

# The ideas of mary wollstonecraft

[People](#)



Mary Wollstonecraft has been seen to be the founder of feminism, with radical ideas in terms of education, marriage and female emancipation. However it is necessary to consider what shaped those ideas, which lead to the emergence of feminism. It is necessary to consider what circumstances events and ideas circulating at the time influenced the political thoughts of Mary Wollstonecraft. In order to understand what formed the basis of Mary's thoughts we will need to identify their thoughts in the context of a number of factors.

Mary's ideas could be regarded as liberal feminism. Her ideas focused mainly around the individual woman and her rights. Her proposals were mainly for women's equality with men. Mary believed women should be treated like men and placed a lot of focus around women's education as being inferior to men's when in fact women were as intellectual as men and therefore should have a more equal education. Her reasoning for this was based around the idea that women need to be well educated to be successful mothers.

Mary also emphasized in her writing the need for sexual freedom and argued how marriage could be dangerous to women as it leads to further oppression. Equality was needed in domestic relationships. However although initially her focus was on equality for women it eventually shifted to equality of humanity. It needs to be contemplated that there are a number of influences in the ideas outlined above these include Mary's own personal experiences, social change and other events occurring at that time.

Many people suggest that Mary's political views are 'grounded in experience'; her personal life explains much about her proposals for

women's equality, education, marriage and humanity. 1 Mary had a very varied background, she moved house six times in total with each time representing a downward social and economic mobility. This gave her insight into in to regional, class and gender divisions of eighteenth century Britain, enabling Mary to perceive class inequalities in society, and campaign for equality of every class rather than just women.

In addition to this it could also be argued that another way in which her personal experiences shaped her views on class inequalities was working for the Kingsborough's, which allowed her to observe the lives of an affluent aristocratic family compared to the lower classes. This shaped her political thought in terms of her "resentment of the power and emptiness of privileged lives" 2 and the injustice faced by the working classes.

However it could be argued that Mary Wollstonecraft ideas were centred round achieving equality for middleclass women as much of her work is focused on how disadvantaged so called ladies of leisure are in having mere existences rather than equality faced by working class men and women.

Mary still regarded women's domestic role as acceptable she believed women should still have the role of caring for children, family and other domestic duties; "mothers should stay at home and care for their children".

3 It could be argued that this was because of the role she had to play in regards to her position in the family.

For example, Mary had to leave her job as a lady's companion in 1781 to go back home to nurse her mother, which was considered as a female's role in her family. It is evident that her ideas of equal education were actually to

enable women to become better mothers (she still saw women in a domesticated role), which could have stemmed from experience in her family of having such roles. Conversely it could be considered that her ideas for women still looking after children could be due to the values of society at the present time.

A great deal of Mary's political thought was based around the education of girls. In her book entitled "Thoughts on the education of daughters" she reflects concern on adequacy of female education. She believed that women were constrained in their education compared with boys and it should therefore be more rational. It could be said that these ideas about the inadequacy of girl's education were based around her experiences of education. Mary attended a local day school for girls. Her school discouraged 'to high notions' and attended to housewifery and morals to make girls such as Mary marriageable.

It could be assumed Mary was an intelligent girl and she found her education "short and inadequate" <sup>3</sup> this may have influenced her view about how inadequate women's education was and pushed her to campaign for reforming women's education. Mary gained knowledge in male dominated areas such as arithmetic, which showed to her that women could be just as capable as having the same knowledge as men. However it could be contended that rather than personal experience influencing her ideas on education her class ideology directed her ideas on reforming education.

This could be shown in Mary's belief of selected education where the mechanically minded children should be placed in separate schools to those

of superior abilities<sup>5</sup>, which was a typical attitude of the middle/upper classes. In her book 'A vindication of the rights of women' Mary highlights her views on the subordination of women in society. Mary argues against the social forces that keep women ignorant and the superficiality they are encouraged to engage in<sup>6</sup>this enables men to remain dominant over women as women become physically and economically dependant on men.

Mary believed that women needed freedom as they were being dominated by male patriarchy and in this sense were open to abuse by males. It seems apparent that the above ideas and assertions on male abuse and dominance of women stemmed from her own life experiences and those of her female relations as she witnessed male abuse to family around her; As a young girl Mary used to be subjected to witnessing her fathers drunkenviolenceagainst her mother. By viewing her mothers abuse and helplessness Mary came to realise the lack of protection available to women.

