

BLOCK III
MARY
WOLLSTONECRAFT

BLOCK III INTRODUCTION

Block three has two units on Mary Wollstonecraft which deal with her views on rights of women and critique of Rousseau's ideas on education. She is often regarded as the mother of feminism by many analysts. Wollstonecraft was a British enlightenment philosopher who questioned the duality in the views of enlightenment thinkers as they supported ideas like equality, liberty and tolerance for all but excluded women from such concepts. She strongly argued for women's rights, human rights, and women as rational human beings. She found Rousseau's ideas on education problematic and thus, raised various philosophical debates. She strongly challenged Rousseau's educational ideas, and argued rational education in favour women. She argued that if women are given rational education, they will contribute significantly along with men. Her emphasis on reason and rationality, and breaking traditional thinking about the role of women in society is considered as her significant contribution.



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UNIT 5 RIGHTS OF WOMEN*

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
 - 5.1.1 Her Life
 - 5.1.2 Her Writings
 - 5.1.3 Her Thoughts
- 5.2 “A Vindication of the Rights of Men”: Wollstonecraft’s Debate with Edmund Burke
 - 5.2.1 Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)
 - 5.2.2 Wollstonecraft’s Defence of the French Revolution and Critique of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections*
- 5.3 “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”: Wollstonecraft’s Plea for Women’s Rights
 - 5.3.1 Context of the *Rights of Woman*
 - 5.3.2 Women as Rational Human Beings
 - 5.3.3 Women’s Rights are Human Rights
 - 5.3.4 Significance of the *Rights of Woman*
 - 5.3.5 Some Limitations of the *Rights of Woman*
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 References
- 5.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with one of the significant early feminist thinkers of the 18th century – *Mary Wollstonecraft*. The main objective of this unit is to get acquainted with her and to understand her important ideas, particularly focusing her thoughts on women’s rights. Therefore, after reading this unit, you will be able to:

- know about Mary Wollstonecraft as an early feminist scholar;

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- study her significant contribution to feminist thinking; and
- to understand her ideas related to the rights of women

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was an English writer, philosopher, intellectual, passionate advocate of women's rights and educational and social equality for women. She was also a moral and political theorist. Her advocacy of women's equality and critiques of conventional femininity became increasingly important. Today, she is regarded as one of the founding feminist philosophers, and feminists often mention both her life and work as important influences. Wollstonecraft is often regarded by many as the *Mother of Feminism*. Before understanding her views and arguments regarding rights of woman, it is necessary to know briefly her life, writings, and thoughts.

5.1.1 Her Life

Mary Wollstonecraft (married name Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin) was born on 27th April 1759 in Spitalfields, London. Her father Edward John Wollstonecraft, the son of a weaver, and mother Elizabeth Dickson Wollstonecraft, who was Irish, were married in 1756. Mary Wollstonecraft was the second of seven children. In her brief, unconventional life, Wollstonecraft's road to acclaim was far from smooth. Right from her childhood, she faced many difficulties. For example, she suffered a peripatetic childhood following an increasingly impoverished and drunken father. Her father was violent at home. She was disgusted with her father's brutality, and she was fuelled by indignation at the inequality of treatment of herself and the eldest son. As a child, the first place Wollstonecraft would face discrimination was at home. Her brother Edward (Ned) received extensive formal education, and became a lawyer. He had also inherited directly from his grandfather a substantial part of the latter's legacy. Wollstonecraft's sisters and she were only afforded day schools for a few years.

Wollstonecraft left home to follow the few occupations open to a lady: as companion, school teacher, and governess. She received a great opportunity when she was employed as a translator and a reader (and later as reviewer and editorial assistant) for the radical publisher *Joseph Johnson* for his monthly progressive periodical *Analytical Review* in London. Due to Johnson's circle of progressive writers and artists, she met such thinkers as *Thomas Paine*, *Thomas Holcroft*, *Henry Fuseli*, *Joel Barlow*, *Horne Tooke*, *William Blake* and *Anna Letitia Barbauld*. Within a short time she wrote both *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

Over the next years, she struggled with the problems of trying to be an independent woman despite a conditioning in dependence. In France, she entered an ultimately unhappy relationship with an American businessman and diplomat *Gilbert Imlay*, by whom she had a daughter. In the last year of her life, she married a philosopher *William Godwin*, one of the forefathers of the anarchist movement, in 1797. She died on 10th September 1797 following childbirth of her

second daughter. She was only 38. Her second daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, later became an English novelist who achieved much fame, and wrote *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

The life of Wollstonecraft has been subject of several biographies after her death. Her husband William Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) which is considered as Mary Wollstonecraft's first biography. However, this book became a subject of controversy because William Godwin in his book revealed much about Wollstonecraft's private life that had previously not been known to the public: her illegitimate child, her love affairs, and her attempts at suicide.

In 1929, a renowned English writer *Virginia Woolf* described Wollstonecraft and her writings, arguments, and experiments in living as immortal. She remarked about Wollstonecraft, "She is alive and active, she argues and experiments; we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living." American crusaders for equal rights like *Margaret Fuller*, *Lucretia Mott*, and *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* were all inspired by Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

5.1.2 Her Writings

Wollstonecraft was a famous and prolific writer whose work was translated into several languages during her lifetime. She reflected on the philosophical and political issues connected with the topics current at that time. During Wollstonecraft's brief career, she wrote novels, treatises, a travel narrative, a history of the French Revolution, a conduct book, and a children's book. It is important to note that her writing career was an unconventional choice for a woman of the time. After her death, several of her manuscripts remained unfinished.

