

**Mary Wollstonecraft: Equal Rights and Education**  
**What progress is made since Wollstonecraft's**  
**'A Vindication of the Rights**  
**of Woman'?**

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## Introduction

This essay discusses Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'<sup>1</sup> and in particular her views on gender equality and education. Today her work seems to undergo a revival. This essay attempts to demonstrate the relevance of her work as well as the progress since then.

First Wollstonecraft will be situated in her habitat and epoch, the scenery of the Enlightenment. Next, her already mentioned ground-breaking book is examined, followed by a discussion of her views of rights in the light of the era she lived in as well as today's views on women rights and education.

This essay illustrates that, although much has changed and improved since Wollstonecraft published her substantiation of women's rights and education, there is still room for improvement with regard to these aspects of Human Rights.

## On the Background of Mary Wollstonecraft

Obviously, Mary Wollstonecraft did not live following Kant's deontological theory<sup>2</sup> as she tried to commit suicide by jumping of the Putney Bridge in 1795. Drawing from the excellent podcasts of Philosophize This!,<sup>3</sup> and the extensive description of her life and work in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,<sup>4</sup> a succinct overview of the determinants of Wollstonecraft's life will be given.

Born during the Enlightenment and influenced by contemporaries such as Rousseau, Locke, Voltaire, and Burke, already early in life Wollstonecraft proves to have a lot of strength and protective caring feelings towards others. It is known from her childhood that she was brought up in a miserable family. Her father, who is often drunk, regularly beats her mother to

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman', London, 1792, Reprinted, with Introduction by Miriam Brody Kramnick', (London: Penguin Classics, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Fundering Voor De Metafysica Van De Zeden*, (Boom Koninklijke Uitgevers, 1997), p. 97, Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, transl. by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, *Kant's writings on the web* <<http://eserver.org/philosophy/kant/metaphys-of-morals.txt>> (1785).

Suicide is contradicting the Universal Law. It is a perfect duty: one could not will that everyone would take his/her own life or as Kant states: 'It is asked then simply whether this principle founded on self-love can become a universal law of nature. Now we see at once that a system of nature of which it should be a law to destroy life by means of the very feeling whose special nature it is to impel to the improvement of life would contradict itself and, therefore, could not exist as a system of nature; hence that maxim cannot possibly exist as a universal law of nature and, consequently, would be wholly inconsistent with the supreme principle of all duty'.

<sup>3</sup> Philosophize This!, 'Philosophize This!', in *Episode #065 - Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Philosophize This! (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Sylvana Tomaselli, 'Mary Wollstonecraft', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2020).

death and she regularly tries to save her from him. *L'histoire se répète*: in 1784, she liberates her sister from an equally abusive marriage. A few years later, in 1787, she becomes the governess of a 'high society' family with four children. She recognises the upbringing of upper-class children, which in the context of that time meant that girls were taught how to behave in elite society by drinking cups of tea, embroidering and attending social events. She abhors the fact that women are raised in such a subordinate way and are in fact only supposed to lead a life in which they have to be charming, satisfy their husbands' desires and bear children. Her connotation of women as 'convenient slaves' to their husbands became well-known.<sup>5</sup> Back in London, supported by the liberal publisher Joseph Johnson, she translates German and French text and writes book reviews. Responding to the conservative opinions of Edmund Burke's 'Reflections on the Revolution in France'<sup>6</sup> she publishes 'The vindication of the Rights of Men'.<sup>7</sup> Not much later, disappointed by the rejection of her love Henry Fuseli, she leaves for Paris enthused by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment writers as Rousseau by whom, in the first instance she is very much inspired. There she meets the American Gilbert Imlay with whom she gets her first child, named after her childhood friend Fanny. Although they fake to be married for Mary's safety, this is factually not the case. Ultimately, she leaves Imlay when his interest in her has waned. Moreover, his infidelity is the source of great unhappiness and reason for her suicide attempts. However, members of the so-called 'Society for the Recovery of Persons Apparently Drowned'<sup>8</sup> rescue her. The following year, she meets William Godwin with whom she marries and get a child, Mary, the future author of *Frankenstein*. Mother Mary herself dies in childbirth.

The experiences in her childhood and with inequality, rejections by her lovers, and the prevailing social attitudes in the then class ruled established society, combined with her almost boundless intellectual appetite and strong sense of justice, resulted in many contributions, originals as reviews of moral and aesthetic nature.

