Reflections on Chapter 2 of Mary Wollstonecraft’s  
*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*  

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Arguably, Mary Wollstonecraft can be as relevant today as she was in 1792 when she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Her critique of societal norms and the education of women and children was revolutionary when she wrote it, and it still has the capability to be influential today. Why is this the case? Is her work so rich that it can be interpreted across cultures and time, or has society not changed as much as it might seem? Certainly, Wollstonecraft’s writing is interpretively rich and able to speak to many people; however, there are some elements of our contemporary society that might hinder the progress of the feminist movement, of which Wollstonecraft is considered the foremother. I intend to investigate Wollstonecraft’s argument for why men and women are equal in rationality and consider why her criticisms of society might still be applicable today by reflecting on applications to our broader society and, more specifically, the evangelical church. I will also suggest that it is unfortunate that a critique such as Wollstonecraft’s still needs to be applied in contemporary society, but that, if we can understand it in today’s context (and by neglecting it we would be causing injustice and miseducation to go unchallenged), then we should indeed apply her proposals.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is seen by many as a suggestion for the renewal of female education; however, it should also be included in the larger picture of the quest for liberty. Many at the time did not want to give her ideas credibility because they believed that she must have had ulterior motives for trying to overturn the status quo for women. It was thought that no sensible woman would seek to deny her place in society and defy the expectations placed on her unless she had questionable morals. This same criticism has been made of the modern feminist movement, that women are not seeking equality with pure motives, but, rather, that they must have a hidden agenda motivated by anger and jealousy. Since the beginnings and up through the development and continuance of the movement, feminism has been harshly criticized and even dismissed by many for this reason even though its ideal objectives seek to be comprehensive and include everyone. Feminism promotes a system based on radical love and equality instead of patriarchy and domination and attempts to meet the best interest of women and men, adults and children of all races and classes.

During the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s Wollstonecraft’s ideas were embraced and became prominent. Much of her thought laid the theoretical groundwork for this revolutionary movement in the twentieth century. Her strong emphasis on equality was foundational to the development of feminism. She also focused on moral improvement, liberty, sensibility, reason, and duty. Her work was clearly intended to be both theoretical as well as pragmatic, which is perhaps one reason why it has been applicable over several centuries.

The main point of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* seemed to be that miseducation of women was occurring and that needed to be changed. Wollstonecraft saw the education system that was in place as a conspiracy by men to subordinate women and to make them seem less rational and weaker than they actually are. She suggested that the solution to this was to educate women differently than they were being educated. She and her revolutionary contemporaries viewed education as the most essential aspect for causing social change. Also, education was regarded as particularly important in childhood, because during childhood development much of one’s character and the prejudices that one will hold are instituted.

Wollstonecraft argued that, when women are held in subjection to men the way that they were by the rules and norms of society, everyone suffers as a result. Women were told to value temporal and trivial things such as beauty of appearance and being coy. Instead of these fruitless ventures, women should be cultivating their own minds in order to become strong and free. Also, children would be better nurtured if they and the women who taught them were educated. If the place of women must be in the home as nurturers of children, it would be more advantageous to make that the best situation that it could possibly be. In fact, Wollstonecraft suggested that women who had been educated would be able to educate children more thoroughly because they would value honorable things.

This alludes to one of the most essential aspects of feminism: a holistic view of society and concern for future generations. This stands in contrast to other views of liberation that work within the capitalistic system and encourage individual women to rise to the top of the social ladder in competition with men. Wollstonecraft’s idealistic vision can speak to us today and for the future.

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critique our own society for fostering values of domination instead of promoting the education and freedom of all.

Wollstonecraft demanded that young girls be taught about the moral life rather than temporal ambitions such as cultivating physical beauty, softness of temper, and societal propriety.\(^4\) She insisted that everyone has innate rational capacities and potential. However, in the spirit of Locke, she acknowledged that children begin as blank slates, in that they can be taught correctly and virtues can be learned, nurtured, and practiced, or they can be taught incorrectly and indoctrinated with false ideas about themselves and their abilities.\(^5\) Since the latter was what she observed to be the case with women, she concluded that education had to change.

