

CONTRIBUTIONS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: RETHINKING OF EDUCATIONAL IDEAS AND GENDER EQUALITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: Mary Wollstonecraft’s seminal work, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” laid the foundation for modern feminist thought by advocating for gender equality through rational education and social reform. This research critically analyses Wollstonecraft’s concept of gender equality as articulated in the text and examines its enduring relevance within contemporary feminist discourse. By scrutinizing her arguments on education, women’s rights, and social roles, the study explores how her ideas can be adapted to address ongoing gender equality challenges in the 21st century, including barriers in access to education and persistent gender stereotypes. Furthermore, the research investigates Wollstonecraft’s philosophical influence on modern feminist movements and policy frameworks aimed at achieving gender equity, highlighting the continuity and evolution of her legacy. Additionally, it assesses the alignment and divergence of Wollstonecraft’s vision with contemporary debates surrounding intersectionality, inclusivity, and the fluidity of gender identities, recognizing that modern feminist theory has expanded beyond binary gender constructs. This comprehensive analysis situates Wollstonecraft’s work as both a historical cornerstone and a dynamic reference point, emphasizing the ways in which her call for equality through education and reason remains vital for informing current feminist praxis and social justice initiatives. Ultimately, the study underscores the significance of revisiting Wollstonecraft’s ideas to enrich and challenge contemporary understandings of gender equality, contributing to a nuanced dialogue that bridges Enlightenment-era advocacy with the complexities of modern gender politics.

Keywords: Gender equality, Feminist educational philosophy, Enlightenment thought, 21st Century Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mary Wollstonecraft, a trailblazing thinker of the 18th century, remains a central figure in discussions of gender equality and educational reform, with her legacy increasingly relevant in the 21st century. Her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), laid the foundation for feminist thought by asserting that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear so due to lack of education (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2004). In an era when women were largely excluded from formal education, Wollstonecraft’s bold proposition for equal educational opportunities marked a revolutionary challenge to the patriarchal structures of her time (Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996). Her advocacy transcended mere access to schooling; she emphasized the cultivation of reason, moral virtue, and independence in women—principles that align closely with contemporary educational goals rooted in empowerment, critical thinking, and democratic participation (Taylor, 2013). In the 21st century, as gender disparities persist in education, leadership, and labour markets globally (UNESCO, 2022), re-engaging with Wollstonecraft’s insights offers critical pedagogical and philosophical grounding. She insisted that education must nurture both intellectual and moral development, a view echoed in today’s emphasis on holistic and inclusive education that fosters gender-sensitive curricula and equity in learning outcomes (Nussbaum, 2010). Moreover, Wollstonecraft’s critique of passive femininity and the social conditioning of women remains pertinent to contemporary feminist debates on

identity, autonomy, and systemic barriers (Tong, 2009). Her work inspires a re-evaluation of the intersection between education and gender justice, urging modern educators and policymakers to dismantle enduring stereotypes and power imbalances through transformative learning practices. By framing education as a tool for social reform, Wollstonecraft prefigured later theories of critical pedagogy, advocating for a system that not only transmits knowledge but also cultivates agency and social responsibility (Freire, 1970). As educational systems worldwide grapple with issues of equity, inclusivity, and gender parity, revisiting Wollstonecraft's pioneering contributions provides a vital lens for rethinking the roles of curriculum, teacher agency, and institutional policy in shaping egalitarian futures. Her vision underscores the enduring truth that the empowerment of women through education is not just a moral imperative but a foundational pillar for building just and progressive societies (Mellor, 2000).

