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The Enduring Legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft's '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*' in Contemporary Society

Upon reading Mary Wollstonecraft's revolutionary text *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* I was left feeling desperate for further conversation. How can this text further serve women today, and what parts could be considered evidence of a previous time that no longer exists? What parts of this text are deemed the most important and which are overlooked? I wondered how a woman of her time could be so forward thinking, and what events in her life had led to the moment of publication. Born in 1759 in London, the second of seven children, Wollstonecraft's childhood seemed to shape her absolute hunger in figuring out why the sexes are so often pitted against each other. As a child witnessing domestic abuse in the home, Wollstonecraft found herself in the role of the caretaker all too often with her sisters and even her own mother. How does a lifetime of abuse impact a woman to write such a seminal text? *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* proves to be an enduring text in the present, as evident by its profound insights on governing bodies, advocacy for education and empowerment, and its influence on contemporary gender politics, which all serve as a blueprint for how we can continue to dismantle entrenched societal norms that persistently undermine women's rights today. I intend to dissect and

question this text, while providing important historical context and insights along the way.

Published in 1792 there were several factors that led to the publication of this text. The socio-political climate in England was reaching new heights of enlightenment and intellectualism, all of which had a profound impact on Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft had to seek out her own education from the time she was a child, but her life circumstances continued to dictate how and what she was able to achieve. "Initially, the nature and extent of her reading was partly owed to the friendship shown to her in her youth by a retired clergyman and his wife. Nevertheless, as a woman from an impecunious family, her prospects were very limited. In relatively rapid succession, she was to enter the most likely occupations for someone of her sex and circumstances: a lady's companion, a schoolteacher, and a governess."¹ A talented translator and reviewer, Wollstonecraft garnered many influences and friends in great writers of her time.

The determining factor that led to the publication of this text was a direct response to another. In 1791, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord wrote a report to the French National Assembly. A note in this report stated that women should only receive a domestic education. In histories of pedagogy from England and Wales, this can also be stated as "include(ing) 'learning to crawl or speak, developing an awareness and later knowledge of

¹ Tomaselli, Sylvana. "Mary Wollstonecraft." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, December 3, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wollstonecraft/>.

identity and community, and cultivating and expanding the imaginative faculties'. Similarly, home education might be defined to include occupational training.”² Simply put, housework, chores, and raising children were to be defined as education for women during this time. Wollstonecraft took issue to this claim and subsequently the basis for writing her text was born.

I tried to put myself in her shoes while reading the impetus to write such a scandalous (at the time) text. I kept thinking about how difficult it must have been for her to go about writing something that without a doubt would put her into a place for immense scrutiny and potentially even harm. I think it is critical to acknowledge that going forward.

Wollstonecraft also took much of her inspiration for writing this text from Jean-Jaques Rousseau. Rousseau had written the text *Emile, or On Education* in 1762. One of his key points of the text is that women and men should receive separate and unequal education, and that women should be prepared to take on their role as wives and mothers of the household. He states “Once it is demonstrated that man and woman are not, and should not be constituted the same, either in character or in temperament, it follows that they should not have the same education. In following the directions of nature they must act together but they should not do the same things; their duties have a common end, but the duties themselves are

² “Home Education in Historical Perspective: Domestic Pedagogies in England and Wales, 1750-1900 (Routledge, 2016).” Faculty of History. Accessed December 8, 2023. <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/home-education-historical-perspective-domestic-pedagogies-england-and-wales-1750-1900-routledge-2016>.

different and consequently also the tastes that direct them. After having tried to form the natural man, let us also see, in order not to leave our work incomplete, how the woman is to be formed who suits this man.”³ Rousseau also seems to paint women as coquettish, small, and frail beings. They are always to be considered in relation to a man, and their place is to be subservient. To discuss Wollstonecraft’s work, it is critical to address how and what she was replying to, and what the framework of the time was considering in widely accessed philosophical texts.

I shall begin by assessing three sections of Wollstonecrafts’ text in *A Vindication of The Rights of Women*, and how they are relevant to society today, and how I think these sections relate to current feminist discourse. I do think this text provides a lot of good insight into feminist discussion, however since it was written 230 years ago, of course there are points that could be considered dated.

