

Nature versus nurture in mary wollstonecraft



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The centuries-long debate over the influence of nature versus nurture is not only a prominent theme in psychology, but also the historic roots of modern day feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft, mother of famous author Mary Shelly and wife of prominent anarchist William Godwin, was also the first liberal feminist theorist to propose that women should be regarded on equal footing as men. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft asserts that if a woman is not prepared by education to become the companion of man or a competent mother, she will impede the progress of knowledge and virtue in society. This paper will first establish the context of Wollstonecraft's nature versus nurture argument and then use a contractarian model of analysis to identify some of the merits and demerits of the old and new social contract dictating marriage and family rights. Maintaining that gendered behavior was a learned experience rather than a natural occurrence, she proposes a model of marriage as friendship that holds certain expectations for both men and women to mollify arbitrary power dynamics within the domestic and social sphere. Further, these expectations are manifested in the form of duties that promote equality in the family and are mutually agreed upon in a reformed social contract. This paper will argue with reference to Mary Wollstonecraft that while the state of nature sets the foundation for gender inequality, it is nurture from a flawed social contract that perpetuates gender distinctions. Further, it will examine Wollstonecraft's newly proposed contract for its beneficial efforts to overcome blind submission, untapped potential, and arbitrary power as well as its potential shortcomings in addressing sexual desire and the dilemma of motherhood.

Wollstonecraft asserts that the distinction between genders is a socially created phenomenon that can be overcome by adopting a new social contract that promotes marriage as a friendship. As Wollstonecraft indicates, men and women “ must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in.”[1] Indeed, the social norm at the time of Wollstonecraft’s writing was for women to be raised to be married to and economically dependent on men. And upon marriage, often relegated to menial household tasks. That is to say, girls are usually assigned the role of “ gate-keepers” or “ homemakers” and men the “ breadwinners” in society. The division of labour was originally viewed as efficient, with men better suited for hunting and warfare, and women better suited for gathering, cooking, and caring for children near camps. Moreover, roots of patriarchy based on physical barriers were further consolidated with the growth of industry and mining under industrial capitalism, with women’s weaker frames deemed inappropriate for heavy lifting. However, these social roles are also dependent on social and economic contexts. For example, few denied women’s ability to contribute to the war effort in factories during WWI and WWII, yet once total war ended women were encouraged to return to their domestic roles so that men could resume their ‘ natural’ employment patterns. Hence, while biological factors from ‘ nature’ may set the foundations, social and historic forces under ‘ nurture’ often have greater influence in determining the outcome of this inequality.

Embedded within Wollstonecraft’s new social contract is the idea that women are not mentally inferior to men, but have equal rational potential that has not yet been realized. Wollstonecraft argues that because “

knowledge of the two sexes should be the same in nature” women should not be treated as half beings but instead educated by the same means as men to achieve their full potential.[2] As Laura Brace notes, the old social contract under Rousseau offered women protection in return for obedience. [3] Yet, Wollstonecraft counters Rousseau’s idea that men were born with a degree of perfection in mind, by noting early debauchery in society as well as the weakness and caprice of men who are inundated by flattery and ego service often required of women. She notes, “ if the blind lead the blind, one need not come from heaven to tell us the consequence.”[4] That is to say, the tendency for women to degrade themselves and act like they are in need of protection, all while offering unconditional support and adulation for men leaves humankind in not only a childish, but also dangerous state. Thus, similar to the divine right of kings, the “ divine right of husbands” should also be challenged to promote a return to equality.[5] While gender inequality was an appropriate solution for problems at the time of its inception in the Bronze Age, it is no longer relevant to our times. However, the gender division of labour persists in modern societies due to the socialization of ideas about certain roles and employment most appropriate for men and women. This can be seen through the concentration of women in personal service or “ caring” industries, with jobs as nurses, maids, teachers and personal secretaries, while men are more likely to be doctors, managers, professors, or higher level executives. Meanwhile, Wollstonecraft offers a forward looking solution to overcome structural inequalities through the marriage as friendship model, which emphasizes equality, free choice, reason, mutual respect and concern for the other’s morality.[6] This new social contract promotes a certain degree of interdependence that deepens

bonds through the appreciation of one another's character and individuality, thus favouring integration and social progress.