Some of the significant works of Mary Wollstonecraft are:

- *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the more Important Duties of Life* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1787)
- *Mary: A Fiction* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1788)
- *Original Stories from Real Life: With Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1788)
- *The Female Reader; or, Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Verse; Selected from the Best Writers, and Disposed under Proper Heads; for the Improvement of Young Women* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1789)
- *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1790)
- *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792)

- *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has produced in Europe* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1794)
- *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1796)
- *Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1798)
- *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (part of Posthumous Works)
- *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Pickering and Chatto, 1989)

Among these writings, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) are mostly popular among scholars and intellectuals.

5.1.3 Her Thoughts

Wollstonecraft was a revolutionary figure in a revolutionary time. She took up and lived out not only the liberal call for women's educational and moral equality, but also virtually all of the other related, violently contested questions of the 1790s – questions pertaining to the principles of political authority, tyranny, liberty, class, sex, marriage, childrearing, property, prejudice, reason, sentimentality, promises, suicide, to mention only a few. She was regarded as a formidable figure who challenged the sexual and moral norms of her society in radical ways.

She advocated a radical revision of British law to enable a new, egalitarian marriage in which women would share equally in the management and possession of all household resources. She demanded that women be paid – and paid equally – for their labour, that they gain the civil and legal right to possess and distribute property, that they be admitted to all the most prestigious professions. She argued that women together with all disenfranchised men should be given the vote. She issued an early call for women's suffrage. She said, "I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government." She called for eliminating obstacles to the advancement of women.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. What is the significance of Mary Wollstonecraft in feminist scholarship?

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5.2 “A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MEN”: WOLLSTONECRAFT’S DEBATE WITH EDMUND BURKE

Wollstonecraft’s writings were written around the period of the French Revolution of 1789. This period was very important. Its impacts were seen in different parts of the world. Various debates were started in Britain during the period of the French Revolution. British political commentators addressed issues from representative government to human rights to the separation of church and state, many of these issues having been raised in France first.

5.2.1 Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

Wollstonecraft first entered into this debate in 1790 with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (henceforth, *Rights of Men*). This text was a response to a British political thinker and philosopher Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In his *Reflections*, Burke criticized the view of many British thinkers and writers who had welcomed the early stages of the French Revolution. Burke viewed the French Revolution as the violent overthrow of a legitimate government. He made a critique of the French Revolution in his *Reflections*. His *Reflections* was an attack on natural rights and a defense of monarchy and aristocracy. Burke argued that the citizens do not have the right to revolt against the government because civilization is the result of social and political consensus; its traditions cannot be continually challenged. It would result into anarchy. He argued that legitimate government rests on honored traditions and habits, rather than on individual rights. Burke represented the French Revolution as the action of a mob bent on destroying all the social and cultural values of France that had been the model for the whole of Europe.

5.2.2 Wollstonecraft’s Defence of the French Revolution and Critique of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections*

Like many British radicals of her time, Wollstonecraft was strongly influenced and inspired by the French Revolution. The egalitarian principles of the French Revolution found favour with Wollstonecraft. When Burke wrote a critique of the revolution in his *Reflections*, Wollstonecraft was quick to come to the Revolution’s defence with her *Rights of Men*. The *Rights of Men* was written in the form of a long letter to Edmund Burke, in which Wollstonecraft argued that tradition alone cannot guarantee rights; it has to be based on notions of rationality and equality. Wollstonecraft attacked aristocracy and advocated republicanism. She replied to Burke’s argument in her text, which was published just six weeks after Burke’s *Reflections*, that rights cannot be based on tradition; rights should be conferred because they are reasonable and just, regardless of their basis of tradition. Wollstonecraft attacked not only monarchy and hereditary privilege, but also the language that Burke used to defend and elevate it.

While showing importance of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men*, Claudia L. Johnson argued, "A dauntless advocate of political reform, Wollstonecraft was one of the first to vindicate the "right of man." Tom Furniss argued that "While Burke's politics are backward looking, Wollstonecraft's are oriented towards the future, looking forward to the possibility that the French Revolution might establish the rights of men for the first time in history by putting radical theory into practice."

The *Rights of Men* was considered as Wollstonecraft's first overtly political work. However, Wollstonecraft's answer to Burke is often overshadowed by *The Rights of Man* (1791), written by 18th century philosopher, Thomas Paine. Yet, one of Wollstonecraft's most spirited verbal attacks against Burke captured the attention of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries and has continued to interest scholars today. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, the Indian economist and philosopher, has argued that "Her critiques of the leading conventional philosophers of her time, such as Edmund Burke, bring out the distinctive nature of her approach, in which the deprivation of women is linked with other social deprivations, and the roots of social progress are seen not only in legislative change but through societal processes involving the expansion and enrichment of basic education and more public engagement on issues of inequality and neglect."

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Why did Mary Wollstonecraft criticize Edmund Burke's book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*?

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5.3 "A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN": WOLLSTONECRAFT'S PLEA FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (henceforth, *Rights of Woman*) (1792) is Mary Wollstonecraft's most influential book, and this is considered one of the earliest works of feminist thinking and philosophy. Before understanding Wollstonecraft's thoughts written in her *Rights of Woman*, it is important to know the context of this book.

