioning techniques, the use of demonstrations, experiments, activities, and the demise of recitations. She envisioned instructional series, school periods set aside for physical activity, and women in professional occupations. Analyzing Wollstonecraft's writings illustrates her presence in our educational

arena, for she embraced the education of adults, infants, and children. Mary Wollstonecraft offered her era an alternative perspective regarding education and the succeeding generations her vision. She saw education as a means of obtaining the emancipation and empowerment of the individual - male and female through the development and independence of the virtuous self.

Eleanor Flexner writes that "When Mary Wollstonecraft put her emphasis instead on awakening and training the intellect, in particular the intellect of a woman, she was arguing without precedent, at a time when the mere existence of a woman's mind not only was in question, but was of no interest to anyone, woman included." We need to reclaim Wollstonecraft's perspectives and pedagogy to ameliorate the inequities and transgressions of our schools and society. While much of the educational structure advocated by Wollstonecraft has come to be, the tireless pursuit of virtue that was to permeate the structure is largely absent. We could profit now, from a reaffirmation of Wollstonecraft's views of virtue: "This I believe to be an indisputable truth, extending it to every virtue: chastity, modesty, public spirit, and all the noble train of virtues, on which social virtue and happiness are built, should be understood and cultivated by all mankind, or they will be cultivated to little effect."

This paper will give information about the works of Mary Wollstonecraft to students, research scholars which will be helpful to know more about her works.

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