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<sup>5</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 7. The whole citation reads: 'They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent'. It appears in the letter to Mr M. Talleyrand-Périgord.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France: And on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event: In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris*, 2nd edn (London: J. Dodsley, 1790).

<sup>7</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France*, (London: Joseph Johnson, 1790).

<sup>8</sup> Nowadays the society is known as the Royal Humane Society. The Royale Humane Society, 'The History of the Society', (London: The Royale Humane Society, 2021). At the time, the Society wanted to save people from apparent death and drowning and promote resuscitation as a new medical technique. Mary Wollstonecraft was also saved from drowning in this way. The foundation still exists today and 'grants awards for acts of bravery in the saving of human life and also for the restoration of life by resuscitation'.

## **Key Themes from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman**

The citations from Wollstonecraft's eloquently written book are illustrative for the most pregnant themes she touches upon. These citations introduce the short summaries of most of the chapters. The most important themes resulting from this synthesis are summed up at the end of this section.

...I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body...<sup>9</sup>

In her introductory chapter, Mary Wollstonecraft sets out what her book will be about: the unequal position of women in relation to men, caused by lack of their proper education. First of all, she asserts, women have to be seen as rational human beings. They should aspire to acquire masculine virtues, i.e. especially those rational faculties and abilities which men obtain by being taught so. Because women lack these and have been taught how to behave as women, to be sweet, submissive, beautiful and to focus on their main goal of life namely marriage and childbearing, they remain slavishly companions to men. She distinguishes between the 'elite', where ladies have nothing else to do than be ladylike, and the middle-class women whose behaviour approaches the most natural state.

In the first chapter Wollstonecraft outlines what human beings distinguishes from other living creatures namely the faculty of reasoning; virtue and knowledge are the logic consequence of the application of reason. As a result, by constant improving this capability individuals obtain happiness and societies are orderly regulated. However, by superimposing some individuals, such as the aristocracy and kings, on entirely arbitrary grounds, not on the basis of reason, feudal power structures are perpetuated. Thus vicious behaviour is tolerated and prolonged. This is contrary to the general themes of the Enlightenment, which preached rational reasoning and progress through this reasoning rather than through tradition (or prejudice). Although at first instance Wollstonecraft appreciated Jean-Jacques Rousseau for his

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<sup>9</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 21.

Enlightened thoughts,<sup>10</sup> in the end she disagreed with his, in her eyes, rather limited vision in particular of women as portrayed in his book *Emile*, or on Education.<sup>11</sup>

If then women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence?<sup>12</sup>

The following chapters deal with the subordination of women and the reasoning behind why they are supposed to be this way and behave this way. Whereas men do get both physical and mental training, hence develop their virtues, women are unable to become virtuous, i.e. to sharpen their senses, shape their temperament and control their passions as they are deprived from similar education. From childhood on they are taught how to behave feminine. Wollstonecraft compares them with young untrained soldiers, who, although able to act as 'disciplined machines',<sup>13</sup> are unable to make reasonable judgements for themselves. Or as she claims, 'both acquire manners before morals', and attain biased ideas about life before obtaining a reflective experience of life and human nature.<sup>14</sup> Referring to The Creation Story as the seemingly still prevailing rationale for why female subordination is self-evident and why women are apparently still expected to please men above all, Wollstonecraft describes how a woman should behave in the society of the time rendering them into 'a coquetish slave'.<sup>15</sup> She then continues and warns that soon the day will come that the husbands they have pleased before get bored of them with all the consequences this entails. Consequently, she questions if passive indolent and obedient women are man's best partners, as clearly, she loathes the subordinate and inferior position of women. She concludes the second chapter with the words '... that as sound politics diffuse liberty, mankind, including woman, will become more wise and virtuous'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rousseau's starting point on how to govern a nation, as described in 'The Social Contract', describes democracy as a form of sovereignty, a form of government. The first phrase of his world-famous treatise reads '*L'homme est né libre, et par tout il est dans les fers*' (translation: Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains), explicating that the population is the Sovereignty, and the government the executor of the democratic social contract. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Le Contrat Social, Ou, Principes Du Droit Politique*, (Paris P. Pourrat Frères, Éditeurs, 1839), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education [1762]*, trans. by Barbara Foxley, M.A. (London & Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons 1921; New York: E.P. Dutton 1921, 1762).

<sup>12</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 53. Slaves mainly of their husbands. She asserts that women should make themselves appreciated by respect, not by indulging into dependency and vulnerability.