5.3.1 Context of the *Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft was encouraged to write this text after reading a French clergyman and leading diplomat Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord's 1791 report to

the French National Assembly. In 1791, he submitted the Report on Public Education to the French National Assembly as a part of the process of revising the French Constitution. This report only addressed public education to men; and stated that women should only receive a domestic education as it was deserved sufficient for women. Wollstonecraft was disappointed by such proposals of the report regarding women's education in France.

Wollstonecraft completed the *Rights of Woman* text hurriedly and excitedly. Upon completing the work, she wrote to her friend *William Roscoe*. She agreed that she was dissatisfied with herself for not having done justice to the subject. She also agreed that if she could get more time, she could have written a better book, in every sense of the word.

This book was a response to this report. Wollstonecraft dedicated this book to *Talleyrand-Perigord*. It appeared anonymously in December 1790 and was republished almost immediately. It was published under her own name in the second edition. In the second edition of the text, Wollstonecraft changed some of her statements regarding female and male difference to reflect a greater equality between the sexes. Though she was willing to write a more thoughtful second volume of the *Rights of Woman*, she died before completing it. However, William Godwin published her "Hints", which were "chiefly designed to have been incorporated in the second part of the *Rights of Woman*", in the posthumous collection of her works. However, she did begin writing the novel *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman*, which most scholars consider a *fictionalized* sequel to the *Rights of Woman*. It was unfinished at her death and also included in the *Posthumous Works* published by Godwin.

In the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft responded to those education and political theorists and philosophers of the 18th century who believed that women should not receive a rational education.

5.3.2 Women as Rational Human Beings

One of the most important points of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* is her emphasis on women as rational human beings. She asserted that women are also human beings who deserve the same fundamental rights as men are enjoying. Treating women as mere ornaments or property for men weakens the moral foundation of society. Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft argued that they are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men. If Wollstonecraft's views are studied in the context of the 21st century, one might argue that her thoughts were not so radical. But if we study Wollstonecraft's thoughts while considering her time and conditions, it can be certainly argued that Wollstonecraft's thoughts were far more radical.

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft rejects the assumption that the subordinate position of women is an absolute feature of the natural order. Human beings are rational creatures. Women are also human beings. As human beings, they are rational creatures and, as rational creatures, they must be entitled to the same

rights of liberty and self-determination as male rational creatures claim for themselves.

Wollstonecraft makes a strong argument that femaleness is not a morally relevant criterion of discrimination. Women do indeed often seem ill-fitted for roles in the world outside the family. However, this is because they are not given the opportunity to develop their talents or character through education. If they are free to exercise their talents in any capacity they chose, they would be equipped to be full members of society and fit companions for men. Wollstonecraft argued that social justice will never be achieved while these mechanisms of inequality remain.

Wollstonecraft's is best known for *Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they lack education. She suggested that both men and women should be treated as rational beings, and imagined a social order founded on reason.

5.3.3 Women's Rights are Human Rights

The idea of women's human rights is the view that women are entitled to equal rights with men because both men and women shared status as human beings. One field of Wollstonecraft's major contribution is her understanding of *human rights*. She developed a rational justification for the idea that women held equal rights alongside men. To her, the idea of rights was not parasitic on any legislation or legalization. They are based on reasoned morality. The full title of Wollstonecraft's book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, makes clear that her approach takes human rights well beyond the limits of legal action and invokes political and moral engagement.

The *Rights of Woman* proposed a model of what we would now call "equality" or "liberal" feminism. Grounded on the affirmation of universal human rights endorsed by such Enlightenment thinkers as *Voltaire*, *Rousseau*, and *John Locke*, Wollstonecraft argued that females are in all the most important aspects the same as males, possessing the same souls, the same mental capacities, and thus the same human rights. Therefore, women's rights are human rights.

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft comprehensively treated the questions of why and how the sexes should have equal rights in all domains of human life.

5.3.4 Significance of the *Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft's *Right of Woman* has become a standard text for feminist political philosophy, and has become important and influential in this field. By the early 20th century, the *Rights of Woman* would come to be considered as one of the earliest feminist texts, foregrounding the centuries' long struggle against misogyny and inequality.

Wollstonecraft in this book argued for moral and intellectual autonomy for women, who are "taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the

mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison”.

Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* has inspired many feminist scholars. For example, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a political writer and former Muslim who is critical of Islam in general and its dictates regarding women in particular, cited the *Rights of Woman* in her autobiography *Infidel: My Life* (2007), and wrote that she was “inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft, the pioneering feminist thinker who told women they had the same ability to reason as men did and deserved the same rights.” Amartya Sen draws repeatedly on Wollstonecraft as a political philosopher in *The Idea of Justice* (2009). His article in *Feminist Economics*, titled *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary!*, argues that Wollstonecraft has made significant contributions not only to field of social sciences, but also to the field of feminist philosophy.

This text was generally received well when it was first published in 1792. Her biographer Emily W. Sunstein called it “perhaps the most original book of century”. Wollstonecraft's work had significant impact on advocates for women's rights in the 19th century, particularly the *Seneca Falls Convention of 1848* which was the first women's rights convention in the United States. This convention declared its manifesto “Declaration of Sentiments” which described women's grievances and demands.