One of her main criticisms of the education system was that women were taught to be modest, in that they were taught which vices they must avoid. However, they were not then subsequently allowed to cultivate the virtues that are the opposite of those vices. They were taught to be submissive and to seek protection instead of fostering gentleness and forbearance. The education of women was thus misleading and incomplete because it only included one aspect of a necessarily two-part sequence. The present system was unfair, and so she insisted upon a system of equality and substance, based upon rationality.\(^6\)

Wollstonecraft often asserted that there is but one life of virtue and that all people should be able to pursue it in order to better themselves. Both women and men are held morally accountable and, thus, both sexes are moral agents. Virtue is an objective concept based upon reason, and so to make female virtue dependent upon and responsive toward men would make virtue itself a subjective concept. She denied any idea of “feminine virtues” and, instead, opted for a complete upheaval of the current female socialization process, particularly beginning with children. One practical suggestion that she made was to allow girls to participate in the same educational and physical activities as boys in order to show that what some referred to as the “natural superiority of man” in areas such as strength was actually exaggerated by the culture, if not completely socially conditioned.\(^7\)

As well as there being one life of virtue, Wollstonecraft asserted that there is one rationality. Reason is an objective toward which individuals strive. However, men are socialized to think that they are the only ones who have rationality. As a result, women are never even given the opportunity to attempt to find whether they do indeed have rational abilities as well. Wollstonecraft’s method sought to uproot prejudice in the thought of others as well as continually reevaluate her own mind. She held to the idea that the rational passions do not justify the world to remain as it is, rather, they call it always to renew and improve its state.\(^8\) The quest for liberty and equality certainly resulted from this.

Wollstonecraft set up an either/or situation: either women truly are moral creatures who are able to cultivate human virtue, or they are to be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men. The current system did not allow for people to determine what the truth was because it did not have the proper structures in place to test the theory. In order to determine whether women were rational or not, they had to be given a chance to exercise their potential reason. To solve the question presented by the either/or, she called for the educational system to be changed and for women to be encouraged to develop rationally and morally. Also, she argued that virtues are not considered relative entities, but rather objective ones. If women are to demonstrate any type of virtue, there must be something about females that is equal to males and based upon the same principles, instead of being inferior.\(^9\)

It is too difficult to know what is socialized behavior and what is natural behavior if women are never given the opportunity to try and if they are only educated within a context of injustice and inequality. Wollstonecraft granted that men seem to be physically stronger than women, but, as mentioned above, perhaps this is because girls are not given the same exercises to do as boys. Perhaps, Wollstonecraft argues, women would prove themselves to be inferior once they were given equal opportunity, but she demonstrated that until this was empirically shown no one had a valid basis upon which to claim that men are superior.\(^10\) Also, to make a normative claim that women should be subordinate to men from the empirical observation that men are generally stronger than women is inappropriate. Unless the norms and expectations of society were changed, Wollstonecraft saw her culture as committing acts of injustice.

Assessing Wollstonecraft’s Arguments

In Wollstonecraft’s time, these suggestions were revolutionary. However, the outcome of the physical strength argument might be detrimental to the feminist project today. Biological differences between the sexes certainly exist, but strength may or may not be one of them. Even if men were empirically proven, as a rule, to be stronger than women, the foundation of equality cannot be based in strength or any other characteristic that certain people tend to exhibit more than others. Biological differences do not provide appropriate justification for the classification of certain groups of human beings’ worth.

Further, a male-preferred society will certainly set the standards of superiority as more favorable towards men. Perhaps today we must question the standards of superiority and revise them to be more inclusive. Men and women are different in many ways, but this fact does not conclude anything about human dignity or worth or the superiority of either sex.

Wollstonecraft also suggested that women should be allowed to be free and independent because that would ultimately prove to be more beneficial in relationships with men. Both sexes should cultivate modesty toward one another. Through education, women would become stronger of mind and, after having achieved and experienced the higher pleasures, perhaps they would be more eager to do necessary tasks diligently. Domestic life is harmed by women who are indolent and vain.\(^11\) The wise and educated woman who is appreciated for who she is instead of what she does will be much more willing and motivated to be a good partner because her true nature will have been acknowledged. Men should treat women as their equals and seek to be friends with their wives rather than subjecting them.\(^12\)
Today, it seems that Wollstonecraft’s suggestions might be taken further to mean that equality entails that men and women share the domestic duties. If both sexes have equally rational natures, then neither should be subjected to the other, nor should there necessarily be defined and rigid social roles.