<sup>16</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 73.

In chapter three, she goes on to underline that women should strive to acquire the same virtues as men, since, she argues, virtue and knowledge are the same in both. Women should not only be seen as moral beings, but also as rational ones, and thus not be brought up as 'chimeras'<sup>17</sup> or sweet innocent puppets.

In short, women, in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit.<sup>18</sup>

The fourth chapter deals with the systematic humiliation of women, perpetuating their inferior position. Wollstonecraft gives ample examples of how this happens. For instance, women constantly try to be beautiful and lovely, ceaselessly show their fondness for beautiful dresses, and continually coquettish men. She also repeats the aforementioned comparison with the aristocracy or kings who, because of their hereditary position, never bother to acquire virtues, just like the abovementioned women who spend their lives in pleasantries. As an illustration, she also talks about the practice of polygamy in countries where women are in the majority and men use this 'surplus' as a good excuse for their polygamy. By allowing, accepting and/or even going along with their subordinate treatment, women will be permanently degraded.

I do not mean to allude to all the writers who have written on the subject of female manners - it would, in fact, be only beating over the old ground...<sup>19</sup>

Chapter five reflects on the different writers who have written about similar subjects such as women, their behaviour and education of that time. Wollstonecraft's sharp pen criticises in particular the paternalistic and patronising attitude of men towards women. The most vehemently attacked is Rousseau, who will be discussed in more detail later. But also Dr Gregory's account of raising 'daughters', as a *pars pro toto* for women in general, is seen by Wollstonecraft as an argument for keeping women beautiful but stupid. Similarly she refers to female writers such as Baroness De Staël. Although they both pursued the same goal of gender equality and equal citizenship, both authors differed in the way they discussed the position of women. Wollstonecraft mainly emphasises the negative way in which men portray women,

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<sup>17</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Wollstonecraft, p.114.

<sup>19</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 186.

thereby maintaining their subordinate position, whereas De Staël wants to use the female 'softening influence'<sup>20</sup> as a means of bringing about social change.

For it is the right use of reason alone which makes us independent of everything...<sup>21</sup>

Early associations are impacting the formation of character, is the central tenet in the sixth chapter. As women are not educated to recognize and to nuance associations, which are either habitual or instantaneous, they lack the capabilities of men who are able to rationalize these and (re)act virtuously upon them. Hence, rakes are able to impact women's sensibilities whereas reasonable men are less capable to impress them.

Chastity, modesty, public spirit, and all the noble train of virtues, on which social virtue and happiness are built, should be understood and cultivated by all mankind, ...<sup>22</sup>

Chapter seven dwells on modesty as a virtue<sup>23</sup> not to be confounded with humility which is a kind of self-abasement. Since women tend to be more chaste than men and chastity is seen as a result of modesty, women are therefore accorded this virtue. Wollstonecraft questions the relationship of chastity to modesty. In the eighth chapter, she continues to prelude to this and discusses the reputation that women must uphold in order to be considered virtuous. Virtues including chastity and modesty must be pursued by everyone, she argues in this chapter.

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<sup>20</sup> Vanessa Van Puyvelde, 'Dilemmas of Representation: Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine De Staël on the French Revolution and Sexual Difference', (Master, Ghent University, 2019), p. 86. Van Puyvelde has won the Flemish Thesis Prize 2019 with this excellent thesis. In this thesis, she explains how big the gap was between men and women and how much they were excluded from the prevailing social debate at the time of the Enlightenment.

<sup>21</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 222.

<sup>22</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 257.

<sup>23</sup> Modesty is also among Aristotle's eleven states of character. His list of all eleven virtues sums up the following virtues: courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, pride, magnitude, truthfulness, friendliness, modesty, wittiness, and patience. Jacques P. Thiroux and Keith W. Krasemann provide a list with some of these virtues and vices. Jacques P. Thiroux and Keith W. Krasemann, *Ethics: Theory and Practice*, (Harlow, United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited, 2013), p. 67.



...whoever the devil finds idle he will employ.<sup>24</sup>

In the ninth chapter, Wollstonecraft deals with inherited wealth. For, she says, in order to develop faculties properly one must use them, which is equally true of the acquisition of virtues for which you have to fulfil certain duties. Like those who have inherited property, also women dependent on their husbands are as well unable to develop their faculties and virtues. If women would be free from their slavish oppression, could attain their talents and virtues, and men would regard them as equals, women would be better citizens. In short, if there were more equality in society, morality would prevail.

