

Gender Equality from the Perspective of Mary Wollstonecraft

Igualdade de Gênero sob a Perspectiva de Mary Wollstonecraft

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ABSTRACT:

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was one of the pioneering thinkers in the movement advocating for gender equality. In the context of 18th-century Western culture, where gender roles were primarily dictated by tradition and religion, Wollstonecraft advanced compelling arguments for gender equality that transcended the limitations of her time. Based on research on Mary Wollstonecraft's work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, this article will analyze and interpret her key arguments concerning gender equality, emphasizing two main aspects: (1) Gender equality as a fundamental human right and (2) Education as a cornerstone of gender equality. Furthermore, the article will assess the lasting impact of Wollstonecraft's ideas on modern feminist thought and how these ideas continue to influence the ongoing struggle for women's rights today.

KEYWORDS: Wollstonecraft, gender equality, women.

RESUMO:

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) foi uma das pensadoras pioneiras do movimento que defendia a igualdade de gênero. No contexto da cultura ocidental do século XVIII, onde os papéis de gênero eram ditados principalmente pela tradição e religião, Wollstonecraft apresentou argumentos convincentes pela igualdade de gênero que transcendiam as limitações de sua época. Com base em pesquisas sobre a obra de Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, este artigo analisará e interpretará seus principais argumentos sobre igualdade de gênero, enfatizando dois aspectos principais: (1) Igualdade de

gênero como um direito humano fundamental e (2) Educação como pilar fundamental da igualdade de gênero. Além disso, o artigo avaliará o impacto duradouro das ideias de Wollstonecraft no pensamento feminista moderno e como essas ideias continuam influenciando a luta contínua pelos direitos das mulheres hoje.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Wollstonecraft, igualdade de gênero, mulheres.

1. Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is known as one of the pioneering thinkers of the feminist movement. With her famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft not only challenged traditional notions about the role and place of women in society but also opened up an important philosophical debate about women's freedom and equality. Her work became widely known in Great Britain, continental Europe, and the United States in the 1790s and continued to influence women's rights discourse and activism worldwide. Novelists, journalists, abolitionists, labor rights advocates, feminists, socialists, missionaries, and many feminists of various schools of thought in the 19th century found in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* a rich source of material for their arguments and activities related to the promotion of social justice for women (Kaplan, 2002; Taylor, 2003; Botting, 2013a).

In an 1843 letter to John Stuart Mill, French positivist philosopher Auguste Comte acknowledged that “the strange book of Miss Mary Wollstonecraft... influenced me strongly” (Mill and Comte, 1995, p. 188). Alongside the quiet reception of Wollstonecraft's works, she also had a strong public presence in the United States and continental Europe during the early decades of the 19th century. Along the eastern coast of the U.S. in 1818, American newspapers published a humorous piece on women's right to wear “breeches,” signed with the satirical and provocative name “Mary Wollstonecraft, Jr.” (Botting, 2013b, p. 283). However, in her homeland of England, Wollstonecraft's reputation remained clouded by scandal stemming from her association with the Godwin-Shelley circle and the controversial lives of her daughters. The bias and gender stereotypes of the Victorian period (1837-1901) may explain why John Stuart Mill, author of *The Subjection of Women* (1869), never mentioned Wollstonecraft, even though he was aware of her influence on the women's rights movement (Botting, 2014, p. 3). Even *The Subjection of Women* was, for a long time, one of the least studied of Mill's works. After publishing it, Mill's philosophical reputation was tarnished for addressing what was considered a “trivial” topic (Dalaqua, 2018, p. 15). It was only in the 1960s that the intellectual value of *The Subjection of Women* began to be appreciated (Morales, 2005, pp. xiii-xiv).

