



Section 2

PRIMARY SOURCE *from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
by Mary Wollstonecraft

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, published by the English writer and reformer Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, is one of the earliest feminist essays. According to this excerpt, how did Wollstonecraft feel about the education of women?

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; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. 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. One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; . . . the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect. . . .

Yet, because I am a woman, I would not lead my readers to suppose that I mean violently to agitate the contested question respecting the equality or inferiority of the sex; but . . . I shall stop a moment to deliver, in a few words, my opinion. In the government of the physical world it is observable that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. This is the law of nature; and it does not appear to be suspended or abrogated [abolished] in favor of woman. A degree of

physical superiority cannot, therefore, be denied—and it is a noble prerogative [right]! But not content with this natural preeminence, men endeavor to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, . . . do not seek to obtain a durable interest in [men's] hearts, or to become the friends of the fellow creatures who find amusement in their society.

I am aware of an obvious inference: from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If by this appellation [name] men mean to inveigh [protest] against their ardor in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind; all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me that they may every day grow more and more masculine.

from Barbara H. Solomon and Paula S. Berggren, eds., A Mary Wollstonecraft Reader (New York: New American Library, 1983), 267–269.

Discussion Questions

1. **Perceiving Cause and Effect** According to Wollstonecraft, what happens when women are not properly educated?
2. **Recognizing Facts and Details** What is Wollstonecraft's opinion of the equality of men and women?
3. **Making Inferences** Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that a woman's education should primarily teach her to become a better wife and mother. How do you think Wollstonecraft would have reacted to his views?