The two consecutive and rather short chapters deal with the duties of parents and children, whereby the former must give their children balanced affection, not tyrannise or corrupt them, and the latter must respect and love their parents. In order to achieve both, the development of faculties and virtues is central again.

...make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives and mothers; that is – if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers.<sup>25</sup>

To this end, Wollstonecraft argues in the extensive twelfth chapter, education must become a national affair and thus a reform is needed. She asserts that education should be both private and public as the combination of both provides the biggest advantages. Private education will permit children to receive the warmth and care of their parents; public schooling permits them to socialize with other kids, boys and girls, to experience differences, to overcome fears, to share joys. Only then, built on rationality, will morality flourish, and true dignity and human happiness occur equally for both men and women.

After this fairly detailed account of the main themes that Wollstonecraft put forward in her seminal book, they can be briefly summarised: gender, morality, sexism, and education. Two of these key subjects, namely gender and education, will be discussed in more detail.

### **Education and gender**

In Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' gender and education are intrinsically entangled and it would be complicated to disentangle these topics in relation to

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<sup>24</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 259.

<sup>25</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 329.

gender equality and equal opportunities. However, the subject of gender goes beyond being seen as a rational creature, having moral standing, and obtaining the right to education. While the subject of education as an elevating mechanism goes beyond gender equality in terms of equal opportunities. Nonetheless, both are also intrinsically linked to human rights, as will become clear at the end of this essay.

## **Gender**

Much is written about gender inequality. Its nature and origins are complex and multifaceted and it would be impossible to view the subject from one single perspective. It is a well-known fact that the ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, seen as the founding fathers of philosophy and still highly esteemed today for their phenomenal contributions to philosophy, saw not only slaves but also women as subordinates.<sup>26</sup>

With a few exceptions, it is only during the Enlightenment that the position and rights of women are seriously discussed. Of course Mary Wollstonecraft did so and that is one of the main reasons that she is generally acknowledged to be the first Feminist. The work of John Stuart Mill is also pioneering in this respect and especially his 'The Subjection of Women' illustrate his liberal thoughts on gender equality.<sup>27</sup> However, they were among the rare exceptions. As Van Puyvelde states in her aforementioned thesis, there was still a huge gap between rhetoric and reality in the 'human rights' debate of the politicians of the time, who excluded a large part of the population, namely women, from this debate.<sup>28</sup> It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century, though, that significant changes can be observed. In the light of this essay, it is not possible to give a complete overview of these changes because, among other things, they did not take place everywhere at the same time, nor were they equally pervasive. To this day, differences exist as a result of different beliefs in culture, ethnicity, nationality, politics and/or religion.

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<sup>26</sup> Caution must be exercised here. It seems that Plato must have been somewhat more 'liberal' in his views than Aristotle, for the former believes that women should still be able to hold the highest office, that of guardian, and receive education. At the same time, Plato also thinks that women are physically, as well as intellectually, weaker than men. Apart from the excellent thesis written by Marije Derksen, Marije Derksen, 'Plato over Vrouwen Tegenstrijdigheden in De Genderfilosofie Van De Staat, Wetten En Timaeus', (Bachelor, Radboud University Nijmegen, 2015), also Anthony Kenny refers to the position of women as viewed by Plato. Anthony Kenny, 'An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy', (Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2019), p. 43. Christopher Shields also recognises the difference between the two Greek philosophers when it comes to women, as do many others who are not all mentioned here. Catherine Legg and Christopher Hookway, 'Pragmatism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2021).

<sup>27</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, (London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green & Co, 1869).

<sup>28</sup> Van Puyvelde.

Feminism may provide a good insight into how women's rights or gender equality have developed over time. The four 'big' Feminist movements will be distinguished here.<sup>29</sup> Firstly, the suffragette movement, which had as a core theme one of the most well-known aspects of inequality between men and women, namely the fact that women were not allowed to vote. The movement starts around the mid-nineteenth century in the United States and quickly spreads out over the world.<sup>30</sup> Apart from the right to vote, women strive to obtain economic and political equality. It will last more than hundred years before women all over the world have obtained the right to vote.<sup>31</sup>