Feminist pioneers from various ideological backgrounds, including Russian anarchist exile Emma Goldman, American anthropologist Ruth Benedict, and British modernist novelist Virginia Woolf, found deep inspiration in Wollstonecraft's unique life and ideas on gender equality, particularly concerning sexuality, love, and marriage (Wexler, 1981; Sapiro, 1992, p. 6; Gordon, 2005, p. 451). In *The Second Sex*, French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir praised Wollstonecraft as the first to present a feminist theory grounded in robust philosophical reasoning (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 172). Since then, Wollstonecraft's writings have been widely studied, analyzed, and cited within feminist and philosophical studies worldwide. Wollstonecraft's key contribution lay in linking women's rights to universal human rights, a perspective that both confronted entrenched prejudices and laid the groundwork for modern feminist thought by affirming that women's rights are inseparable from human rights. Based on a close examination of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, this article will analyze Wollstonecraft's critical arguments in justifying gender equality, particularly women's rights, and provide commentary and assessments of their impact on the feminist movement and current social realities.

2. Gender equality is a fundamental human right

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft approached women's equality, or more broadly gender equality, from the human rights perspective. She wrote: "I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties; and afterwards I shall more particularly point out their peculiar designation" (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 30). Here, Wollstonecraft emphasized the importance of recognizing women not merely through the lens of gender but from the broader perspective of human development and the realization of human potential. She viewed women as beings with the same fundamental purpose and rights as men: to develop their capabilities. This viewpoint reflects a humanist philosophy, in which every individual, regardless of gender, is entitled to develop their natural and intellectual capacities fully.

Before addressing gender distinctions and the specific societal roles assigned to women, Wollstonecraft began with a broader foundation, clarifying that women are complete individuals with the same abilities and rights as men. This perspective demonstrated Wollstonecraft's aspiration for a just society in which women are valued and treated according to their potential and skills, not simply according to predetermined social roles. Furthermore, she laid the groundwork for the discourse on gender equality, asserting that women should not only be seen as subjects constrained by societal regulations but also as individuals with the right to develop and realize their potential. Wollstonecraft stated:

If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test: though a different opinion prevails in this country, built on the very arguments which you use to justify the oppression of woman—prescription (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 23).

Through this reasoning, Wollstonecraft challenged the arguments used to justify the oppression of women, establishing her case for equality based on reason and human rights. Wollstonecraft argued that women's rights should not be overlooked or denied in discussions and explanations; they should be the same as men's. According to her, discrimination against women is unacceptable and not based on rational reasoning but only on unfair customs and traditions. Wollstonecraft called for a shift in how women were perceived and treated, urging fairness and equality in human rights discourse without gender discrimination. This reflected her vision of a society where women's rights were equal to men's. Besides, she presented strong arguments about the negative consequences of denying women their legitimate rights: "If women are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will render both men and themselves vicious, to obtain illicit privileges" (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 24). The legitimate rights Wollstonecraft referred to include freedom, education, and participation in social and political activities. Deprived of these rights, women would be pushed into seeking advantages through illegitimate means, such as seduction, cunning, or even emotional manipulation. This would not only degrade their morality but also deteriorate the relationship between the sexes. Both women and men could become "vicious" in their behavior, not because of their inherent nature, but because they had no other options in an unjust society. Thus, Wollstonecraft stressed the necessity of restructuring society to grant women the legitimate rights they deserved. Failing to do so would lead to moral decline and social instability. A just society, where women are treated equally and given rightful power, would produce morally better individuals and a more harmonious community.

Wollstonecraft also asserted that women should enjoy the same civil and political rights as men. She opposed the traditional view that women should focus solely on domestic responsibilities, arguing that these limitations were not only unjust but also a violation of women's natural rights. In her letter to Talleyrand-Périgord, Wollstonecraft wrote: "Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?" (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 23). By raising this question, she challenged the belief that men were the sole judges of critical societal decisions, emphasizing that if women shared the gift of reason, there was no valid reason to exclude them from civil and political rights. Wollstonecraft's argument continued:

If women are to be excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reason—else this flaw in your new constitution will ever show that man must, in some shape, act like a tyrant, and tyranny, in whatever part of society it rears its brazen front, will ever undermine morality (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 23).

According to Wollstonecraft, excluding women from natural rights was both unjust and contradictory. If society could not prove that women lacked reason, it revealed that society maintained a form of tyranny. Oppression and injustice, no matter where they appeared, would permanently undermine the moral fabric of society. Hence, granting women civil and political rights was a matter of justice and an ethical foundation for societal development. When women are empowered, they have the potential to contribute positively to society's advancement, particularly in educating children and engaging in community activities.