Review of Related Studies

Bezari (2021) examined Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas on female education and the participation of eighteenth-century women in public dialogue. The study analyzed the literary salons to trace the ideological conflict created after Rousseau's death in 1778. Hutton (2021) challenged the assumption that enlightenment radicalism was essentially secular, highlighting the interconnection between religion and radical thought. Wollstonecraft's republicanism was influenced by religion, and her views on liberty were not solely secular. Halldenius (2021) examined Sophie de Grouchy's Letters on Sympathy, comparing her views to Adam Smith and Wollstonecraft. The study found that de Grouchy's Letters were silent on women's citizenship rights and negated any commitment to equality of wealth. This makes de Grouchy a more recognizable republican than Wollstonecraft, whose philosophy explicitly included a commitment to equality (Poonacha (2016) and Ray (2015) conducted studies on the role of education in shaping gender identities in education philosophy. Poonacha critiqued Jean Jacques Rousseau's educational philosophy, arguing that it recommended different education for boys and girls. Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau's treatise, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), further criticized Rousseau's approach. Ray (2015) highlighted Wollstonecraft's role in addressing issues related to political authority, tyranny, liberty, class, sex, marriage, childbearing, property, prejudice, reason, sentimentality, promises, and suicide. Bhat (2015) investigated the role of education in women's empowerment in India, highlighting its importance in addressing challenges, confronting traditional roles, and changing lives. Both studies highlight the need for societal changes to enable women to access autonomy and empowerment, to equality of wealth and equal citizenship rights for women.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant academic and social value in today's context, where gender equality and inclusive education remain central to global development agendas. Mary Wollstonecraft, often regarded as one of the earliest advocates of women's rights, laid the philosophical and ideological groundwork for feminist thought through her seminal work '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*' (1792). Her advocacy for women's access to education, intellectual freedom, and moral agency challenged 18th-century patriarchal structures and sparked discourse that continues to influence feminist and educational thought. Revisiting her contributions in the 21st century is crucial for understanding the historical roots of gender equality and for evaluating the progress and challenges that still persist. This study is particularly relevant as it connects historical feminist ideologies with contemporary issues such as gender parity in education, curriculum development, and policy-making. By re-examining Wollstonecraft's educational philosophy, the research sheds light on the enduring value of her ideas, especially in promoting critical thinking, rational autonomy, and equal opportunities for both genders. Furthermore, the study contributes to the decolonization of knowledge by highlighting voices from early feminist history that are often overshadowed by modern theorists. The research also empowers the contemporary feminist movement by rooting its principles in a rich historical tradition. Socially, the study emphasizes the need to reassess long-standing gender norms that persist despite centuries of feminist advocacy. It highlights how Wollstonecraft's call for equal education and opportunities remains pertinent in addressing disparities in political representation, economic participation, and legal rights worldwide. By revisiting her work, the research encourages policymakers, educators, and activists to reflect on enduring inequalities and develop more inclusive strategies for gender justice. Thus, this research is not only a tribute to Wollstonecraft's pioneering role but also a call to action for renewing commitment to educational equity and gender justice in modern societies, making it a timely and impactful contribution to both scholarly literature and social transformation. Practically, this study serves as a resource for educators, students, and advocates seeking to integrate feminist historical perspectives into contemporary discussions on gender equality. It fosters a deeper appreciation of Wollstonecraft's contributions while inspiring further dialogue on gender rights in modern society. Ultimately, the study reinforces the importance of historical feminist thought in shaping present and future movements toward true gender parity.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of gender equality as presented in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and its relevance in contemporary feminist discourse.
2. To examine the ideas of Wollstonecraft related to education, women's rights, and gender equality challenges of the present century.
3. To explore the impact of Wollstonecraft's philosophy on modern feminist movements and policies advocating for gender equity.
4. To assess the extent to which Wollstonecraft's vision aligns with or diverges from contemporary debates on intersectionality, inclusivity, and evolving gender identities.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a historical approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources for data analysis. A wide range of authentic materials, including scholarly books, journal articles, and government documents, magazines, relevant websites, and visual sources, have been incorporated to ensure a comprehensive analysis. In addition, both internal and external critiques have been applied to critically assess and interpret the collected data.