After the success of suffrage, Feminism seems to have lost its importance. There are still feminist groups here and there, but they do not bring about major social changes. Time is not favourable either. At the end of the roaring twenties, the world falls into a worldwide malaise. First there is the Great Depression,<sup>32</sup> which started in the United States but causes an (economic) disaster all over the world. Then the Second World War broke out. From the ruins of the atrocities of the Second World War, the first Universal Declaration of Human Rights would eventually emerge (more on this later). While the First Feminist Wave was mainly, though not exclusively, triggered by the rise of abolitionism, the Second Wave of Feminism was provoked by the Civil Rights movement of the sixties and seventies. These were, in any case, the years of unbridled freedom in which the hippie counterculture played a major role, especially with regard to the so-called sexual revolution. Sexual freedom was one of the themes of the second Feminist Wave and of women's emancipation.<sup>33,34</sup>

The two subsequent Feminist Waves followed each other in fairly quick succession. The Third Feminist Wave emerged in the mid-1990s. Generally building on the achievements

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<sup>29</sup> This essay draws on the clear exposition of the four waves of Feminism provided by the Britannica Encyclopaedia. Elinor Burkett and Laura Brunell, 'Feminism', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (2021).

<sup>30</sup> Future Learn, 'A Brief History of Gender (in)Equality', in *Future Learn*, (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2021) <<https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/understanding-gender-inequality/0/steps/66837> [Accessed 23 April 2021]. This website and platform is run by Exeter University provides a quick overview of the main historical development on suffrage.

<sup>31</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 'Women in Politics. A World Chronology of the Recognition of Women's Rights to Vote and to Stand for Election', (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2021). <<http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>> [Accessed 23 April 2021]. Although it might look that most European countries were among the first to have female voting rights, it was not until in the early nineties of the last century that in Switzerland voting rights were granted to women. Next to the central government, Switzerland has a system of Cantons (comparable with provinces or regions elsewhere) that have a rather big autonomy. It was the canton Appenzell that as the last Canton allowed women voting rights. It is noteworthy that it was mainly the women themselves who prevented women's suffrage in the canton.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Keeley, *From Crisis to Recovery : The Causes, Course and Consequences of the Great Recession*, (Place of publication not identified: OECD, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> John Anthony Moretta, *The Hippies: A 1960s History*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> William Joseph Rorabaugh, *American Hippies*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

of the Second Wave, which was characterised by greater independence for women, activism focused on female empowerment, self-awareness and success and on breaking down barriers such as the so-called 'glass ceiling'.

The Fourth, though contested by some, Wave of Feminism, started more or less in the second decade of the current century. This Wave is characterised by a great focus on and right to self-preservation, physical safety and body autonomy. Through the use of social media, 'incidents' quickly develop into global events, gaining much more attention and also developing into global movements much faster. Illustrative is the #Me Too movement.<sup>35</sup> Way before it became a widely known and worldwide movement after the sexual harassments of film producer Harvey Weinstein, it started as an organisation who wanted to give marginalized women a voice after sexual violence.<sup>36</sup>

The above concise insight into how the struggle for gender equality and equal rights has evolved since Wollstonecraft first took it seriously raises the question of whether one should be happy or worried? After all, it has been more than two hundred years since she wrote the book and many more years since women came into this earth. Although there is much more to be said about gender, it is necessary to pick up the thread and dive into the second central theme of Wollstonecraft's argument, namely education. What happened to her plea for education for all?

## **Education**

While often praised, Rousseau's ideas on education have also frequently been severely attacked. As said before, Wollstonecraft appreciated Rousseau for his liberal views on equality as described in his *Social Contract*.<sup>37</sup> However, she opposed him strongly on his thoughts on education. Chapter five of her book dwells on this.<sup>38</sup> She loathes his opinion on the differences in what men and women should be taught as expressed in his treatise on *Emilius/Emile*.<sup>39</sup> Sophie, the female counterpart of *Emile*, should be as perfect as the boy. But the perfectness contains different attributes. The boy should have bodily and mental strength. He is a reasonable creature as should strive to ameliorate both strengths in youth and throughout life. Sophie,

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<sup>35</sup> James Taylor, 'About-Me Too Movement', in *Me Too*, (2018). <<https://www.essaytyping.com/me-too-movement/>> [Accessed 23 April 2021].

<sup>36</sup> Alyssa Evans, '# Metoo: A Study on Sexual Assault as Reported in the New York Times', *Occam's Razor*, 8 (2018).

<sup>37</sup> Rousseau.

<sup>38</sup> Wollstonecraft, pp. 145-172.