Wollstonecraft proposed a national school system, which exemplified her concern to combat not only sexism but also classism. This principle can be directly applied to our present society, where there is a need to combine the eradication of racism, classism, and sexism as a whole in order to achieve the equality of all. In theory, feminism can provide a holistic vision containing all of the necessary elements. Feminism must include, not only the issue of sexism, but also the issues of racism and classism. It must involve an international pursuit of equality against injustice or the quest will not work at all. The equality of some is not good enough. If not all women (and men for that matter) are treated equally, then the ideals of feminism will not be achieved.

We must have a global outlook in the issue of feminism in order to include all women of every race, ethnicity, and social class. If only some women are given equality, then the same injustice still exists. Our present situation in a competitive economic society witnesses men and privileged women receiving special treatment instead of just men. We cannot pretend that the equal status of some women with men has brought about the fulfillment of the ideals of the feminist movement. Work still must be done and Wollstonecraft’s ideas might provide help and impetus.

Another way that Wollstonecraft might be applied to our contemporary situation is in relation to certain strains within the evangelical church. The complementarian movement in evangelical Christianity seems to be detrimental to the pursuit that Wollstonecraft outlines in Vindication of the Rights of Woman, because it insists that men and women have innate differences which must play out as having different social and domestic roles.

Recently, I attended a presentation that was titled “Biblical Manhood and Womanhood” in order to understand the world of complementarianism better. The information was shocking to me because of how outdated and repressive it seemed. In the eighteenth century Wollstonecraft had already provided a critique of a theory that is still held today. I discovered that complementarians believe that male headship and female submission are biblical mandates and that a man’s primary responsibility is to provide and protect while a woman’s role is to create a beautiful home and nurture the children. Simply by virtue of one’s sex, a person has a particular societal role. I think that Wollstonecraft would resist these classifications and ways of socializing in favor of a way that could foster rational characteristics and the freedom of knowing one’s own self and developing one’s self by making choices.

Perhaps we can never actually know what the innate differences are between men and women because it is impossible to separate ourselves from our socialization process. However, when a view practically plays out by assuming that we must have certain roles and cannot have others, that is when the argument seems to be used for the potential subjection, domination, and oppression of women. Also, to classify certain characteristics and roles as masculine and feminine can be alienating for women and men who do not fit their own gender’s supposed characteristics.

To those who might argue that women have been given equal opportunities in today’s society and question the value of the feminist movement, I would suggest that the very structures and systems within our society must be evaluated and reconsidered in order to provide authentic equal opportunity for all. For example, many men still believe that it is not their job to do housework. In upper class circles, this problem is solved by the professional woman hiring a maid, nanny, etc. However, lower class women, who typically work the maid and nanny jobs, are then expected by society to hold a full time paying job as well as keep up their own homes. This is not equality, it is systemic oppression. I believe that Wollstonecraft would oppose this form of injustice in our society and call for change.

Mary Wollstonecraft called for a new system of education in her time. The inequality of women and men was promoted by her culture and she countered it by asserting their equality of rationality and virtue. Her thought was revolutionary, but it can still be applied today. Our society is full of injustice, particularly for racial minorities and the poor, and the women in those groups are the ones who struggle the most. The theory and spirit of Wollstonecraft should be understood and used to change the structures of our society that foster a spirit of domination. If we do not educate ourselves to the reality of the experience of many people in our midst, we are doing a great disservice to them and to ourselves, not only pragmatically, but also rationally. It is unfortunate that the state of our society is such that we still need to look to thinkers such as Wollstonecraft for the same criticism that she applied over 200 years ago, but, fortunately enough, we do have resources like her work to help us make changes. And, indeed, changes must be made.

Notes

2. Ibid., 4.
4. Ibid., 26.
5. Ibid., 31.
6. Ibid., 32.
7. Ibid., 33–34.
10. Ibid., section 65.

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