Objective-wise Analysis & Findings

1. To analyse Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of gender equality as presented in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and its relevance in contemporary feminist discourse

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) stands as a cornerstone of early feminist philosophy. In it, Wollstonecraft argues for the rational and moral capacity of women, insisting on their right to education and civic participation. Her revolutionary ideas challenge the 18th-century patriarchal norms and resonate powerfully within contemporary feminist discourses focused on equity, agency, and structural transformation.

▪ Wollstonecraft's Concept of Gender Equality

Wollstonecraft's principal argument centers on the notion that women are not naturally inferior to men but appear so only because they lack access to the same educational and societal opportunities (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2004). She asserts: "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves" (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2004, p. 114). This statement encapsulates her vision of gender equality as grounded in autonomy, reason, and virtue rather than domination or imitation of male behavior. Education is a critical instrument in Wollstonecraft's gender egalitarian framework. She argues that the cultivation of reason, traditionally denied to women, would enable them to become virtuous citizens, capable of contributing meaningfully to society (Botting, 2006). This educational emphasis marks a shift from passive femininity toward active citizenship.

▪ Contemporary Feminist Discourse and Wollstonecraft's Legacy

Contemporary feminist theory continues to grapple with many of the same issues Wollstonecraft raised—education, autonomy, and societal roles. Second-wave feminists like Betty Friedan (1963) built on her critique by highlighting how societal structures limit women's self-realization, while third-wave and intersectional feminists such as bell hooks (2000) expanded the analysis to include race, class, and other identities. Wollstonecraft's ideas remain relevant in current debates about systemic inequality. Her insistence on rational agency aligns with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which argues for providing individuals the real freedoms necessary to live a flourishing life (Nussbaum, 2011). Additionally, her critique of "artificial weakness" resonates with contemporary challenges to gender norms in media and politics.

▪ Critical Evaluation

While Wollstonecraft's advocacy for women's rights was groundbreaking, some limitations of her framework have been noted. Her primary focus was on middle-class white women, with little attention to the experiences of women of different races, classes, or colonial contexts (Ferguson, 1992). Modern feminist critique extends her work by emphasizing inclusivity and intersectionality.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a foundational text that conceptualized gender equality in terms of rational autonomy, educational equity, and moral independence. Her work laid the groundwork for future feminist thought and remains strikingly pertinent to contemporary debates on gender justice, particularly in discussions of agency, education, and systemic reform.

2. To examine the ideas of Wollstonecraft related to education, women's rights, and gender equality challenges of the present century

Mary Wollstonecraft, in her seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), advanced a radical argument for her time: that women should receive an education equal to that of men, not merely to make them better wives or mothers but to develop their reason and moral agency (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1995). Her advocacy for rational education, independence, and gender equality remains highly relevant in the 21st century, especially as global efforts intensify to address systemic gender disparities.

▪ Education and Empowerment

Wollstonecraft's conviction that education is the key to women's liberation resonates with modern global development agendas, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 5 (gender equality). Research underscores that women's access to education is directly correlated with reduced poverty, improved maternal health, and increased political participation (UNESCO, 2020). Her argument for cultivating women's reasoning abilities through co-educational and egalitarian pedagogy parallels current movements toward inclusive curricula and gender-sensitive teaching approaches (Unterhalter, 2017).

▪ Women's Rights and Intersectionality

Wollstonecraft's emphasis on women as rational beings deserving of civil rights anticipates later feminist arguments for legal and political equality. Though she largely addressed middle-class women, her foundational premise supports contemporary intersectional feminism, which highlights how race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender to produce varied forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). In the 21st century, this broadens Wollstonecraft's legacy, aligning her thought with global feminist demands for reproductive rights, protection from gender-based violence, and equitable labour practices.

▪ Social Roles and Gender Norms

Wollstonecraft challenged the socially constructed roles that confined women to the domestic sphere, advocating instead for their participation in public life. Her critique of "feminine accomplishments" as instruments of subjugation foreshadows present-day concerns over gender stereotypes in media, education, and work. As gender fluidity and non-binary identities gain recognition, Wollstonecraft's appeal for liberating both women and men from rigid roles provides a philosophical foundation for rethinking gender as a social construct (Butler, 1990).