Wollstonecraft criticized the legal system and social regulations that perpetuated injustice against women. She strongly advocated for women's participation in civil and political rights as fundamental human rights, viewing this as the only path to genuine equality, enabling them to break free from dependency and attain equal status with men. Wollstonecraft wrote:

Let there be then no coercion established in society, and the common law of gravity prevailing, the sexes will fall into their proper places. And, now that more equitable laws are forming your citizens, marriage may become more sacred: your young men may choose wives from motives of affection, and your maidens allow love to root out vanity (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 24).

Wollstonecraft believed that the sexes would naturally find their places in society without coercion and contribute to its development. A just legal context would promote the growth and education of citizens, reinforcing the values of love and marriage. Men would choose wives based on genuine affection rather than status or personal gain, while women would allow love to prevail over vanity or superficial concerns.

Wollstonecraft acknowledged that “women may have different duties to fulfill; but they are human duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same” (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 77). If the opposition between man and woman is justified on biological grounds, the distinction between masculine and feminine carries significant cultural weight. It is tied to an imaginary, an ideology, and representations that distinctly define what is characteristic of men and what pertains to women, aligning with the prevailing norms (albeit varied) of different societies (Ferreira, 2006, p. 95). Women may assume different roles and responsibilities in society, such as family care or other traditionally assigned tasks; these duties fall under the broader scope of human responsibilities. Using the term “human duties,” Wollstonecraft emphasized that men's and women's responsibilities should be governed by the same universal values— such as justice, integrity, and morality—regardless of their specific roles. She maintained that the principles guiding women's actions must align with those applied to men, insisting that women should be treated with the same respect and fairness, rejecting the double standards of her time. Wollstonecraft explained that greater equality must be established in society for morality to thrive:

There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground, and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind be

chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 171).

Wollstonecraft warned that even if virtuous equality is built on a solid foundation, it cannot be sustained if “one half of mankind” is chained by fate at the bottom. This suggests that inequality, whether imposed by destiny or society, will continually undermine moral foundations. Those trapped in such inequality may erode the efforts to build an ethical society driven by ignorance or arrogance stemming from the injustice they endure. This perspective reflects Wollstonecraft's visionary call for a society where all individuals have the opportunity to cultivate moral virtues equally.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft offered profound reflections on the interconnectedness of politics, morality, and society while emphasizing the significance of principles of justice in maintaining a moral society. Wollstonecraft wrote:

A man has been termed a microcosm; and every family might also be called a state. States, it is true, have mostly been governed by arts that disgrace the character of man; and the want of a just constitution, and equal laws, have so perplexed the notions of the worldly wise, that they more than question the reasonableness of contending for the rights of humanity (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 209).

Wollstonecraft pointed out that the absence of a just constitution and equal laws had created confusion among those considered wise in society (the worldly wise), leading them to question the logic behind advocating for human rights. Unjust political systems not only negatively impact individuals but also undermine the moral foundation of society. When national morality is corrupted, it spreads streams of vice that degrade the components of the political body. This demonstrates that injustice and corruption at the national level directly affect personal and social life, creating a vicious cycle of moral decay. Therefore, according to Wollstonecraft, justice and ethical principles must serve as the foundation of law, for only then can society achieve harmony and justice, thereby improving individual moral conduct.

Wollstonecraft underscored the necessity of social equality and proper education in improving the condition of women and, by extension, society as a whole. She asserted: “We shall not see women affectionate till more equality be established in society, till ranks are confounded and women freed” (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 223). According to Wollstonecraft, the current social system, with its class distinctions and oppression of women, prevents them from expressing and developing genuine emotions. Only when women are granted freedom and equality can they fully realize their emotional potential and character. The true values of family life can only be appreciated when women, and humanity in general, are not constrained by societal impositions and distorted ideologies. Family happiness, in Wollstonecraft's view, is contingent upon the emancipation of women and the achievement of social equality. She further wrote:

Neither shall we see that dignified domestic happiness, the simple grandeur of which cannot be relished by ignorant or vitiated minds; nor will the important task of education ever be properly begun till the person of a woman is no longer preferred to her mind. For it would be as wise to

expect corn from tares, or figs from thistles, as that a foolish ignorant woman should be a good mother (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 223).