<sup>39</sup> Rousseau.

however, as woman by nature of bodily weakness, should be weak and passive and render herself agreeable to men as women in general have a greater capacity to please men than the other way around.<sup>40</sup> Following Rousseau this difference leads to the logic consequences that men and women should not be educated similarly.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, he contends that the dependence of men on women is only built on their male desires whereas the dependency of women on men derives from both their desires and their needs.<sup>42</sup>

Although Wollstonecraft strongly disagreed Rousseau's views on the education of men and women, there seemed to be a mutual opinion on the fact that learning should be done amongst and with age-mates, other children. Education is an utterly social interaction, the learning is done with others as well as in private or as Rousseau puts it in 'natural' conditions, i.e. outside school. Over a hundred years later, John Dewey (1859-1952),<sup>43</sup> an American educational reformer and progressive thinker shares the ideas of Rousseau and Wollstonecraft. His views on education, among other things, were ground-breaking: he believed in learning in and out of school, which he described as civil society. Moreover, he is a fervent supporter of other democratising issues such as women's suffrage and, like Wollstonecraft, separates womanhood from the individual and the capacity to think and act, as the following quotation shows:

You think too much of women in terms of sex. Think of them as human individuals for a while, dropping out the sex qualification, and you won't be so sure of some of your generalizations about what they should and shouldn't do.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to his incredible contributions on education and democracy, Dewey has also made a huge contribution to ethics, where, as in his other subjects, he uses his views on interaction and organic learning, and is of the opinion that philosophical principles ought always to be put into practice.<sup>45</sup> He is still regarded as one of the foremost American intellectuals of the last century.

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<sup>40</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 146.

<sup>41</sup> Rousseau plainly states: 'A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young. The further we depart from this principle, the further we shall be from our goal, and all our precepts will fail to secure her happiness or our own'. Rousseau, p. 291.

<sup>42</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 148.

<sup>43</sup> David Hildebrand, 'John Dewey', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Reserach Lab, Stanford University, 2018).

<sup>44</sup> Jane S. Upin, 'Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Instrumentalism Beyond Dewey', *Hypatia*, 8 (1993), p.52.

<sup>45</sup> Hildebrand.

As a contemporary of Dewey, Charlotte Perkins Gilman<sup>46</sup> endorsed Dewey's views on the need to transform the environment to foster social progress.<sup>47</sup> She shared his ideas on what today would be called 'learning by doing', or learning in the everyday. Both Dewey and Gilman saw the home as the place where children learn moral norms. But despite this seemingly similar view, they also differed greatly in their ideas on education. Dewey saw it as the father's rather than the mother's task and responsibility to educate children intellectually and morally. Gilman was of the opinion that in order to obtain a moral compass, both indoor, or parental education, and outdoor education or socialisation were necessary. At the root of this difference in views on education were their different views on the position of women. Dewey held to conventional ideas of the woman as the manager of the household. Gilman, on the other hand, believed that women should be (economically) independent and not exclusively occupied with housework and child rearing.<sup>48</sup> This female ideal of independence corresponds to that of Wollstonecraft, as the latter articulated it in the ninth chapter of her book.

Taking a leap forward in time, another philosopher of more recent date, Martha Nussbaum, also praises Rousseau for his views on child rearing. She dwells on his notion of the 'tyrannical child' who, in his helplessness and vulnerability, involuntarily forces his parents into slavery.<sup>49</sup> It is the nurturing process, socialization and internalization of the things that children learn in the course of their upbringing that helps them develop social awareness. For Nussbaum the essence and necessity of education as a means of elevation / emancipation machine is beyond dispute. But, she argues, and here seems to be a similarity with the ideas of both Dewey and Gilman, children should not only be educated for a life in today's economically oriented society. They need to be educated in the ethics, in humanities: to be able to think critically, reflectively and autonomously, to act empathetically and compassionately, to think inventively and creatively. Like these earlier pragmatist authors, she propagates the Socratic

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<sup>46</sup> Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Charlotte Perkins Gilman', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, ed. by Editors of Encyclopaedia (2021). <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charlotte-Perkins-Gilman>> [Accessed 23 April 2021]. In the encyclopaedia's description of Perkins Gilman's life, there are some striking resemblances between her life and Wollstonecraft's.

<sup>47</sup> Legg and Hookway. Both Dewey and Gilman are seen as pragmatists, a philosophical tradition which has as its epistemological starting point that the world can be known by reason and experience.

<sup>48</sup> Upin. Upin's article briefly sets out the similarities and differences between Dewey and Perkins Gilman. Moreover, it also makes their mutual support and conviction for women's suffrage obvious.