The *Rights of Woman* is an extension of Wollstonecraft's arguments in the *Rights of Men*. In the *Rights of Men*, as the title suggests, she is concerned with the rights of particular men (18th century British men) while in the *Rights of Woman*, she is concerned with the rights afforded to “woman”, an abstract category. She does not isolate her argument to 18th century women or British women. The first chapter of the *Rights of Woman* addresses the issue of natural rights and asks who has those inalienable rights and on what grounds. She answered that since natural rights are given by God, for one segment of society to deny them to another segment is a sin. The *Rights of Woman*, thus, engages not only specific events in France and in Britain, but also larger questions raised by political philosophers such as John Locke and J. J. Rousseau.

In her *Rights of Men* and *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's anger is not aimed only at inequities suffered by women; it is directed also at the treatment of other deprived groups of people, for example slaves in the United States and elsewhere. And yet her classic writings are, ultimately, based on a strong appeal to reason.

One of Wollstonecraft's most scathing criticisms in the *Rights of Woman* is against false and excessive sensibility, particularly in women. For her, women who are prey of their senses cannot think rationally. In fact, not only do they do harm to themselves, they also do harm to all of civilization. However, reason and feeling are not independent for Wollstonecraft; rather she believes that they should inform each other.

5.3.5 Some Limitations of the *Rights of Woman*

The *Rights of Woman* is an influential book. However, it is also subjected to some criticisms. For example, some scholars argued that, in the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft does not make the claim for gender equality using the same arguments or the same language that late 19th and 20th century feminists later would. For example, rather than unequivocally stating that men and women are equal, Wollstonecraft contends that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, which means that they are both subject to the same moral law. For Wollstonecraft, men and women are equal in the most important areas of life. While such an idea may not seem revolutionary to 21st century readers, its implications were revolutionary during the 18th century.

However, Wollstonecraft's arguments for equality stand in *contrast* to her statements respecting the superiority of masculine strength and valour. Moreover, she calls on men, rather than women, to initiate the social and political changes she outlines in the *Rights of Woman*. Because women are uneducated, they cannot alter their own situation – men must come to their aid. While the first edition of the *Rights of Woman* attributed a physical superiority to the male, by the end of the second edition, Wollstonecraft had effectively denied the significance and even the necessary existence of male physical superiority.

For scholars may argue that *Rights of Woman* is not radical in nature because of some of the ideas of Wollstonecraft. For example, Wollstonecraft is not a 'job and careers' liberal feminist of the twentieth-century type, not does she challenge the institution of the family or women's traditional responsibilities within it. More than anything, her argument is about the enhancement of women's dignity and sense of self-worth, regardless of job or occupation. However, Wollstonecraft's emphasized the exercise of reason and virtue and women as rational human beings, these doctrines were much more radical at the time than they seem now. By the end of the nineteenth century *Rights of Woman* had achieved recognition as one of the foundation documents of feminism. She declared that both women and men are human beings endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

A feminist and political theorist *Carole Pateman* has suggested that the problem with the arguments of Wollstonecraft, like with those of most other liberal feminists, lies in an underlying dilemma – that of claiming citizenship for women on gender-neutral grounds, while at the same time recognizing their specific qualities and roles within a framework that would allow women to become full citizens only by being like men.

However, despite several criticisms of Wollstonecraft's arguments, it cannot be denied that Wollstonecraft contributed significantly to early feminist thinking. We have to consider Wollstonecraft's time and her personal difficulties while she was writing.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Why did Mary Wollstonecraft call women as rational human beings?

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2. “Mary Wollstonecraft has been considered as early proponent of women’s human rights.” Elucidate this statement.

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5.4 LET US SUM UP

Mary Wollstonecraft was an early feminist scholar and philosopher of the 18th century. Despite many difficulties in her personal life, she successfully managed to achieve a profound place in feminist thinking. She was influenced by French Revolution and its egalitarian principles. When Edmund Burke criticized the French Revolution on various grounds, Wollstonecraft responded to him through her book, *Rights of Men*. It was her first political treatise in which she strongly refuted Burke’s arguments. Wollstonecraft’s second popular political treatise, *Rights of Woman*, became the founding book of feminist philosophy which also inspired many scholars. This book was also Wollstonecraft’s strong response to *Report on Public Education* submitted by Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord to the French National Assembly. Wollstonecraft strongly argued for women’s rights, human rights, and women as rational human beings. Therefore, women should receive a rational education.

Her pioneering contributions to the social sciences in general and to feminist studies in particular deserve fuller recognition. Her insights and arguments have far-reaching relevance and use in contemporary debates on such subjects as human rights, the nature of gender inequality, and feminist philosophy.

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5.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Wollstonecraft is regarded as one of the founding feminist philosophers. Many feminist scholars are influenced and inspired by her life and work.
 - Wollstonecraft was a revolutionary figure in a revolutionary time.
 - She talked about women's educational and moral equality. She also made her intervention in important questions of the 1790s. For example, tyranny, liberty, class, sex, marriage, childrearing, property, prejudice, reason, sentimentality, promises, suicide, and others.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Wollstonecraft was influenced by the French Revolution and its egalitarian principles. Burke criticized the French Revolution in his *Reflections*, and viewed the French Revolution as the violent overthrow of a legitimate government.