Thus, Wollstonecraft maintained that true family happiness and proper rearing for future generations could only be attained if women's worth were assessed by their intellect rather than their superficial characteristics. Wollstonecraft compared the expectation that an ignorant and foolish woman could become an excellent mother to the notion of expecting wheat to grow from tares or figs from thistles (a wild plant with spiky leaves and often purple flowers, also the national symbol of Scotland). This powerful metaphor emphasizes that poor education will never yield positive results. If women are not adequately educated, they will be unable to become good mothers, and this will have detrimental effects on future generations.

3. Education as the Foundation of Gender Equality

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft expressed profound anger and sorrow over the inequality and subjugation of women in society, which, according to her, largely stemmed from a flawed and biased educational system. She wrote:

I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial. I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? — a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 29).

Wollstonecraft thus highlighted that the neglect and inadequacy of education were the primary causes of the suffering and inequality faced by women, as they hindered their intellectual and moral development, perpetuating the cycle of oppression. She recognized that human misery, particularly that of women, stemmed from the neglect of education. In her view, the existing educational system had failed to prioritize women's intellectual and moral development, focusing instead on molding them into beings valued solely for their physical allure rather than their intellect and virtue. This weakened women and rendered them unhappy and ineffective within society. Women had become frail and miserable due to a range of factors linked to misconceptions about education. The educational system, designed and implemented by men, neglected the intellectual development of women, instead aiming to turn them into charming companions, submissive wives, and mothers lacking both reason and autonomy. Wollstonecraft observed:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 29).

Wollstonecraft contended that women had been deceived by the male-imposed emphasis on appearance rather than on the development of intellectual and moral strength. As a result, women sought love and admiration rather than more significant goals, such as earning respect for their abilities and values. So Wollstonecraft encouraged women to abandon frivolous aspirations in favor of loftier goals, such as gaining respect and becoming valuable members of society.

Wollstonecraft acknowledged that, in her contemporary society, more attention was given to women's education than in the past. However, women were “still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them” (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 32). This demonstrates that in Wollstonecraft's time, the prevalent societal view continued to devalue women, perceiving them as “weak creatures”. Much of women's early lives were wasted on learning superficial skills that were of little practical use. They were taught only rudimentary knowledge and external skills without the opportunity for comprehensive intellectual and physical development. This development was sacrificed for misguided notions of beauty, and women were driven primarily by the singular desire to marry, as this was the only path for them to advance in society.

Wollstonecraft criticized the education of women, which was aimed solely at making them physically attractive to secure marriage rather than helping them become strong and independent individuals. She argued that, due to this type of education, women were concerned only with beautifying themselves, much like ornaments in a harem, rather than being companions or mothers capable of nurturing and raising their children. Wollstonecraft questioned whether women educated in this manner could “govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?” (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 32). She was, in fact, skeptical of these women's abilities, as they were not equipped to handle such roles responsibly and effectively. According to her, this flawed education rendered women useless, unable to properly fulfill their roles in society and the family.

Wollstonecraft offered a profound analysis of the relationship between education and personal development while pointing out the limitations and mistakes in the educational notions of her time. To her, education was not merely the transmission of knowledge but a process of sharpening the senses, forming character, and regulating passions as they emerged. She emphasized that this process must occur before a child's body matures so that by the time they reach adulthood, they continue learning rather than starting from scratch. As Wollstonecraft wrote:

By individual education, I mean, for the sense of the word is not precisely defined, such an attention to a child as will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions as they begin to ferment, and set the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity; so that the man may only have to proceed, not to begin, the important task of learning to think and reason (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 47).