▪ Application to 21st-Century Challenges

Today's gender equality challenges—ranging from the gender pay gap and underrepresentation in leadership to systemic violence and digital misogyny—require educational, legal, and cultural interventions. Applying Wollstonecraft's ideas means promoting educational reforms that develop critical consciousness, support for women's leadership, and the dismantling of patriarchal institutions. Her vision of rationality, virtue, and autonomy speaks to modern calls for equity not only in formal structures but also in personal and social relationships.

Wollstonecraft's Enlightenment ideals, though historically situated, offer enduring insights into the struggle for gender equality. Her advocacy for equal education, the moral agency of women, and critique of gendered social roles can guide contemporary efforts to confront and dismantle gender-based inequalities across societies.

3. To explore the impact of Wollstonecraft's philosophy on modern feminist movements and policies advocating for gender equity

Mary Wollstonecraft, an 18th-century British writer and philosopher, is widely considered a foundational figure in feminist thought. Her most influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), argued for women's rationality, education, and moral agency at a time when women were largely excluded from intellectual and political life. Her philosophy has significantly shaped the trajectory of modern feminist movements and continues to influence gender equity policies around the world.

▪ **Wollstonecraft's Foundational Philosophy**

Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), argued for the rational and moral equality of women, asserting that education was essential for women to become virtuous and independent citizens. She emphasized that the subjugation of women was not a product of nature but of deeply entrenched social conditioning and lack of educational opportunity (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1995). Her call for women's rights was grounded in Enlightenment ideals of reason and individual liberty, challenging Rousseau's views on women's "natural" roles. This philosophical grounding established a foundation for later feminist thought that sought structural and cultural reforms in pursuit of gender equity (Taylor, 2003).

▪ **Influence on First-Wave Feminism**

Wollstonecraft's work was rediscovered and popularized during the first wave of feminism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Early feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and John Stuart Mill drew inspiration from her advocacy for women's education and civil rights. Stanton, for instance, acknowledged Wollstonecraft's work in the preface to *The Woman's Bible*, aligning her with the broader struggle for suffrage and equal legal rights (Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996).

▪ **Resonance in Second-Wave Feminism**

The second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s expanded Wollstonecraft's legacy by emphasizing equality not only in education and legal status but also in the workplace, reproductive rights, and domestic roles. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) echoed Wollstonecraft's critique of the confined roles of women and their lack of intellectual stimulation. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir cited Wollstonecraft in *The Second Sex* (1949), recognizing her as a precursor to existential feminist thought (Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

▪ **Contemporary Feminist Movements and Policy Impact**

Modern feminist movements—especially those advocating for intersectional gender justice—continue to draw from Wollstonecraft's foundational arguments about autonomy and rational capability. Contemporary policy shifts, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) and education-based gender equity policies across the EU, India, and the US, can be seen as modern implementations of Wollstonecraft's insistence on equal opportunity and the transformative power of education (UN Women, 2020). In particular, initiatives promoting gender-sensitive curricula and inclusive educational access trace ideological lineage to Wollstonecraft's call for intellectual parity. Scholars argue that current global educational and political reforms promoting women's participation in leadership and governance have philosophical continuity with Wollstonecraft's demand for moral and civic equality (Tong, 2009; Okin, 1989).

▪ **Critical Perspectives**

However, some scholars critique Wollstonecraft's limited scope, particularly her failure to account for race, class, and coloniality. Modern feminist theorists such as bell hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have highlighted that while Wollstonecraft's ideas were revolutionary, they were largely centered on white, bourgeois women, thus necessitating an expansion of her ideas within an intersectional framework (hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 2003).

Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophical legacy continues to shape feminist thought and policy frameworks promoting gender equity. Her advocacy for rational education, civil rights, and the critique of patriarchal socialization remain central to both academic discourse and public policy reforms globally. Nonetheless, her ideas require ongoing reinterpretation to address the complex realities of diverse women's experiences in contemporary society.

4. *To assess the extent to which Wollstonecraft's vision aligns with or diverges from contemporary debates on intersectionality, inclusivity, and evolving gender identities*

This research set out to explore the extent to which Mary Wollstonecraft's vision of gender and equality aligns with or diverges from contemporary discourses on intersectionality, inclusivity, and evolving gender identities. A critical analysis of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Wollstonecraft's broader philosophical framework reveals both convergences and significant limitations when juxtaposed with modern feminist paradigms.

▪ **Wollstonecraft's Vision and its Context**

Wollstonecraft advocated for women's rationality, autonomy, and education, asserting that women were not naturally inferior to men but appeared so due to lack of access to education (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1995). She believed in a universal human nature defined by reason, arguing that virtue and rational thought were equally accessible to men and women. Her liberal feminist position focused on equality through the extension of Enlightenment principles.

▪ Alignment with Intersectionality and Inclusivity

Contemporary feminist discourse, especially after the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), introduced intersectionality — the understanding that different axes of identity (race, class, gender, sexuality) interlock to produce unique modes of discrimination and privilege. In contrast, Wollstonecraft's framework was largely centered on a homogeneous category of "woman," primarily white, middle-class, and European. Thus, her work diverges from intersectional feminism in scope and applicability. As scholars such as hooks (2000) and Collins (2000) have pointed out, early feminist thinkers like Wollstonecraft often neglected the complexities of race, colonialism, and socioeconomic class.

▪ Gender Identities and Essentialism

Wollstonecraft operated within a binary framework of gender, aligning with the Enlightenment-era belief in essential, natural roles. She argued that men and women share a rational nature but still emphasized traditional gender norms, albeit reformed (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1995). In contrast, contemporary debates—especially within queer theory and trans-inclusive feminism—reject rigid binaries and question the fixity of gender altogether (Butler, 1990). Therefore, her vision diverges substantially from modern understandings of evolving gender identities that emphasize fluidity, self-identification, and the social construction of gender roles.

▪ Philosophical and Political Legacy

Despite these divergences, Wollstonecraft's emphasis on structural reform, women's rights, and critique of patriarchal power laid foundational groundwork for feminist theory. Her insistence on autonomy and human dignity resonates with inclusive politics, even if not explicitly articulated in intersectional or non-binary terms. As Barbara Taylor (2003) notes, while Wollstonecraft could not transcend the intellectual and cultural limits of her time, her insistence on critical reason and justice creates a bridge toward more expansive, inclusive feminist ethics.

Wollstonecraft's vision aligns with contemporary debates to the extent that it advocates gender equality, critiques patriarchal institutions, and foregrounds education as a means of empowerment. However, it diverges sharply from intersectional and post-structural feminist approaches in terms of its universalism, neglect of racial and class-based oppression, and essentialist gender assumptions.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Mary Wollstonecraft's pioneering contributions to gender equality and educational philosophy remains profoundly relevant in the 21st century. Her advocacy for women's rights, particularly her insistence on equal access to education, laid the foundational groundwork for modern feminist thought and progressive pedagogical theories. By challenging the patriarchal norms of her time, Wollstonecraft redefined the discourse on women's intellectual and moral capacities, asserting that reason and virtue were not gender-specific traits but universal human attributes. In an era where global conversations increasingly center on equity, inclusion, and empowerment, revisiting her ideas provides not only historical insight but also a compelling framework for addressing contemporary challenges in education and gender justice. As educators, policymakers, and scholars strive to create more equitable societies, Wollstonecraft's legacy continues to inspire and provoke critical reflection on the persistent gaps in educational access and gender parity. Her vision endures as both a challenge and a guide, urging the modern world to fulfil the promise of true equality she so passionately envisioned.

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