- Burke's *Reflections* was an attack on natural rights and a defense of monarchy and aristocracy. Wollstonecraft attacked aristocracy and advocated republicanism.
- Burke argued that legitimate government rests on honored traditions and habits, rather than on individual rights. Wollstonecraft argued that tradition alone cannot guarantee rights; it has to be based on notions of rationality and equality.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Wollstonecraft asserted that women are also human beings who deserve the same fundamental rights as men are enjoying.
 - As human beings, women are rational creatures and, as rational creatures, they must be entitled to the same rights of liberty and self-determination as male rational creatures claim for themselves.
 - She argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they lack education. She suggested that both men and women should be treated as rational beings, and imagined a social order founded on reason.
2. Your answer should highlight following points
 - Wollstonecraft developed a rational justification for the idea that women held equal rights alongside men.
 - To her, the idea of rights was not parasitic on any legislation or legalization. They are based on reasoned morality.
 - She argued that females are in all the most important aspects the same as males, possessing the same souls, the same mental capacities, and thus the same human rights.

UNIT 6 CRITIQUE OF ROUSSEAU'S IDEA OF EDUCATION*

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Idea of Education
 - 6.2.1 Limiting Women's Education to their Functions in Society
 - 6.2.2 Rousseau's Thoughts on Education for Men and Women
- 6.3 Mary Wollstonecraft's Critique of Rousseau's Idea of Education
- 6.4 Mary Wollstonecraft's Idea of Women's Education
 - 6.4.1 Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*
 - 6.4.2 Rational Education for Women
 - 6.4.3 Education for the Self-Respect of Women
 - 6.4.4 Educational Equality for Women
- 6.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.6 References
- 6.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

6.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with Mary Wollstonecraft's educational thoughts, particularly her thoughts on women's education, and her critique of Rousseau's idea of education. Therefore, after reading this unit, you will be able to:

- understand Wollstonecraft's educational thoughts, specifically related to women's education, and
- know Rousseau's thoughts on women's education, and Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau's idea of education

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 5, we have studied about the life, writings, and thoughts of Mary Wollstonecraft. We also studied about Wollstonecraft's two important texts: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Through these texts we studied Wollstonecraft's thoughts on the

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rights of women. It is also important to understand Wollstonecraft's thoughts on women's education. She also contributed significantly to the educational discourse during her time. She expressed her educational thoughts through her various texts. She primarily criticized Rousseau's thoughts on education. In this unit, we will study Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau's idea of education. To begin with, it is important to study Rousseau's idea of education.

6.2 JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU'S IDEA OF EDUCATION

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is one of the most influential political philosophers of the 18th century. His *Discourses on Inequality* (1755) and *The Social Contract* (1762) are considered cornerstones in modern political and social thought. His *Emile, or On Education* (1762) was an educational treatise. Rousseau expressed his thoughts on education in this text. He became celebrated as a theorist of education and child-rearing. However, Rousseau's ideas on education became the subject of criticism for early feminists like Wollstonecraft. In order to understand her profound critique of Rousseau's thoughts on education, it is necessary to study Rousseau's ideas at the outset.

6.2.1 Limiting Women's Education to their functions in Society

The ideas of Rousseau on women – on their nature, their education, and their proper place in the social and political order – are worthy of thorough examination. Rousseau defined women's nature, unlike man's, in terms of her function – that is, her sexual and procreative purpose in life. Therefore, he restricted women to their functions. For Rousseau, men are generally having limitless potential, for rational thought, creativity, and so on. On the other hand, woman's role and her actual and potential abilities are perceived as stunted. Woman's functions are seen as physical and sensual, whereas man's potential is seen as creative and intellectual.

For Rousseau, the function of so-called feminine virtue is to make women pleasing to men and to ensure that women's own needs are subordinated to this end. For some scholars, Rousseau deliberately undermined women's independence.

6.2.2 Rousseau's Thoughts on Education for Men and Women

Rousseau's educational thoughts are reflected in his text *Emile* (1762). *Emile*, in which the ideal education for women is described at length, was claimed by its author to be "the best and most important of all my works", and the one with which one should begin, in order to understand his whole philosophy. His proposals concerning the education of women and his attempts to justify these proposals through an account of woman's "nature", occupy most of book V of *Emile* which is an account of the appropriate education for Sophie, Emile's future

wife and helpmate. In Book V it becomes clear that the concern with equality that preoccupies Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762) and the *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) is a concern with men's equality *only*, as women are specifically excluded from the rights and duties of citizenship. In connection with this, feminist commentators have pointed out how Sophie's education is designed not around her own needs, but around the idea that her role is to be Emile's complement and subordinate: "Nature herself has decreed that woman, both for herself and her children, should be at the mercy of man's judgment... A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man."

It was book V of *Emile*, about half of which is concerned with the rearing and education of the ideal woman, Sophie, which Rousseau claimed to be his favorite part of the work. Rousseau took conservative and reactionary stance on the issue of the position of women. He openly challenged those philosophers who regarded his views about women as old-fashioned prejudice and deceit, maintained by men to protect their patriarchal privileges, and took it upon himself to show that the subordination of women was not the result of mere prejudice or convention, but was part of the natural and necessary order of things.

Rousseau considered a lengthy list of "feminine" qualities to be undeniably natural in women. Shame and modesty, love of finery and adornment, the desire to please and to be polite to others, and skillful shrewdness tending to duplicity – all these characteristics are presented as inborn and instinctive in women. In both *Emile* (1762) and in the *Letter to d'Alembert* (1758), Rousseau asserted that women have a kind of intellect different from and inferior to that of men, and lack the capacity for abstract reasoning and creativity.

