

A CRY FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE, AND RIGHTS: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT ON THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

Stamatoula Panagakou

Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cyprus

Honorary Visiting Fellow, Department of Politics, University of York, UK

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)¹ is a classic text in the history of political thought and in feminist philosophy. Wollstonecraft's account of women's emancipation and rights draws upon her rich theory of freedom, equality and justice, and reflects the Enlightenment belief in reason and progress. Wollstonecraft championed a rational approach to the question of women, and called for an end to the hypocrisy, injustice, and corruption that characterised the legal and social relations of the sexes. Wollstonecraft, with her republican adherence to freedom and virtue, produced a radical discourse of gender equality and social justice that not only challenged conventional views, but also made women think seriously about their position and role in society as equal, free, and independent citizens. Her focus on virtue and duty shows the ethical foundations of her feminist philosophy. She addressed issues of respect, recognition, citizenship, and empowerment, searched for the causes of women's subordination, and suggested effective remedies for curing the ills of gender inequality. Wollstonecraft, like John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), stressed the vital link between women's emancipation, human improvement, and the common good. Both philosophers adopted a holistic approach to social theorising that shows the logical relation between freedom and equality, on the one hand, and the attainment of social happiness and just polity, on the other.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is a robust statement of radical feminism and republican political thought. Wollstonecraft embarks on a brave defense of women's rights, self-determination and emancipation, and, at the same time, castigates what she perceives as deplorable traits in female behaviour. Her sharp critique of the problematic features in women's deportment and attitude to life is of particular interest. She is an uncompromising moral thinker who fights vice and celebrates virtue. Wollstonecraft is not afraid of telling the truth however uncomfortable it might be. In identifying the vicious circle of patriarchy, domination, subjection, corruption, and hypocrisy, she demands freedom and equality for both sexes. Yet, most importantly, she asks for profound changes in the way in which women see their role in the world:

¹ In this article, all references to Wollstonecraft's book come from the following edition: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Everyman's Library, 1992).

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 (p.49).

This statement contains the gist of Wollstonecraft's argument. Her cry for freedom and justice shakes the foundations of the evil realm of sexual inequality and female subordination. How did she perceive the condition of women in her own time? She draws a vivid picture of the state of women: her observations are shrewd and alarmingly true. The social system is corrupt; its moral pillars are deficient; men tyrannise and exploit; women whirl round the vortex of folly, ignorance, and artificiality; both sexes are far from immune to vice. In a state like this, the moral life is seriously hindered. Wollstonecraft's tale of female suffering and society's injustice is powerful. Let us now see the main points of her critique.

She stresses that the current situation of women is unacceptable: corruption and hypocrisy dominate the relation of the sexes in an environment that cultivates vice at the expense of truth and virtue. In this type of society, the sensualist and the libertine reign because their amorality and lust find fertile ground in the perverted moral order supported by the dubious decorum of hypocritical social relations. Women are condemned to a prolonged state of childhood and ignorance in the name of innocence, sweetness, and affability. Focused on the art and tricks of pleasing men, on whom they depend for their subsistence, women are caught in the tangled web of deceit, dishonesty, and stupidity.² At the heart of the problem lies a particular kind of multidimensional deficit with regard to the state of women: lack of proper and systematic education, absence of intellectual discipline, and exclusion from the active and responsible political life. As a result, women tend to develop habits, affinities, and interests that strengthen rather than undermine their "enslavement" to the realm of the trivial, the vacuous, the impressionable, and the artificial. Docility, coyness, indolence, and mischief have nothing to do with the virtues of citizenship. Wollstonecraft then lists some instances of female folly – the result of a defective education, and of false morals (pp.196-207). Women become victims of astrologers, future tellers and magnetisers; they also read romantic novels and, in being "amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists," indulge in sentimental exaggerations. They are taught from early childhood that their value (and virtue) consists in pleasing men by being beautiful and sexually attractive.³ Reason, understanding, and intellectual

² "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" (p.212).

³ "Pleasure is the business of woman's life, according to the present modification of society; and while it continues to be so, little can be expected from such weak beings. Inheriting in a lineal descent from the first fair defect in nature – the sovereignty of beauty – they have, to maintain their power, resigned the natural rights which the

vigour do not have place in this degrading "educational" process. Instead, girls and women are encouraged to concentrate on dress, ornaments, and frivolity:

Before marriage it is their business to please men; and after, with a few exceptions, they follow the same scene with all the persevering pertinacity of instinct. Even virtuous women never forget their sex in company, for they are forever trying to make themselves *agreeable* (p.205).