The first section I shall address from this text is from the first chapter titled *Human Rights and the Duties they Involve*. In this chapter she discusses that reason is elevated above all else in society. Reason is what places humankind above all else in the world. Reason is what should be used to look at issues and overcome them by looking at them objectively, and men tend to use reason to justify having prejudices instead of overcoming them. A part of this section that really stuck out to me is her views on

³ Lewis, Jone Johnson. “What Rousseau Wrote about Women and Education.” ThoughtCo, July 14, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/rousseau-on-women-and-education-3528799>.

tyranny in government, and her huge disdain for blind obedience and monarchy. She states, "Think how knowledge and strength of mind must be violated when the sheer fact that the man does become a king poses an insuperable bar to his acquiring either wisdom or virtue, when all his feelings are stifled by flattery, and when thoughtfulness is shut out by pleasure! Surely it is madness to make the fate of thousands depend on the whims of a weak fellow creature whose very position in life puts him necessarily below the poorest of his subjects! But one power should not be thrown down in order to raise up another. Man is weak, and all power intoxicates him; and the way power is misused proves that the more equality there is among men and thus the less power of men over men the more virtue and happiness will reign in society." ⁴

I found this section of the text to be extraordinarily relevant to today, especially in the United States. Allowing one person to rule or govern completely over an entire body is completely catastrophic, and often leads to deadly consequences. There is currently an ongoing discussion across the US, but mainly in Texas, concerning a woman named Kate Cox and her right to obtain an abortion due to a fetal abnormality. The case has garnered widespread outrage and attention due to the Attorney General of Texas, Ken Paxton, and the Supreme Court of Texas ruling against Kate Cox's right to receive an abortion that would fall under the medical exemption aspect of

⁴ Wollstonecraft, Mary. "Human Rights and the Duties They Involve ." Essay. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subject*. London: Johnson, 1796.

Texas' state laws. Currently in Texas there are three main laws restricting abortion almost completely. The first law was a "trigger law" imposed once the overturn of Roe vs. Wade was instituted. This law states that a felony life sentence is the consequence for health care providers who perform an abortion, and a \$100,000 dollar fine. The second law, also known as a bounty law, deputizes any person who assists the facilitation of an abortion. This could be the person's partner, friend, or even rideshare driver. The third law dates back to the 1850's, where the state instituted a total abortion ban except for cases where the mother's life is at risk.

I think the criminalization of medical procedures by a governing body, specifically a governing man (the attorney general of Texas) is exactly something that Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophy relates to now. Of course, she was criticizing the monarchy of England and their policies, but nevertheless the monarchy and the church at this time was the reigning government authority in England, and in Texas, the governing body is reinforcing policies that directly go against science. George the Third, who was also known as the mad king, is of course known throughout history as the King who lost America, was deemed mentally unfit to rule in his last decade of life. His policies absolutely came from precedents set before him, but nevertheless they proved harmful for those who he was governing in England at the time. As we know throughout history, the people who face the most consequences from tyrannical governments are those who are the

most marginalized, which include people of color, women, and the poor. This is absolutely representative of many state governments today, and Wollstonecraft's point is only getting proven further, as we delve deeper into an unfortunately more far right, religious nation.

In this passage, Wollstonecraft discusses the fact that when there is one specific person influencing the government, their thoughts, ideas, and powers all come from the innate power they hold over their subjects. It seems as though fear tactics play a huge part in the influence a monarchy has over its people. I think the same logic applies to the present day, and the fear tactics pro-life governments instill into the people. In introducing laws that encourage the public to snitch or tell on others, that creates a sense of fear and distrust, which only is going to make abortions more secretive, and thus more deadly.