Wollstonecraft recognized that gender inequality stemmed from the unequal educational opportunities for men and women. From a young age, men were trained in a structured, orderly manner,

enabling them to adhere to rules and methods more precisely. In contrast, women often received an education that she described as “disorderly,” lacking systematic instruction and rigorous methodology. As a result, women could not frequently generalize or reason from specific events, acting mechanically, merely repeating actions without questioning their rationale or effectiveness. She also emphasized that this lack of order prevented women from applying rational thinking to their actions and decisions. Instead, they relied on instinctual “common sense”, not tested by reason.

Wollstonecraft criticized such an approach to education, as it impeded women’s ability to develop reasoning skills and gain a deeper understanding. She called for educational reform for women and argued that only when women were trained methodically and rationally could they achieve full development and escape the reliance on unexamined habits and patterns. This reform would foster independent thinking in women and enable them to become genuinely rational individuals capable of making decisions and exercising control over their lives.

For Wollstonecraft, the early disregard for women's intellect had far more detrimental consequences than generally acknowledged. She argued:

The little knowledge which women of strong minds attain, is, from various circumstances, of a more desultory kind than the knowledge of men, and it is acquired more by sheer observations on real life, than from comparing what has been individually observed with the results of experience generalized by speculation (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 49)

Thus, Wollstonecraft advocated for transforming education and society to allow women to cultivate their intellect fully. She emphasized that the intellectual differences between groups of people are not due to inherent gender or personal traits but rather to deficiencies in education and opportunities. To achieve true equality, women needed to be equipped with the same learning opportunities and intellectual development as men to reach their full potential without being constrained by the lack of education and freedom.

If women’s minds were strengthened through the expansion of their knowledge, blind obedience would come to an end. However, Wollstonecraft recognized that rulers and pleasure-seekers had long sought to keep women ignorant to serve their interests. Thus, expanding women’s knowledge is a means to enhance justice, reduce blind obedience, and weaken the dominance of ruling powers. This highlights the necessity for social and educational reforms to create a more just society where women can fully develop their potential without being hindered by social discrimination. Wollstonecraft wrote: “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 women in the dark” (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 50).

Wollstonecraft sharply criticized the contemporary educational system, believing it had negative consequences for both men and women. She pointed out that boys were physically and morally ruined

by early debaucheries, making them selfish, while girls were made weak and frivolous by passivity and the pursuit of trivialities. Wollstonecraft emphasized that to remedy this situation, gender equality must be established, and she proposed an educational plan in which both men and women would benefit from a system free of discrimination. This equality would eliminate behaviors like gallantry and artificial coquetry, which were manifestations of inequality and rigid gender norms. When gender equality is established, friendship and love will become the dominant factors in relationships between men and women. Wollstonecraft believed that friendship and love are not only natural affections but also play an essential role in shaping the heart and preparing individuals for higher duties. This implies that a society where friendship and love are valued over flirtation and pretense would foster more moral and responsible individuals (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 200).

Wollstonecraft argued that education is crucial in achieving equality between men and women. According to her, the lack of education is the primary reason why women are undervalued and placed in an inferior position in society. Therefore, women need proper education to develop their reason and morality and become valuable citizens. Wollstonecraft wrote:

Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 22).

In Wollstonecraft's view, education is the essential factor that enables women to become equal companions to men. According to her, if women are not equipped with knowledge and virtue through education, they cannot contribute positively to society. They may even hinder the progress of knowledge and morality. She believed that only when women possess equivalent knowledge and qualities can they play an important role and achieve equality in their relationship with men. This would benefit women and society, fostering the overall development of knowledge and morality. Wollstonecraft emphasized that if truth is not shared and made accessible to men and women, it will have no effect or be ineffective in practice. This idea underscores that knowledge should not be monopolized by one gender but should be widely disseminated to create a positive and lasting societal impact.