Living in a state of unfreedom and subordination, women use a variety of "weapons" to survive, to have their way, and to exert their own, albeit limited, influence.⁴ They also tend to reproduce the prevailing stereotypes about their sex without protesting. Yet how can they do otherwise when, as Wollstonecraft states in despair, they are educated "in worse than Egyptian bondage"? (p.126).

Chained in the galleys of ignorance and foolishness, women resort to techniques which, sadly yet inevitably, perpetuate the vicious circle of inequality, subjection, and prejudice. In a patriarchal world of sexism and double moral standards, women "survive" by deploying an array of protective qualities: charm, childishness, docility, superficiality, intrigue, irritability, sentimentalism, false modesty, and servility. In brief, they are led by a ceaseless desire to impress and create sensation, to attract and please men:

Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are [...] consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; and, disregarding the arbitrary economy of nature, one writer has declared that it is masculine for a woman to be melancholy. She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused (p. 36).

Women become fair game for the libertine who relishes in degrading and ridiculing females and tends to dispense with them when his sexual appetite is satiated. Enslaved in the empire of beauty, locked in the golden prisons of luxury, and eagerly seeking male acceptance and admiration, the ladies are in fact prevented from breathing the fresh air of freedom. They are also kept away from the path to virtue. Their rational

exercise of reason might have procured them, and chosen rather to be short-lived queens than labour to obtain the sober pleasures that arise from equality" (p.59).

⁴ "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of a man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives" (p. 21).

growth, their self-development, and their inherent capacity for citizenship are strategically thwarted. The picture is pretty grim:

Confined, then, in cages like the feathered race, they [women] have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch. It is true they are provided with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin; but health, liberty, and virtue are given in exchange (p. 60).

Wollstonecraft's narrative makes for compelling reading. Is there any way of reversing this catastrophic route and of restoring dignity and respect to the half of the human race? Yes, suggests Wollstonecraft. We need to see this state of affairs as an aspect of the subordination-dependency ethic that underlies the superior-inferior relationship which characterises marriage and the family. The inequality of the sexes is part of a broader domination-subordination discourse that includes the power of monarchs and priests (pp.17-19). An ethos of servility and unfreedom permeates society and hinders human improvement. Women's life and behaviour are sadly influenced by the effects of such a degrading state of affairs. Blind submission to authority, docility and cunning,⁵ superficial knowledge, preoccupation with the minor virtues of etiquette and propriety, false modesty, mastery of the tricks of pleasing, cultivation of weakness, dependency, and stupidity,⁶ habitual slavery to first impressions – these are some of the features of the female self in an environment of inequality and unfreedom. Wollstonecraft assesses the type of education that women receive and finds it not only inadequate, but also hugely problematic. Women should be encouraged to cultivate their reason and develop their critical faculties. Moral agency requires freedom, rational thought, and judgment. With proper instruction and socialisation, women are capable of reaching this state of ethical development. No doubt, this "revolution in female manners" would disturb the conventional arrangement of power relations. Women would be liberated from the fetters of ignorance, stupidity, and childishness, and would enter the world of responsibility, civic virtue, and true dignity:

⁵ "How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes! For instance, the winning softness so warmly and frequently recommended, that governs by obeying. What childish expressions, and how insignificant is the being – can it be an immortal one? – who will condescend to govern by such sinister methods!" (p. 21).

⁶ "Fragile in every sense of the word, they are obliged to look up to man for every comfort. In the most trifling danger they cling to their support, with parasitical tenacity, piteously demanding succour; and their *natural* protector extends his arm, or lifts up his voice, to guard the lovely trembler – from what? Perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse; a rat would be a serious danger. In the name of reason, and even common sense, what can save such beings from contempt; even though they be soft and fair" (pp. 66-67).

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 endeavour to keep woman in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a plaything (pp. 26-27).