I also think that because she says that power is intoxicating, and that men are weak to this power, lends to an interesting comparison to our very recent political history as Americans. Donald Trump was and still is an extremely polarizing figure, who draws on the support he gets from his unwavering base in order to maintain power and control, even in the face of over 90 indictments. I can't think of another time in our very tiny history, where a Presidential candidate/former President has been compared to a king, cult leader, pinnacle of Christianity, and/or monster. With an election looming, there is a very real possibility that he could be elected again, even

with all of his current troubles. We all saw what influences he has over his base, and what happened on January 6th, so it is extremely important to tread on with caution for the future election.

The next section I will be examining is from Chapter 12, *On National Education*. In this chapter, Wollstonecraft discusses the need for public national education, and for boys and girls to be educated together and not separately. In direct contradiction to Rousseau, she believes that it is actually extremely beneficial to educate the sexes together. She also states that the main ways of education at the time, homeschooling and country-day type schooling, are not the most effective ways of educating a child. She calls for public education to be instituted, and that there are benefits to having peers socialize, and then are able to come home to experience the benefits of domesticity.

She also brings about an interesting point regarding women's education, and how the lack of it has allowed for women to remain complacent and non judgemental. She states "It is the want of domestic taste, and not the acquirement of knowledge, that takes women out of their families, and tears the smiling babe from the breast that ought to afford it nourishment. Women have been allowed to remain in ignorance, and slavish dependence, many, very many years, and still we hear of nothing but their fondness of pleasure and sway, their preference of rakes and soldiers, their childish attachment to toys, and the vanity that makes them value

accomplishments more than virtues.”⁵ There is a lot to unpack here in terms of the modern implications of this statement. I think putting the blame, per se, on women for remaining “ignorant” and unwilling to learn is a pretty bold statement. There are many different reasons for women to have been remaining complacent for such a long time. I think Wollstonecraft is missing a lot of intersectionality in her discussion, which is not surprising for the time that this was written. There are financial, racial, and economic reasons for women to remain in a subservient position, if not only for self preservation and safety.

There is an element of victim shaming that comes into her discussion here that I think is important to discuss. It reminded me of the play *What the Constitution Means to Me*, which premiered on Broadway in 2019.

Written and originally performed by Heidi Schreck, this play exists in the present, with Schreck referencing herself in the past when she used to debate elements of the Constitution in local competitions. Throughout the show, Schreck reveals deeply personal anecdotes, including one of her great-great-grandmother who was a “mail order bride” from Germany in the early 1900’s. “the story of her great-grandmother’s immigration to Seattle as a vulnerable mail-order bride with little legal protections (one of an influx of women who were recruited to join the community, sometimes called “Mercer Girls”). Schreck’s great-grandmother ultimately died very young, after being

⁵ Wollstonecraft, Mary. “Chapter 12: On National Education.” Essay. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subject*. London: Johnson, 1796.

institutionalized for “melancholia”; the domestic abuse she may have experienced, and which was thereafter experienced by subsequent generations of women in her family, created a tenuous contradictory strain of resilience and denial within her mother’s consciousness and, to some extent, Schreck’s own”⁶ Schreck discusses that her great-great-grandmother had to do a lot of things to just survive, to just keep on living. Including suffering horrific abuse at the hands of her husband, in order to help save her children. To some, this could be considered submissive, meek, or to put it into Wollstonecraft’s verbiage, a “slavish dependence.” This takes away from the fact that so many women had to do what they had to do to simply just survive. Of course there is a pattern to abuse, and unfortunately the cycles often repeat themselves without further intervention.

I think Schreck’s way of including her family’s history in her show is of great service to many people, and for me made me think twice about the women I have considered to be meek or submissive, or even the times I have cowered away from hard topics in the hopes of remaining palatable for men. There is a historical context to be considered here. For Schreck and her family, a legacy of abuse that continued on through the cycles, that led to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other traumas. It is not just bruises that indicate a legacy of abuse. Wollstonecraft also came from an

⁶ Romano, Aja. “What the Constitution Means to Me Lets Teen Girls Inject Hope into Democracy. It’s Great.” Vox, April 17, 2019.
<https://www.vox.com/2019/4/17/18310288/what-the-constitution-means-to-me-review-heidi-schreck>.