The inequality in knowledge between men and women is one of the primary causes of social and moral inequality. Therefore, Wollstonecraft warned that if women were not educated, “half of the population” would be excluded from intellectual and ethical development, leading to the general weakening of society. In her view, to achieve true gender equality, women must have access to the same high-quality education as men. Equality in education is a prerequisite for women to fulfill their roles in society and the family effectively and equitably. Empowering women through education helps them develop personally and contributes positively to the progress of society as a whole. As Wollstonecraft asks Talleyrand, “how can woman be expected to cooperate unless she know why she ought to be

virtuous? unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good?" (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 22). She implied that virtue cannot merely be a matter of compliance or moral obligation but must stem from a deep understanding of its reasons and purposes. Without this understanding, the pursuit of virtue by women becomes superficial, lacking sincerity and personal awareness. Thus, education is a tool for intellectual development and a means for women to achieve happiness and self-fulfillment. When women realize the connection between virtue and personal happiness, they will be more motivated to pursue it voluntarily and consciously.

For Wollstonecraft, education is not only a right but also how women can play an essential role in society, particularly in raising children. She asserted:

If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 22).

Wollstonecraft believed that only when women are appropriately educated can they become mothers capable of instilling the values of patriotism and humanity in their children. Empowering women through education not only enables their personal growth but also has a positive impact on the moral and spiritual development of future generations. When discussing public versus private education, Wollstonecraft admitted that private education could not produce "miracles" and that individual education is inextricably linked to societal influences. Both men and women are significantly impacted by the opinions and customs of their culture. She made this significant argument because it demonstrates that individuals cannot wholly avoid cultural effects in their growth. Perfect education teaches the mind to strengthen the body and form the heart, allowing people to develop the moral habits required to become self-sufficient.

4. A few observations

As early as the 18th century, Wollstonecraft profoundly discussed women and the issue of gender equality, which can be considered a breakthrough. Later, from the 19th century onwards, we observe a shift in the philosophical status quo, with the theme of women and the feminine gaining traction (Ferreira, 2006, p. 95).

In engaging with debates on rights during the Enlightenment, Wollstonecraft made one of the most distinctive contributions to contemporary political theory: women's rights are a form of human rights. In 1792, universal human rights, undifferentiated by sex, which we now often take for granted, was a revolutionary concept. The most revolutionary and influential aspect of Wollstonecraft's argument for women's rights lies in her call to recognize women's humanity. She argued that because women are human beings, they should be entitled to equal civil and political rights as men in modern republican governments.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft described women as “half of the human species” who have been degraded, oppressed, and marginalized in politics. With such rhetorical locations, she reminded her audience of the artificial and arbitrary quality of women’s social inequality with men. Furthermore, she emphasized the commonalities between the two sexes as members of the same species, asserting that women deserve recognition and respect as human beings (Botting, 2014, p. 4). Through this argument, Wollstonecraft established a solid foundation for demanding equality for women, not merely based on gender differences but on universal human rights, thereby presenting a solid challenge to the contemporary societal views on women's roles and status.

Wollstonecraft's arguments about women's rights as human rights bear many similarities to current international human rights law provisions. The Vienna Declaration, issued at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993, employed the term “human rights of women” in two interrelated ways. First, it affirmed that women have the right to share the same fundamental human rights as men, including rights such as nourishment, safety, and education, and that women should have equal access to these rights without gender discrimination. Second, the term encompassed women’s rights as human beings to be free from “gender-specific abuses”, such as “murder, systematic rape, sexual slavery, and forced pregnancy”, which are tragically prevalent in “situations of armed conflict” (UN, 1993). Thus, Wollstonecraft's ideas on gender equality laid the foundation for recognizing women's rights as human rights in the modern context. She not only demanded equal rights for women in accessing fundamental human rights but also emphasized the importance of protecting women from gender-specific violence and abuses.

In the contemporary setting, Wollstonecraft's theories on gender equality have been reinforced and developed through international law, particularly in the United Nations’ resolutions and declarations to protect and promote women's rights globally. This demonstrates that, although written in the late 18th century, Wollstonecraft's ideas in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are not only valuable in her time but also play a crucial role in shaping modern international human rights standards, especially in safeguarding the rights and dignity of women in complex social and political contexts.