Wollstonecraft charts the path to female emancipation, empowerment and rights. The rights of woman are human rights: their declaration signifies a pledge to human improvement and to moral progress. To achieve equality, rational freedom, and justice – in brief, to build a fairer system of social organisation – we need to focus on reason, education, and virtue. These three elements are interrelated in Wollstonecraft's republican vision of political life. Women play a central role in this just polity as active citizens, equal spouses, and mothers. After all, the family is the first school of virtue, as well as a place where friendship, responsibility, respect, recognition, and a sense of loving care constitute a living experience. Women must develop their intellect and learn to live as independent and responsible citizens:

To render women truly useful members of society, I argue that they should be led, by having their understandings cultivated on a large scale, to acquire a rational affection for their country, founded on knowledge, because it is obvious that we are little interested about what we do not understand (p. 210).

Education and cultivation of reason are important for women in order to combat ignorance, foolishness, stupidity, superficiality, vice and superstition.⁷ Lack of education, or the wrong type of "education," does not only mean lack of, or imperfect, knowledge; it also means a limited perspective of general understanding, deficiency in judgment, and cultivation of vice as a result of ignorance, uncritical acceptance of opinions, and prejudice:

The grand source of female folly and vice has ever appeared to me to arise from narrowness of mind; and the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of the female understanding; yet virtue can be built on no other foundation" (pp. 58-59).

Dignity and respect are gained through real virtue, strength of character, and the exercise of rational capacities, not through qualities that, although they might please the eye (or entertain), keep women in a permanent

⁷ Women would become respectable by exercising their understanding: "there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the *modest* slaves of opinion" (p. 55).

state of childhood.⁸ The prevailing opinion concerning the role of woman is responsible for the misery of women, for it cultivates the view that women “were created rather to feel than reason, and that all the power they obtain must be obtained by their charms and weaknesses” (p. 66). Intellectual development and the use of reason are the corner stones of excellence and true grace: “Without a foundation of principles taste is superficial; grace must arise from something deeper than imitation” (p. 72). The cultivation of intellect in females should not be seen only as an accomplishment that enriches their individuality. An educated woman benefits herself and all those who are around her. She can contribute to the well-being of her family and to the social whole in co-operation with men who must also learn not to neglect their duties.⁹ Systematic education will prepare women for active participation in public life, giving them access to professions and to politics:

I may excite laughter, by dropping an hint, which I mean to pursue, some future time, for I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government (p.158).

Wollstonecraft devotes Chapter XII of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to the issue of national education where she elaborates on the interrelated themes of education, equality, and citizenship. Her analysis contains both principles and recommendations for achieving the type of education that will produce independent and enlightened citizens. Children (boys and girls) should be allowed to think for themselves and teachers should encourage intellectual autonomy. Schools must have large playground for physical exercise. Physical activity and exercise are suitable and necessary both for boys and for girls.¹⁰ Apart from delving into a variety of academic subjects, children at school learn the virtues of companionship, fellowship, and cooperation. Education, broadly conceived of as moral paideia, forms the character. Through learning and playing, children are habituated to virtues that are central to citizenship such are

⁸ “The little artless tricks of children, it is true, are particularly pleasing and attractive; yet, when the pretty freshness of youth is worn off, these artless graces become studied airs, and disgust every person of taste” (p. 75).

⁹ “Make women rational creatures and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives and mothers – that is, if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers” (p. 195).

¹⁰ In attacking Rousseau’s arbitrary gender discrimination, Wollstonecraft writes: “I have, probably, had an opportunity of observing more girls in their infancy than J. J. Rousseau. I can recollect my own feelings, and I have looked steadily around me; yet, so far from coinciding with him in opinion respecting the first dawn of the female character, I will venture to affirm, that a girl, whose spirits have not been damped by inactivity, or innocence tainted by false shame, will always be a romp, and the doll will never excite attention unless confinement allows her no alternative. Girls and boys, in short, would play harmlessly together, if the distinction of sex was not inculcated long before nature makes any difference” (p. 46).

friendship, respect, recognition, collaboration, honesty, and truthfulness. Wollstonecraft is in favour of mixed day-schools instead of boarding schools. There must not be distinction of class in dress, or discrimination. This type of education would reinforce good habits of thinking and conduct, and would eradicate negative behavioural traits and vices of character that are left untouched under the prevailing educational system.

Wollstonecraft's views on female emancipation and rights are part of her broader republican ideal of political life. Motherhood is an important aspect of republican citizenship.¹¹ Women as mothers play a very important role in the formation of children's character. A mother's intellect, attitude, and overall deportment have a direct impact on the child who is the recipient of her loving care, affection, and guidance.¹² Ignorance and imperfect education incapacitate the mother (pp. 207-210). Men's perception of women and their sexist focusing on their own sexual gratification adversely affects the lives of women. Focusing on pleasing men and on how to keep them interested in their charms, women become tools for the satisfaction of male lasciviousness and lose their autonomy, dignity, and independence.¹³ They also become unfit to be mothers.