extremely abusive household, so I find it interesting that she took almost the opposite approach in her writing. "Her mother passed away when Mary was only 11, after suffering years of domestic abuse, and the young girl was raised by her violent and dismissive father. Wollstonecraft received very little formal education because her father was unwilling to support her intellectual development as a woman. Despite this oppressive environment, Wollstonecraft spent much of her time reading and writing, and she invested greatly in her studies. In 1784, in order to escape the confines of her abusive home, Wollstonecraft moved away and established a girls' boarding school in Newington Green with her sister and close friend Fanny."⁷ Writing seemed to serve as a means of escape for Wollstonecraft, even though her sentiments echoed feminism of a very distant past, it was still a way for her to process her traumas and adolescence.

I find it intriguing that she also seems to equate women to children, by saying "their childish attachment to toys," while also explaining that they have a want for domestic taste. The infantilization of women has been going on for a long time, and is a way to oppress and keep them subordinate. Of course, Wollstonecraft could be using this as a way into her further dialogue, but nevertheless it is still an interesting point to bring up. "Women are usually infantilized by men and treated as children often concerning sexism

⁷ "Inspiring Thursday: Mary Wollstonecraft." WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENCE EUROPE, June 13, 2023. <https://wave-network.org/inspiring-thursday-mary-wollstonecraft/>.

and misogyny. The most common manifestations of infantilization are through linguistics, such as overly simplifying explanations or using demeaning nicknames. However, it can also be physical such as offering a woman a hug when offering a man a handshake. The infantilization of women often includes policing their appearances and which social spheres they're allowed to occupy. Infantilizing a person generally conveys a sense of superiority. As a gendered practice, women's infantilization is related to patriarchal structures that situate men in the default position of power"⁸ Wollstonecraft's life was likely littered with this kind of infantilization, and thus crept into her writing by no fault of her own.

This chapter definitely has points that are relevant to conversations today, and I think it is always necessary to look at important historical texts with the lens of the current era. Wollstonecraft was writing this during a time where many women were still illiterate, unable to access education, and normally completely dependent on a man in their lives. The fact that she was able to write this is an incredible accomplishment that shouldn't go unnoticed, however it is important to be able to critique the work in modern times to facilitate further conversation.

The next section I will be dissecting is from Chapter 10, titled *Parental Affection*. I took great interest in this chapter, coming from having the perspective of being a professional nanny/caregiver for many years. This

⁸ The hypersexualization of young girls and the infantilization ... - AJHSSR. Accessed December 19, 2023. <https://www.ajhssr.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/X22701193197.pdf>.

chapter focuses on the nature of caregiving, and how many women can be overindulgent in their parental practice, or dominating. This causes the children to act out, or even resent their parents. She continues to explain that women who are guided by their emotions rather than reason when parenting often fall short in many ways. She also makes an argument for breastfeeding one's own children, and suggests that this is the best way to create a bond with a child, but it will only stay strengthened if the parent stays involved with the child's life. The section I will be looking closely at is regarding a woman's own sense and independence when raising children. "The formation of the mind must be begun very early, and the temper, in particular, requires the most judicious attention--an attention which women cannot pay who only love their children because they are their children, and seek no further for the foundation of their duty, than in the feelings of the moment. It is this want of reason in their affections which makes women so often run into extremes, and either be the most fond, or most careless and unnatural mothers...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. Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers; wanting their children to love them best, and take their part, in secret, against the father, who is held up as a scarecrow."⁹

⁹ Wollstonecraft, Mary. A vindication of the rights of woman – CH 10. Accessed December 19, 2023. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wollstonecraft-mary/1792/vindication-rights-woman/ch10.htm>.

This section describes Wollstonecraft's view on motherhood, and essentially regards women as the sole caretakers of children. She says that if women do not develop independent sense, and solely depend on their husbands, that they will end up not raising their kids well, and thus the cycle of ignorance continues. I think Wollstonecraft raises some valid points here, but again, the context of the time and the subsequent historical context also plays a big part in her argument. Women were, and to some extent still are expected to be the primary caretakers in heteronormative society. To raise the issue that women brought up in ignorance will inevitably pass on that ignorance and dependence to their children, denies the autonomy of that future child. Of course, it is possible to repeat circumstances that one is brought up with, and without intervention in one form or another, it is extremely hard to get out of that cycle.