Rousseau adopted separate approaches for education of men and women. He made distinctions between it. It is mainly because Rousseau thought that women's nature are different from men's, and that this meant they ought to be educated, both, differently and separately. Whereas Rousseau stipulated two distinct and very different educational systems for boys, depending on whether it was intended to turn them into citizens or into independent and natural men, he set out only one type of education as suitable for women. It did not fit her to be an independent person. What is called the education of the natural woman is a training in modesty, domesticity, and complete submissiveness to prevailing opinion. In this way, Rousseau limited the role of women in society. Her education is totally dictated by her function and by the characteristics considered essential in her life if she is to fulfill it properly.

It is understood from Rousseau's views that he considered the possibility of not giving woman any intellectual education at all, but confining her training solely to "the labors of her sex". He even argued that women should be educated for the pleasure of men. According to him, "The education of the women should always be relative to the men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young, and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable; these are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy."

As far as Rousseau is concerned, men and women have very different natures. Women are not suited for abstract or political thought, and so their reason should not be developed. Their nature is to serve man, to amuse or relax him, so they should learn to obey and to please.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. What are the views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on education for women?

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6.3 MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S CRITIQUE OF ROUSSEAU'S IDEA OF EDUCATION

Wollstonecraft criticized Rousseau's educational and political model which was drafted for women. She pointed out his double morals in his political representational claims. Rousseau's model excluded women from egalitarian participation. But Wollstonecraft defended egalitarian participation of women.

Wollstonecraft responded to Rousseau's argument that women in the present state of society do seem to be less capable of abstract reasoning and creativity than men are. She strongly argued that women's lack of capability in abstract reasoning and creativity is not due to her natural incapacity, but it is primarily due to the kind of education and environment she is receiving.

Wollstonecraft raises some fundamental questions on Rousseau's thoughts. Rousseau claimed that women's equality would subvert the social order. Women's primary function in life is to raise and educate children. Wollstonecraft pointed out that if women are trained to be dependent on men, and required to base their judgments on the authority of men, then they will be incapable of raising and educating children. Therefore, she is trying to argue that the task of education demands independence of judgment. This in turn requires a capacity for reflection and generalization. But the education and social position that Rousseau recommends for women denies them the opportunity of developing these capacities. Furthermore, if women are ignorant of virtue and are themselves subjected to arbitrary authority, how likely is it that they will inculcate virtue in their own children? What is more likely is that they in turn will subject their children to arbitrary authority rather than teach them virtue through the use of reason.

In Wollstonecraft's opinion, the idea that boys and girls need different types of education to fulfill their respective roles was only a justification for male tyranny and an attempt to keep women dependent.

Wollstonecraft not only provided philosophical grounds for her disagreement with Rousseau, but also pointed out that his educational proposals for women will actually undermine his social and political project. Her critique of Rousseau's ideas on education stemmed from her assertion that women are also "human creatures who in common with men are placed on earth to unfold their faculties." However, it must be understood that although the idea of women's education she put forward in the *Rights of Woman* constituted a wholesale rejection of Rousseau's recommendations for the education of girls, it incorporated the education Rousseau designed for men. In other words, even as she appropriated the Enlightenment's philosophy of men's rights for women, she claimed Rousseau's philosophy of the education of boys and men for her own sex. Although Wollstonecraft admired many of Rousseau's thoughts on education, she did *not* share his views on the education of women.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. What are the arguments of Mary Wollstonecraft against Rousseau's ideas of education for women?

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6.4 MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S IDEA OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION

6.4.1 Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (henceforth the *Rights of Woman*) is one of the most influential works of the 18th century. It is considered by many to be one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. The *Rights of Woman* is also considered Wollstonecraft's first political treatise which calls for women and men to be educated equally. In this work, she argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they lack education. She argues that the educational system of her time deliberately trained women to be frivolous and incapable.

Wollstonecraft also argued that women should be given more rights at a time when 'equality' was usually reserved for men. Women are essential to the nation because the primary responsibility of raising children rests on them. Mothers are the primary educators of young children. They can also act as respected "companions" to their husbands.

Wollstonecraft was encouraged to write *Rights of Woman* after reading a French clergyman and leading diplomat *Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord's 1791 report to the French National Assembly*. In 1791, he submitted the Report on Public Education to the French National Assembly as a part of the process of revising the French Constitution. This report only addressed public education for men; and stated that women should only receive a domestic education as sufficient for women. Wollstonecraft was disappointed by such proposals of the report regarding women's education in France. The *Rights of Woman* was a response to this report.

Wollstonecraft not only put forward her broad philosophical arguments, she also suggested a specific plan for national education to counter Talleyrand's educational proposals. In Chapter 12 of the *Rights of Woman*, which was titled *On National Education*, she proposed that children be sent to free day schools as well as given some education at home "inspire a love of home and domestic pleasures." She also proposed that schooling should be co-educational, contending that men and women, whose marriages are "the cement of society," should be "educated after the same model." These were the revolutionary ideas of Wollstonecraft at that time.

Wollstonecraft emphasized the importance of education for women and its relationship with society. Wollstonecraft in her preface of *Rights of Woman* stated that "My main argument is built on this simple principle, that if (woman) 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." She asserted that society will degenerate without educated women.