Both sides stand to benefit from the new social contract as it promotes a sense of stability by limiting the pursuit of arbitrary power. Wollstonecraft explains that, " Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison." [7] Women's education comprised of training in the art of pleasing, yet with the goal of seeking attention and admiration from men, they become " alluring mistresses" instead of " affectionate wives and rational mothers." [8] This emphasis on appearances and games not only promotes infidelity due to the transient nature of looks and habit of flirting, but also poor mothers who feel the tendency to compete with their daughters once their beauty is jaded and feelings of insecurity takes over. Strict gender roles under the previous social contract neither supported the right conditions for women to carry out their duties as educators nor serve in their family's best interests. As Ruth Abbey summarizes, when they are " refused power in any larger sense, women become tyrants in small matters." [9] That is to say, because women aren't permitted legitimate rights, they are forced to obtain power indirectly through illegitimate avenues such as deception and seduction. Hence, when women are taught to value beauty over smarts, they are unable pass down rationality to the next generation. Husbands are also disadvantaged in this arrangement as they are unable to find common topics with their spouse, thereby widening the gap and increasing the likelihood of an unhappy marriage. [10] However, if men and women were to marry by choice and for companionship, there

should be fewer affairs, as husbands are more likely to be at home and serve as better fathers to their children. Hence, Wollstonecraft's new social contract underscores the importance for women to be educated in a way that prepares them to carry out educative duties as parents and allow them to cooperate with men in this role. By changing the definition of a good wife, good mother and good daughter, not only will the family prosper but also society at large.

Although the liberal notion of equality is promoted within the new social contract to allow both men and women to reach their full potential in public and private domains, Wollstonecraft's new social contract fails to account for the passion between male-female relationships and the dilemma of motherhood. While Rousseau believes love should be the foundation of marriage and family life, Wollstonecraft believes that love is too fleeting and emphasizes the importance of friendship in reaching equality and a mature relationship between married partners.[11] However, Wollstonecraft fails to fully address corporal intimacy and sexual desire in her marriage as friendship solution, this is largely due to the fact that the higher friendship she envisioned was in the image of a relationship "traditionally thought of as existing between men only." [12] That being said, she does not completely ignore or shun the sexual dimension of personality but simply advocates moderation to focus on fulfilling familial duties. Thus, Wollstonecraft assumes priorities in the social contract between men and women by picturing marriage as an arrangement that allows love to drop to a healthy lukewarm temperature. Hence, there are some rights that must be given up in promotion of the greater good, that is to say, strong feelings of affection.

Still, some may argue that the co-existence between friendship and sexual desire is difficult, especially when humans are more driven by desires than rationality in the pursuit of companionship. Moreover, society has not yet evolved to favour level-headedness and long-term planning in lieu of short-term passion and stimulus. As Abbey rightly observes, had Wollstonecraft not died while giving birth to Mary Shelley, her continued marriage with William Godwin might have been able to offer deeper insights and reflections on the place of sexuality in friendly marriages.[13] However, a noticeable flaw still exists in Wollstonecraft's newly proposed social contract of equality, and that is the gap between equality and difference that drives Carole Pateman's description of Wollstonecraft's Dilemma.[14] In essence, Wollstonecraft's dilemma is the double-edged argument that women must be granted rights of humanity to then fulfill traditionally feminine duties of motherhood. However, assuming women's biological destiny and natural calling to motherhood risks confining them to the private sphere. This is an issue unaddressed by Wollstonecraft that reverberates in modern debates over work-life balance and the timing of marriage and childbirth. Thus, there exist both physical and psychological barriers in the attempt to bridge feminist rights and motherhood. While society should make women capable of fulfilling the role of motherhood through equal opportunity, men also have an obligation to marriage and fatherhood. However, workplace representation, the glass ceiling and gender wage gap are indicators that women still cannot have the best of both worlds, and subsequently men too. Hence, barriers between the public and private sphere are often borne by nature, but engrained by nurture.

Wollstonecraft's ideas about nature versus nurture and gender embody a very modern sense of gender identity for her time. She was one of the first to suggest the extension of the social contract into the private sphere by highlighting the idea that everyone is born equal, and that oppression from one's environment is what creates inequality. Under the old social contract of patriarchy, women were not only required to be dependent on men but also beautiful and emotionally vulnerable. Moreover, Wollstonecraft highlights the need for a change to women's education for dependence by uncovering the thoughtlessness behind submitting to the will of another fallible being as well as the inevitability of arbitrary power relations on both sides. Nevertheless, because men and women create social contracts out of self-interest, redefining those interests leaves considerable room for reform to the original agreement. In other words, what we value, is ultimately up to us. As liberal values of freedom, reason, and consent diffuse, women will be able to overcome their subordinate positions and achieve equality and independence in the household. Additionally, friendship based on choice, complementarity, mutual respect and concern for the other's character will not only help wives but also husbands in fulfilling their duties of a stable and happy marriage as well as education of the next generation. Not only does Wollstonecraft note the false dichotomy between nature and nurture, she devises a new interpretation of gender relations and identity to aid both men and women in reaching their full potentials. Ultimately, Wollstonecraft's work is fundamental in highlighting the importance of addressing the political nature of family relations before liberal political theory may progress.

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[1] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 21. [2]

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[7] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 39. [8] *Ibid.*, 10. [9]

Abbey, "Back to the Future: Marriage as Friendship," 86. [10] *Ibid.*, 82. [11]

Ibid., 85. [12] *Ibid.*, 87. [13] *Ibid.*, 88. [14] Brace, "Not Empire, but Equality," 436.