<sup>49</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Niet voor de Winst. Waarom de Democratie de Geesteswetenschappen nodig heeft*, (Amsterdam: Ambo, 2011). Chapter 3. In this chapter she also discusses Freud's 'infantile omnipotence' and his famous reference to 'His Majesty the Baby' in On Narcissism, in which she describes that children are primarily concerned with themselves and secondarily with those who provide them with their basic needs.

teaching method.<sup>50</sup> In short, Nussbaum sees education and philosophical knowledge or understanding as important for the formation of democratic citizenship.

While the emphasis in this section has not been specifically on the empowerment or emancipation of women, it is clear that education does or has done that for women. This part shows that this is true for every other human being. Moreover, this section makes clear that the formation of human beings into reasonable, critical, virtuous, empathic, and social beings requires an investment in time and context. Something that Aristotle already advocated: only after death can one judge whether a virtuous life has been led and whether the highest goal, *eudaimonia*,<sup>51</sup> has been achieved.

## **Human Rights**

'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood',<sup>52</sup> reads the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This is made in 1948, in the aftermath of and built on the smouldering remnants of the Second World War. Apparently, global atrocities on the scale of WWII were required before such a common agreement could be reached. Alison Bisset's book<sup>53</sup> lists in detail all the articles on Human Rights that have been drafted and amended since then.

The issue of gender equality is covered by the very first article as it states that all human beings are equal (in dignity and rights). Education as well is seen as a fundamental human right.

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<sup>50</sup> Nussbaum. Although the whole book is permeated with the usefulness and necessity of humanities in general in order to develop and promote democratic thinking, it is particularly in chapter four that Nussbaum stands by the Socratic teaching method.

<sup>51</sup> *Eudaimonia*, which is commonly translated as 'happiness', which in the Aristotelian meaning can best be described as living a life successfully or as human flourishing, i.e. human beings striving to live well. Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012). Aristotle argued that it is a rational activity to be a good individual, and to substantiate that this is not a goal but a continuous and ongoing process, illustrating this with his famous remark, 'For one swallow does not make a summer...', Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by W.D. Ross (Blacksburg: Virginia Tech, 2001). Book I:7.

<sup>52</sup> Alison Bisset, *Blackstone's International Human Rights Documents*. 12th Edition (Oxford University Press, 2020), p.10.

<sup>53</sup> Bisset.

It is part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>54,55</sup> as well as the more recent Social Development Goals.<sup>56</sup>

Both, equal rights and the right to education, have been topics of attention for many years. Although the UDHR has been in force for a long time, the establishment of equal rights for men and women is not respected throughout the world and women do not have the same opportunities everywhere.<sup>57</sup> Apart from the known societies where there is still a lot of inequality, also in societies which are renowned democratic societies still quite some inequality exists.<sup>58</sup> Countries that violate women's rights are also likely to infringe their rights to education. But as mentioned before, the right to education, or the violation of this right, can be more widespread and affect people other than women. A real-life project, close to the author's heart, will show how education can make a difference.

### **A Real-Life Example**

In the North West of Thailand live various hill tribes, ethnic minorities such as the Karen and the Hmong. These tribes belong to the poorest people in Thailand and are highly marginalised. They live in remote areas, small villages difficult to reach due to the bad dirt roads, especially in the rainy season. The villages have schools which are attended by the village kids. For

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<sup>54</sup> Patrick Hayden, 'The Philosophy of Human Rights', (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2001). Chapter 33 portrays the original Declaration as drafted in 1948. Article 26 deals in particular with the right to education.

<sup>55</sup> Bisset. Bisset's book is a collection of the most important official instruments on Human Rights since 1919 and the updates until the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. It gives a clear overview of all the changes and additions made so far and highlights the developments that have taken place in the field of Human Rights worldwide. It is clearly not a static concept, although the foundation '...recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...' remains unchanged.

<sup>56</sup> United Nations, 'The Sustainable Development Goals ', ed. by United Nations (New York, 2015). Article 4 articulates the right to education: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

<sup>57</sup> Just two of the official sites, referring to gender equality. There are many more other sites and organisations being occupied with a huge variety of issues related to gender equality. It would be going too far to give a list here that would even come close to being complete. UN Women, 'About Un Women', (New York: Un Women, 2021) <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women>> [Accessed 26 April 2021]; Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 'About the Ipu', (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2021) <<https://www.ipu.org/about-us>> [Accessed 26 April 2021].