The issues that Wollstonecraft raised in the 19th century concerning women's rights remain relevant and influential in recent discussions on human rights, democratization, global justice, and human development. Amartya Sen, a renowned economist and theorist, praised *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a “classic book” that vindicated two vital forms of human rights for women: the rights to well-being (happiness) and even more crucially, rights to be agents of their own course in life (Sen, 1999, p. 189). These rights form the foundation of the concept of freedom that Sen develops in his work *Development as Freedom*. In his book *The Idea of Justice*, Sen further views *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as an argumentative model for empowering the marginalized to participate in democratic deliberation

about justice. Sen asserts that, following Wollstonecraft, the marginalized may effectively combine “wrath and reasoning” to make emotionally, intellectually, and politically compelling claims for human rights in the public sphere, thereby gaining a voice where they had been ignored before (Sen, 2009, p. 392). Besides, in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, cultural scholar and modern philosopher Charles Taylor recognizes Wollstonecraft as a pioneer in the “long march” toward democratic inclusion in the West, especially given her rethinking of the family in a “critical democratic-egalitarian light” (Taylor, 2004, p. 147). Thus, Wollstonecraft's vision extends beyond her era, influencing current debates on human rights and democracy. The principles she articulated have been reinforced and continue to play a crucial role in advancing justice and the rights of marginalized individuals.

Wollstonecraft's ideas on education as the foundation of gender equality laid the groundwork for the principles of universal education that are now widely recognized in international law and global development goals. Wollstonecraft proposed a national education plan in 1792 in a context where universal educational rights were not yet widely recognized. However, her vision became a reality nearly two centuries later with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirmed the right to free primary education as a fundamental right for children worldwide (UN, 1989).

Today, despite significant progress in achieving gender equality in primary education in developing countries, more girls than boys still lack access to primary education. According to UNESCO, there are currently 122 million girls and 128 million boys globally who are out of school, and women continue to make up nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults (Unesco, 2024). Thus, Wollstonecraft's 1792 call for the universal human right to primary education remains farsighted in both theory and practice, much like Kant's 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace*, in which he envisioned a federation of republics across the world—an idea that resonates with the current existence of the United Nations (Botting, 2014, p. 9).

Recently, the documentary “Her Education, Our Future” released on March 7, 2024, to mark International Women's Day, portrays the lives of Anee, Fabiana, Mkasi, and Tainá – four young women across three continents who are fighting for their right to education. This film provides a powerful perspective on the transformative power of education. It demonstrates that empowering girls and women through education improves their lives and enhances the lives of their families, communities, and even society as a whole (Unesco, 2024). This shows that Wollstonecraft's ideas on women's education were ahead of their time and still relevant in today's global context. These ideas have continued to promote the development of human rights and education worldwide.

5. Conclusion

Through her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft made a profound and intelligent contribution to the debate on gender equality within the social and philosophical context of the Enlightenment, laying the foundation for feminist thought in the centuries to follow. Her work was a call for equal rights for women and a sharp critique of traditional prejudices and notions about women. She emphasized that women's perceived intellectual and moral inferiority stemmed primarily from an unjust and oppressive education system, not from women's natural disposition. She extended her vision to other spheres, such as career opportunities and political rights, arguing that gender-based discrimination in labor was a grave injustice. According to her, women should be empowered to participate in social and political activities, as they possess the potential to contribute equally to society alongside men. Wollstonecraft pioneered the struggle for women's political rights, paving the way for future generations to fight for voting and political participation.

Mary Wollstonecraft's theory on gender equality continues to resonate and profoundly impact the modern feminist movement. Her arguments on education, marriage, family, and career opportunities laid the groundwork for discussing women's rights and their societal roles. Subsequent feminist movements, from suffrage to labor rights, are built upon the core ideas that Wollstonecraft established. Beyond advocating for legal equality, she opened deeper discussions on social structures and cultural prejudices against women. She fought for individual women's rights and called for widespread social structure changes, aiming to build a society where everyone, regardless of gender, has equal opportunities for development. Her philosophy is a foundational theory for the fight for equal rights and a powerful reminder of the importance of comprehensive development for every individual. By emphasizing education and women's autonomy, Wollstonecraft sparked a wave of social change that transcended the limitations of her era. Her vision of gender equality is not just a call for social change but a revolutionary idea with the ultimate goal of liberating individuals from imposed frameworks and opening up opportunities for holistic development for all.

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