Wollstonecraft prioritises the role of women in bringing up future citizens. The nurturing and educational duties of a mother are thus "political." Domestic issues are political or have political implications. Take for instance, the case of a girl who is brought up in an environment that "confines" her to dolls, dresses, ornaments, idle talk, sentimentalism, indolence, and shallow pursuits. This girl is "product" of a particular socialisation process which promotes as characteristics of femininity such features as childishness, vanity, folly, attractiveness, a desire to please, and artificial passions. Under the influence of this system of values and without any alternative view of female selfhood, she comes to perceive herself and her role in society in such a way that "confirms" her socialisation and mirrors the constructed idea of herself as her own real subjectivity. We have here a "false system of female manners" that deprives the female sex of its dignity, "and classes the brown and fair with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land" (p. 57). This type of upbringing and socialisation renders women unfit for active citizenship and

¹¹ "The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother" (p. 157).

¹² "To be a good mother, a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands" (p. 164).

¹³ To achieve permanent male attention and affection, women would have recourse to a number of tricks, for instance, faking weakness in order to excite tenderness. Wollstonecraft's comment is to the point: "In a seraglio, I grant, that all these arts are necessary; the epicure must have his palate tickled, or he will sink into apathy; but have women so little ambition as to be satisfied with such a condition?" (p. 31).

leadership.¹⁴ What happens in the domestic sphere does have serious implications for a woman's socio-political self-realisation. Society's perceptions about femininity and masculinity, historical factors, public opinion, men and women – all have played a part in this. The main question is what should be done in order to address this problematic situation. Is there any way out of this vicious circle that endlessly reinforces an ethic of submission, arbitrary power, and cunning? Yes, an alternative is possible. A "revolution in female manners" would change the dynamic of interpersonal relations and would establish a new culture of justice, equality, and virtue. Drawing upon Wollstonecraft's analysis, we could share her vision. A mother who follows the authority of reason and has cultivated her understanding would be able to lead her daughter to the road of freedom, dignity, and virtue instead of enslaving her to the empire of beauty, stupidity, and hypocrisy.¹⁵

With respect to the relation of the sexes in marriage, Wollstonecraft stresses the importance of friendship, as well as mutual respect and understanding. Friendship must be the reigning value. Wollstonecraft contrasts friendship to the passion of love, and prioritises the former as the solid foundation of the ethical union of marriage. Her views are important because she introduces a new approach to combating women's subjection and "enslavement." Her perspective is radical for, in a way, she de-eroticises women in order to save them from the dangers of sexual objectification that a sexist environment produces. Wollstonecraft has grasped the link between female exploitation, subordination, and, in many cases, degradation and ridicule, and related conceptions of sexuality, attractiveness, and beauty. It is both ironic and sad, though, that frequently women themselves are guilty of their "fate." They cultivate and project the image of beauty and weakness, for they have been taught from early childhood that they have a duty to please and that their power consists mainly in igniting passions and in getting admirers. Wollstonecraft attempts to break this circle of subjection, domination, and vice by denouncing the very elements that perpetuate its existence. Extravagant feelings, passion, emphasis on beauty and attractiveness at the expense of moral excellence – all are for satisfying the vulgar appetite of the sensualist. Sexual excitement seems to be an obstacle to effective running of a household. Passionate love takes one's mind away from duty:

¹⁴ "Pleasure is the business of woman's life, according to the present modification of society; and while it continues to be so, little can be expected from such weak beings" (p. 59).

¹⁵ "I have already inveighed against the custom of confining girls to their needle, and shutting them out from all political and civil employments; for by thus narrowing their minds they are rendered unfit to fulfil the peculiar duties which Nature has assigned them" (p. 185).

In order to fulfil the duties of life, and to be able to pursue with vigour the various employments which form the moral character, a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion. I mean to say that they ought not to indulge those emotions which disturb the order of society, and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed (p. 33).