<sup>58</sup> The author of this essay, wrote an earlier essay on the gender inequality in leadership positions in the Dutch Hotel industry. Angelique Lombarts, 'Female Leadership from an Ethical Perspective', (unpublished essay Dublin City University, 2020). The essay painfully exposes how in a democratic country like the Netherlands there is still an inequality in positions for men and women. Meanwhile, binding quotas for women in boardrooms have been agreed by law and there is a special seat on the Social-Economic Council (SER), the most important advisory body for the government and parliament to advise on matters of gender inequality. Although the Netherlands is not the only country where gender inequality is persistent, it is one of the Western European countries that scores worst in this respect. see SER, 'Diversiteit in de Top. Tijd voor Versnelling', ed. by SER (Den Haag: Sociaal-Economische Raad (SER), 2019).



families not living nearby these villages it is not an option to send their children to these schools: too far away, too bad. The quality of the schools is very poor partly because good teachers do not want to live and work in such remote areas. This is due to the fact that a teacher is not only a teacher but is also responsible for the livelihood and welfare of the children, which means that one is literally working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. In addition, the quality of the buildings and facilities is so poor that living conditions can be described as deplorable, for both for the children and the teachers. Therefore, despite the fact that education is compulsory throughout Thailand, the number of hill tribe children receiving education is very limited. Until 2001, the year Samsara foundation<sup>59</sup> was founded.

The aim of Samsara is to improve the living conditions of the children in the schools so that more children can attend schools and receive an education. In order to achieve this, Samsara invests in building and maintaining schools: dormitories, furnished with beds and bedcovers; canteens with kitchen and kitchen utensils; and water installations. The Thai government provide school buildings, school materials, and teachers. Over the next fifteen years, the mountainous areas of Mae Hong Son province have been provided with boarding schools where parents can safely accommodate their children. The previously illiterate area is slowly turning into an area where children are educated. In addition to the nine mandatory school years, programmes are also started to support continued education of successful students at vocational schools and universities. However, the spin-off is even bigger. The discriminated population groups gain more respect because they become literate. Without education, for example, one cannot become a teacher or a policeman in Thailand. Through education, this is now within the reach of the hill tribes. Moreover, cohesion is emerging: whereas before the different tribes did not support each other, or even had conflicts among themselves, now they are starting to collaborate. Building together the facilities for their kids, a mutual understanding is created. Because Samsara is establishing solid cooperation with the regional and national educational authorities, the position of teachers is strengthened and their chance of promotion to a less remote place is stimulated (as reward after a good performance). The most important long-term goal that has been achieved is that the economic position of these hill tribe groups has improved, as well as their social status, which is slowly bringing them out of marginalisation.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jacob Vossestein, *Getting Children to School. The Story of Samsara: an Efficient and Effective Ngo*, (Zoetermeer: Free Musketeers).

<sup>60</sup> Vossestein, pp 11-12. The main achievements can be divided into two groups, namely the construction programme and the scholarship programme. The first programme has, among other things, provided 77 dormitories for students, 108 for teachers, 103 school canteens 185 clean water installations, and the second programme has provided 800 students with scholarships.

## **Conclusion**

Much has changed since Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'. The right to gender equality is widely recognised. So is the right to education. Yet both rights continue to be flagrantly violated. Sometimes openly, sometimes more secretly. The reasons for this are numerous and not unambiguous. The various Feminist movements indicate that the fight for women's rights is still necessary. In some areas, this concerns fundamental rights similar to those of the First or Second Wave. Elsewhere, these rights have already been achieved, and other issues arise that require attention and renewed combat for rights.

Wollstonecraft's focus on education as an instrument to enable women to act as right-thinking rational beings has not lost any of its appeal today. Education, for all, is a way out of poverty, and towards independence and self-sufficiency. The real-life example of Samsara shows crystal-clear the meaning of education and how it helps to gain an economic and social position in society, how to counteract discrimination and marginalisation: to be equal in dignity and rights.

This essay attempts to make clear that gender equality and education are inextricably linked to human rights, which in turn are intrinsically linked to morality. Moral awareness is constitutive for equal dignity and rights, hence moral action. Mary Wollstonecraft was far ahead of her time by exposing these aspects. Unfortunately, ample two hundred and fifty years later, it appears that progress has been made, but that gender equality and the right to education are still far from being self-evident worldwide. Just like acting morally, by the way.

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