In terms of education allowing for increased access and a better outcome for children, it seems that that is absolutely the case. "Existing research demonstrates a strong relationship between maternal education and family circumstances, and between family circumstances and children's development, establishing the importance of both material resources and family relationships for children. Implicit in much existing work is the idea that family circumstances play an important role in explaining the educational gradient in both early childhood outcomes, and in the

persistence of gaps throughout childhood.”¹⁰ Access to education, not just domestic education, allows for a broader range of socio-economic, emotional, and psychological advances to be made. Family dynamics, ones that allow for healthy growth of a child, are often fostered by the families having access to advanced education. “With respect to duration and stability, if children in more highly-educated families experience a longer duration of positive economic, family structure and mental health circumstances, as well as greater stability in those resources, they may be less likely to experience the compounding developmental effects of family disadvantage. There is ample evidence, for example, that chronic exposure to poverty is particularly detrimental for children, to the extent that it persistently increases exposure to stressors and limits opportunities for human capital development, social and economic advancement.”¹¹ This further proves that not only knowledge and education are factors in determining a child’s success, but also exposure to poverty, stressors, and other negative circumstances can have a profound effect on that child.

Wollstonecraft crafts a very intriguing narrative in this chapter. From explaining how temperament is key in raising a child, to maintaining independence and a strong sense of will– independent from the person’s

¹⁰ Jackson, Margot, Kathleen Kiernan, and Sara McLanahan. “Maternal Education, Changing Family Circumstances, and Children’s Skill Development in the United States and UK.” The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, November 2017.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5857959/>.

¹¹ Jackson, Margot, Kathleen Kiernan, and Sara McLanahan. “Maternal Education, Changing Family Circumstances, and Children’s Skill Development in the United States and UK.” The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, November 2017.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5857959/>.

husband. Her willfulness to stand up to the societal norms at the time is invaluable. She absolutely has an incredible voice that was way beyond the normal thinking of her time. Of course, these narratives are colored in a very heterosexual, heteronormative way. These tropes that women have to be the ones who are the homemakers are simply outdated, and much of contemporary society has moved on from this stereotype.

There are however, a group of women online who have been embracing and promoting this type of lifestyle. Known as “trad wives” they embrace traditional homemaker roles and consider household domestic duties to be their occupation. There is much to be said about this phenomenon, including the fact that many of the women who participate in this trend online are white, and tend to be very privileged individuals. “Not all trad wives are alike, according to Estee Williams, a trad wife influencer on TikTok. In her eyes, trad wives are homemakers whose priority is cooking, cleaning and being subservient to men. But such submission isn't “degrading,” she says. It's her choice...” “It doesn't mean you're below the man, because if you think about it, it's a compliment,” Williams says. The man needs that woman to be beside him, to motivate him, be there for him.”¹² The article continues on by explaining that this specific influencer grew up in a conservative Christian home, one that valued homemaking and

¹² Triggs, Ariana, Claire Hardwick, and David Oliver. “What Is a ‘Trad Wife’? These Controversial Women Are Drawing Attention – and Opinions.” USA Today, July 31, 2023. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2023/07/14/trad-wife-meaning-controversy/70407456007/>.

domestic duties instead of higher education. This further proves Wollstonecraft's point in that limiting access to education for children, and parents, has profound effects across the board for that person's choices later on in life. There is absolutely nothing wrong with choosing to be a homemaker, as long as that choice is made with fully informed consent.

Wollstonecraft is really arguing for informed consent in much of her piece. Education facilitates informed consent, and by garnering access to it, it opens up a huge world of possibilities. Informed consent consists of being educated about all of the possible outcomes of a certain predicament. It relies on assessing the person's confidence, competence, and voluntariness in a certain situation. Without access to education, this all goes completely out the window. How can someone be informed completely with the whole truth without a vehicle such as education? Thinking of the time when this piece was written in the late 1700's, her reasons for writing this were strong.