Her past experiences of her and her family may have also influenced her views on relations with males including marriage. In a letter to George Blood in 1789 Mary describes marriage as " legal prostitution" <sup>6</sup>. Mary had witnessed cruelty of men to her mother, sister and friend fanny in their marriages. She believed that her sister condition of illhealthwas due to the mistreatment of her husband; she took steps to help Eliza arrange legal separation. " On three different occasions Mary did see the lives of women ruined by cruel dissipated, husbands" (Bouten 1922: 131).

Witnessing the abuse faced by three people close to her in their marriages may have guided her ideas on marriage which she regarded as slavery and

influenced her decision not to marry through most of her life. Alternatively it could be said that her ideas arose from the laws of society at the time, as there was little recourse from the victims of abuse. The laws also gave rights to the husband and took them away from women at the same time in the procedure of marriage. The norms of society may have therefore informed Mary's political thought as it made obvious inequalities in marriage and the dominance of women.

There were some aspects of feminism that Wollstonecraft didn't consider such as legal property rights of women and voting rights. This may be due to her not experiencing these issues in her life, which further confirms her ideas were based around her personal experiences. However it has to be considered that her personal experience was not the only factor contributing to her political thought. In the 18th Century Mary was subjected to experiencing and participating in a series of social revolutions both in Britain and in France.

One was enlightenment, which put reason as the focus of human identity and as the main justification of rights. <sup>7</sup> This may have influenced Mary's political ideas as she based her argument for equal rights on the fact that both men and women had the same human identity, which echoes the ideas of enlightenment. Britain was also experiencing rapid change with the industrial revolution. These rapid periods of change may have influenced Mary to challenge the existing social order regarding the position of women as traditional institutions and conceptions were being outgrown; " The time was ripe for an intellectual questioning of society" <sup>8</sup>.

Although Wollstonecraft's feminist thought went against the traditional ideas of sexual opinion reflected in 18th century Britain, it could be argued that her political ideas actually reflected the spirit of innovation around at the time; " the century prior to the rights of women had seen a steady flow of writings by enlightened literati of both sexes arguing for higher valuation of woman's characters and an enhancement of female intellect and status".

In which case it could be said that Mary's political thought was informed by changes in society. It also has to be considered that the late eighteenth century there was an expansion in literature as a profession for women. 9 This may have encouraged the thoughts of Mary's, which may have developed due to her writing. It is possible that the French Revolution that begun in 1789 with its struggle for social justice also influenced her political ideas especially in terms of her ideas on the rights of humanity.

Prior to the French revolution Mary concentrated on the rights and freedom of women, but later on changed her focus towards the rights of humanity as a whole including men, This lead to her considering the rights of women in terms of the rights of men. " Her vindication was that of men but in relation to men, the human race, and the entire human experience" 10. Therefore it could be argued that the revolution influenced the change of Mary's political ideals from concentrating on women to human kind.

On the other hand it could be argued that the French Revolution did not influence Mary's ideas, which were primarily based on equality for women, as the new constitution of France did nothing to remove the inequalities between men and women. Many supporters of social justice in the French

revolution were the most active opponents of women's rights. 11 Religion is another possible factor outside Wollstonecraft's personal experience that may have influenced her political thought. Wollstonecraft believed that education would make women more virtuous.

This could be regarded as one of the reasons for her views on education of girls. Mary believed education would give women the chance to prove in the reality of good and evil and she put her faith in to the goodness of god. 12 Alternatively there is also reason to suggest that Mary Wollstonecraft wasn't religious as she rejected many religious doctrines such as pacifism of Christ. An alternative argument regarding the reasons behind Wollstonecraft's feminist thought is put forward by Freudian Psychiatrists.

They argue the basis of her political thought was due to her hatred of men. " Hers was hatred of creatures that seemed capable of doing everything while women seemed to her capable to her of doing nothing" 13 They therefore argue her feminist thoughts arose out of her illness of being neurotic and compulsive. 7 However it could be argued that Freudian analysis is subjective and therefore has no objective basis for explaining reasoning for Wollstonecraft's political ideas.

Overall it is clear Mary had many painful experiences and experiences of social changes in her life, which helped shape her political views. Therefore it can be attained that personal factors influenced political thought, although it also has to be taken into account that her political thought was also influenced by outside factors such as social change and institutions such as



religion. This coincides with concept of the " personal is political" where the experience of our personal lives are defined by broader political settings.

To feminism personal experience such as that encountered by Mary can be seen as a valid way of knowing the social world and deriving political thought. However it could be argued that the experiences of Mary didn't provide a sufficient claim of truth, as it doesn't necessarily mean that Mary has political insight. Therefore it could be said that this isn't the most objective way to gain an insight into the political sphere of society.