For Wollstonecraft, "the most perfect education" is "an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attach such habits of virtue as will render it independent."

While commenting upon the limitations that some educational scholars placed upon women, Wollstonecraft wrote, "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison." This implies that such damaging ideology encourages young women to focus their attention on beauty and outward accomplishments. However, women should not be limited to it. They can achieve much more. Women can be the rational "companions" of their husbands. They can even pursue careers of their choice. According to Wollstonecraft, "Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses. And midwifery, decency seems to allot to them... they might, also, study politics... Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue."

In the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft sets herself a *threefold* tasks: to refute the presumption that women are not rational but are slaves to their passions; to show that if the rights of man are extended to females, women's domestic duties will not suffer; and to propose an education and upbringing for women that will sufficiently develop their ability to reason independently so that they will clearly

deserve the same political rights as men. Since women have been denied the very education necessary for the development of reason, it is impossible, she said, to know if they are rational by nature.

6.4.2 Rational Education for Women

One of Wollstonecraft's central arguments in the *Rights of Woman* is that women should be educated in a rational manner to give them the opportunity to contribute to society. In this text, Wollstonecraft responded to those educational and political theorists of the 18th century who believed that women should not receive a rational education. She argued in favour of rational education for women. She suggests that both women and men should be treated as rational beings and imagines a social order founded on reason. She emphasized the education of woman so that, like man, she may exercise reason and virtues. Women are considered as deficient in rationality and quite incapable of abstract thought. She argued against the assumption that women were not rational creatures and were simply slaves to their passions.

She argued that women's education should match their position in society. In the 18th century, it was often assumed by both educational philosophers and conduct book writers that women were incapable of rational or abstract thought. It was believed that women were too vulnerable to sensibility and too fragile to be able to think clearly. Wollstonecraft, along with other female reformers such as *Catharine Macaulay* and *Hester Chapone*, argued that women were indeed capable of rational thought and deserved to be educated. She argued this point in her own conduct book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), in her children's book, *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), as well as in the *Rights of Woman* (1792).

Wollstonecraft attempted to find out the problem of uneducated women, and attributed this problem to men and "a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who (consider) females rather as women than human creatures." According to her, women are capable of rationality; it only appears that they are not, because men have refused to educate them and encouraged them to be frivolous. Wollstonecraft described silly women as "spaniels" and "toys". She argued that this is not because of women's innate deficiency of mind, but rather because men have denied them access to education.

Wollstonecraft criticized female conduct book writers of her time such as *James Fordyce* and *John Gregory* as well as educational philosophers such as Rousseau who argued that a woman does not need a rational education. Rousseau famously argues in *Emile* (1762) that women should be educated for the pleasure of men. Wollstonecraft expressed her discontent with this argument. Therefore, she responded and criticized Rousseau's argument.

Wollstonecraft raised some philosophical discussion while dealing with the rationality of women. She argued that to be a moral individual, one must exercise one's reason. The exercise of reason required, in turn, that knowledge and

understanding be cultivated. An education of the mind is essential for rationality; that is the mark of a truly virtuous person.

Wollstonecraft is considered by many scholars as a true daughter of the Enlightenment. Reason served as the starting point for her political philosophy. As argued by *Jane Roland Martin*, “The originality and profundity of her ideas are to be found not in her Enlightenment philosophy *per se* but in the way she extended the fundamental tenets of that philosophy to women.”

6.4.3 Education for the Self-Respect of Women

For Wollstonecraft, rational and egalitarian education for women is important for their critical thinking and reasoning. She ridiculed prevailing perceptions about women as helpless, charming adornments in the household. She categorically said, “Society had bred “gentle domestic brutes.” For her, education held the key to achieving a sense of self-respect and a new self-image that would enable women to put their capacities to good use. Therefore, Wollstonecraft considered education an important tool for the development and advancement of women.

As we have seen in the last unit, Wollstonecraft was influenced by the French Revolution. Some scholars considered that she was truly a child of the French Revolution. Therefore, she experienced a new age of reason and benevolence. She undertook the task of helping women to achieve a better life, not only for themselves and for their children, but also for their husbands.

6.4.4 Educational Equality for Women

Wollstonecraft was a passionate advocate of educational equality for women. She asserted that women and men should be educated equally. There should not be any discrimination and inequality in providing education to men and women. Wollstonecraft in her *Rights of Woman* argued that the educational system of her time deliberately trained women to be frivolous and incapable. She posited that an educational system that allowed girls the same advantages as boys would result in women who would be not only exceptional wives and mothers, but also capable workers in many professions. Other early feminists during the time of Wollstonecraft had made similar pleas for improved education for women, but Wollstonecraft's work was unique in suggesting that the betterment of women's status be effected through such political change as the *radical* reform of *national* educational systems. She argued that such change would benefit all society.

Wollstonecraft argued that women are not given the opportunity to develop their talents or character through education. They are educated, but they are educated to be adjuncts to men in a world largely conditioned by male values. They are submissive, light-minded, emotional, susceptible to flattery and so on, because they are taught to be. In modern terms, their femininity is socially conditioned. If women could be properly educated, if they could enjoy full civil rights, and if they could be legally independent of their husbands and free to exercise their talents in any capacity they chose, they would be equipped to be full members of society and fit companions for men. She rejected the education in dependency that

Rousseau prescribed. She argued that a woman must be intelligent in her own right.