I wanted to end my discussion by focusing on some of the other feminist discourse at the time in regards to Wollstonecraft and her own practice. The Enlightenment, the period of time between about 1650-1800 was a period of key growth for feminism in England. Across the pond in France lived a fellow writer named Olympe de Gouges, who wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* in 1791. In it, she called for equality of the sexes, as well as for unmarried women in France. She argues for many of the same things as Wollstonecraft, saying

that a women's natural state is born free, and that if women are to be excluded from having rights then the people in charge of the French courts should have to provide a reason as to why this should be the case. "De Gouges's "Rights" and Wollstonecraft's "Vindication" claim that the seeming "nature of women" is actually a product of being disenfranchised politically — a very early iteration of the "social construction" argument used by feminists today. Both "Rights" and "Vindication" identify certain stereotypical characteristics ascribed to "female nature" during the late eighteenth century: deceitfulness, the inability to exercise reason, ignorance, weakness. The texts then go on to argue that these tendencies are not the product of some kind of essential female nature, but of being excluded from the education and freedom their male counterparts enjoyed." ¹³ Both of these women strived to be taken seriously in their writing, and were able to express very similar sentiments, in similar climates as well. It is interesting and comforting to see that both of these women, separated by an ocean and what I am sure are very different life circumstances, were able to come to similar conclusions at the time.

Diving into this text, I felt that it was important to compare the conversation that Wollstonecraft was bringing to the table at the time, to current conversations happening today. The centering of the conversation of abortion was very intentional, and continues to be extremely prominent in

¹³ Wollstonecraft, Mary. "How Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges Argued for Equality In Proto-Feminist Pamphlets." A vindication of the rights of woman – CH 10. Accessed December 19, 2023. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wollstonecraft-mary/1792/vindication-rights-woman/ch10.htm>.

the news today. Equating Wollstonecraft's immense disdain for tyrannical government to what is going on in the United States today is a direct result of the patriarchy and evolution of an increasingly tyrannical, Christian nation. Witnessing the rise of a political figure that allows for the criminalization of an extremely common, safe medical procedure, by what is most often white men in government is exactly what Wollstonecraft was arguing against. As previously stated, it is also paramount to point out inconsistencies or parts of the discussion that do not hold up in the 21st century. Wollstonecraft's tendency to place the blame on women who remain ignorant or "slavish" as she puts it, is a point lacking the complexities of life and all of its circumstances. Comparing this to Heidi Schreck's *What the Constitution Means to Me* was a way for me to examine how generational abuse permeates through family lineage, and becomes very hard to break out of. Critiquing language that infantilizes women was also an important point to discuss and call in, as that is something that so many people experience still to this day.

Wollstonecraft's arguments surrounding parental nature and affection were heavily littered with pressure on women for having to maintain a very specific demeanor and poise when raising children. She reiterates her point that education is the basis of much of the freedoms that are missing for women, and that if women and men were able to receive education together, there would be an impetus for women to garner their own independence

separate from their husbands. This in turn would cause them to approach parenthood in a way that would create a well-rounded child, one that would be raised without coddling or neglect. While this section did lack intersectionality, it is still important to note that this type of thinking was absolutely revolutionary at the time. Comparing this to the online phenomenon of “trad wives” was a way for me to bring this conversation of intentional domesticity to the present. There are of course women who chose to live a more traditional, domestic life, but it is important that they do so with informed consent, and not under any form of duress.

While this was only a dissection of three parts of Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, I feel as though it is continually important to look back on previous feminist discourse in order to see progress but also where things can be expanded. The questions I am left with ponder how we can take Wollstonecraft’s words and use them to facilitate further conversation. What does it mean for our society that a lot of the same questions she was posing still are relevant today, in 2023? How can we as modern feminists critique her work, but still appreciate the conversation she was proposing? How does systemic abuse affect a person’s narrative voice? These are the notes I will be taking with me in future conversation, and I hope this paper allows you to ponder these questions, as well as Mary Wollstonecraft’s enduring legacy in the present day.