Wollstonecraft prompts us to think radically and to consider the hidden, "darker" dimensions, as well as the transient nature of the passion of love. Idolisation of female beauty and constant focus on sexual attractiveness reduce women to a lesser being as they finally become sexual objects that men can use and dispose at will. This is a complex issue and involves the discussion of many parameters. We can mention, for instance: historical reasons, conventions and tradition, unchecked public opinion, legal inequality, restricted access to education and professions resulting in lack of alternatives, imperfect cultivation of reason and understanding, power relations that create a vile pattern of command, obedience, hypocrisy and cunning. All these issues affect the way in which women's subjectivity and role in society are both conceived of and represented. Wollstonecraft focuses on (erotic) love, its impact and consequences, and identifies it as an impediment to women's equality and self-realisation. She emerges as an austere moralist who discusses love in a detached, rational, and ethical-oriented way. Virtue and civic virtue are the moral imperatives. Her analysis has a stern puritan element. Yet, at the same time, it conveys a feeling of emancipation and empowerment. Let me elaborate on this point. What Wollstonecraft does is to reveal and reject the hypocritical (and for women, oppressive) way in which the romantic feeling of love is used in order to trap and enslave women. The exaggerated emphasis on love, beauty, passion, and attraction as the definitive characteristics of women hinders the development of the female self. The coquettish, stupid, smiling flower is in fact, a sexual toy for men, an unfit mother, and a human being who has not developed her rationality and intellect. As she is getting older and her external accomplishments gradually fade, she becomes jealous and mean.¹⁶ On the other hand, men who benefit from this situation, deride women for their imperfect intellectual development and their insufficient rational capacities. They appear to adore women for their beauty, and, at the same time, they crudely exploit and easily dispense with them when there is no excitement and the lust is satiated. As Wollstonecraft warns, "men who have wasted great part of their lives with women, and with whom they have sought for pleasure with eager thirst, entertain the meanest opinion of the sex" (p. 211). "Love" in its sexual and passionate manifestation might be a trap; it can make women follow a path that

¹⁶ "When the husband ceases to be a lover, and the time will inevitably come, her desire of pleasing will then grow languid, or become a spring of bitterness; and love, perhaps, the most evanescent of all passions, gives place to jealousy or vanity" (p. 30).

leads to subordination and exploitation instead of emancipation, empowerment, and independence.

Wollstonecraft heralds the coming of a new epoch which would wipe out conventional perceptions and demeaning attitudes in the relation of the sexes. Men and women must be together in pursuit of moral excellence. It does not suffice if just one sex participates in the struggle for improving our society. The natural ties between the two sexes signify a spiritual interdependence that affects their relations, as well as their contribution to the common good. As individuals, men and women are mutually responsible for their moral formation and development:

The two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other. 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 (p.151).

In the relation of the sexes and in marriage, Wollstonecraft focuses on friendship, not on the transient passion of love. Love and sexual attraction will subside as time passes: marriage needs to have a stronger foundation in order to fulfil its important function. The family is the ethical topos of intimate human relations of affection, care, and mutual respect, such as the relation between spouses, and the relation between parents and children. To sustain the family and create the right environment for their children, husband and wife must be friends. Commonality of sentiments, trust and respect are necessary for a happy marriage: "Virtue flies from a house divided against itself – and a whole legion of devils take up their residence there" (p. 211). Friendship in marriage enables women to develop as human beings and work together with their husbands for the attainment of a shared common good. Friendship requires recognition, respect, freedom and equality. It is the moral foundation of marriage:

Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections, because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time. The very reverse may be said of love (p.79).

Wollstonecraft launched a brave critique of the ills of her society and identified the hindrances to the realisation of a just polity. In analysing the position of women and their important role in society, she focuses on education and the cultivation of reason, as well as on issues of rights and equality. The fight for women's rights is a fight for empowerment, freedom, justice, and virtue. Wollstonecraft's feminist theory challenged conventional conceptions of femininity and heralded a new era of ethical politics where women's equal citizenship is recognised and affirmed.

Friendship would sustain moral excellence. It would also help both men and women to accomplish their duties as spouses, parents, and citizens.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman has commanded unremitting scholarly attention. Wollstonecraft's book is a radical manifesto of female emancipation. It is also a fearless critique of the hypocrisy, corruption and vice that ignorance, inequality and sexism generate. Her vision of freedom, justice, and women's rights still stimulates fruitful reflection on gender, power and politics.¹⁷

¹⁷ I would like to thank Professor James Connelly for his comments.