A keen and vital concern with education, especially the education of girls and women, runs throughout Wollstonecraft's writings and remains a dominant theme to the abrupt end of her career. The title of her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughter* (1787), speaks for itself. It was published by *Joseph Johnson*, a radical publisher. This text was marketed as a book of conduct for women who wanted to be good wives and mothers. Wollstonecraft's most popular work the *Rights of Woman* (1792), begins as a plea for the equal education of women and includes an ambitious and farsighted proposal for a *national schools system*. Both of her novels, *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and the unfinished *Maria* (1798), centrally address the self-education of their heroines while seeking to fill a pedagogical role in relation to their female readers. *Mary* was written as a homage to Rousseau's *Emile*, a novel-like treatise on education in which a tutor follows his student, *Emile* from his infancy to his married life. There are interesting differences between *Mary* and *Emile*. *Mary* the heroine (and Mary Wollstonecraft the writer) are self-taught – they did not benefit from an expensive and free-thinking tutor, but had to scavenge in friends' libraries for knowledge. Rousseau's important argument regarding women's education was that men and women are essentially different, and should be educated each according to their nature. Right from the beginning of her career as a writer, Wollstonecraft disagreed and felt that women need to be educated in the same way as men.

Her work about and for the education of children, *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788) is also important for analysis of her theory of education. In both her conduct book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and her children's book *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), Wollstonecraft emphasized the importance of teaching children to reason, revealing her intellectual debt to the important 17th century educational philosopher *John Locke*.

Wollstonecraft criticized Rousseau and other scholars who regarded women as weak and artificial and not capable of reasoning effectively. She rejected the education in dependency that Rousseau advocated for them in *Emile* (1762).

Wollstonecraft proposed the same type of education for girls as that proposed for boys. She also went a step further and proposed that they should be educated *together* which was even more radical than anything proposed before. The idea of co-educational schooling was not accepted by many educational thinkers of the time. She favoured co-educational day schools, lessons given by informal conversational methods, with lots of physical exercise, both free and organized. She wanted men and women to not only to receive identical educations, but to be educated together. She had a picture of an ideal family where the babies were nourished by an intelligent mother and not sent away to nurses and then to boarding school and fathers were friends to their children rather than tyrants.

She received a haphazard education in what by all accounts were miserable. Her brother received extensive formal education, and became a lawyer. He had also inherited directly from his grandfather a substantial part of the latter's legacy.

Wollstonecraft's sisters and she were only afforded day schools for a few years. Therefore, her individual experience also encouraged her to equality in providing education.

Wollstonecraft believed education could be the salvation of women. She insisted women should be taught serious subjects like reading, writing, arithmetic, botany, natural history, and moral philosophy. She recommended vigorous physical exercise to help stimulate the mind.

Wollstonecraft argued that women are entitled to an education consistent with their position in society. She advocated compulsory education, and encouragement of critical thought and life skills for economic independence of women.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. What are the major contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft to the educational discourse of her time?

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6.5 LET US SUM UP

Mary Wollstonecraft was a revolutionary feminist thinker of 18th century. She not only presented her ideas on rights of women, but she also contributed significantly to the educational discourse of her time. The doctrines proposed by Wollstonecraft were, of course, much more radical at the time than they seem now. Her ideas were converted into concrete political strategies by later feminists. She has long been appreciated as a major political thinker, but she also made important contributions to educational theory and practice. As a political philosopher she carried on discussions and debates with her contemporaries such as *Edmund Burke*, *Thomas Paine* and *Catharine Macaulay* at their levels.

Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) and Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) are both political and educational treatises. Wollstonecraft provided a powerful critique of Rousseau's educational ideas in the *Rights of Woman*. She found Rousseau's ideas on education problematic and thus, raised various philosophical debates. She strongly challenged Rousseau's educational ideas, and argued for rational education in favour of women. She also challenged the assumptions made by various thinkers including Rousseau that women are naturally incapable of abstract reasoning and thinking. She argued that if women are given rational education, they will contribute significantly along with men.

Her emphasis on reason and rationality, and breaking traditional *thinking about the role* of women in society is considered her significant contribution.

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6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Rousseau defined women's nature, unlike man's, in terms of her function – that is, her sexual and procreative purpose in life. Therefore, he restricted women to their functions.
 - He adopted separate approaches for education of men and women. He set out only one type of education as suitable for women.
 - What is called the education of the natural woman is a training in modesty, domesticity, and complete submissiveness to prevailing opinion.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Wollstonecraft strongly argued that women's lack of capability in abstract reasoning and creativity is not due to her natural incapacity but it is primarily due to the kind of education and environment she is receiving.
 - She challenged Rousseau's assumption, and argued that if women are trained to be dependent on men, and required to base their judgments on the authority of men, then they will be incapable of raising and educating children.
 - She also pointed out that Rousseau's educational proposals for women will actually undermine his social and political project.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Wollstonecraft argued that women and men should be educated equally.
 - She not only put forward her broad philosophical arguments, but she also suggested a specific plan for national education.
 - She argued in favour of rational education for women. She suggests that both women and men should be treated as rational beings and imagines a social order founded on reason.
 - For her, education held the key to achieving a sense of self-respect and anew self-image that would enable women to put their capacities to good use.

