

Theories of feminism essay

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was one of the most prominent pioneers of the feminist movement. In a culture and time where women were consistently considered subservient to men, Wollstonecraft's seminal work *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) proved that women deserved an equal opportunity particularly in education which she saw as a means of liberating women from their secondary and passive positions in society. In many ways, Wollstonecraft was considered a radical idealist because she saw the possibilities for finding a way to reconcile mankind's current situation and an ideal ultimate perfection. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft saw in current educational philosophies a predominantly sexist ideology that reinforced the subjugation of women through prevailing educational thoughts such as those propounded by Jean-Jacque Rousseau who in *Emile* (1762) argued that women should be denied an education or if so should only be educated for purposes of serving men. Thus Wollstonecraft argued that women should be educated in order to break free from such male-dominated discourses that characterised society then. She agreed with prevailing notions about women being passive, helpless, silly and superficial (often referring to them as 'spaniels' and 'toys') but believed this could be changed with education and that women were not innately such. It is the denial to education that has made them 'objects' of men's pleasure.

Furthermore, she saw how the attitudes toward women and demands that they be kept home created a deep sense of frustration that controlled the women's behaviour and treatment of their children and servants. She believed that, with education, women's focus could be diverted to more

productive accomplishments rather than to concentrate on beauty and outward perfection. More importantly, she saw that education could provide women with a new sense of self-respect essential for the proper functioning of society. The renewed sense of self would also allow them to apply themselves effectively in society. Such a proposition, in the 18th century, was considered extremely radical. There are many who believe that there are certainly Marxist leanings in her philosophy but this is of course to argue in retrospect since Marxist ideologies were not yet a prevalent thought. Yet Wollstonecraft demonstrated leanings of such thinking particularly when she argues that this liberal education for women, not just for the men, was something most natural.

In many ways, Wollstonecraft was addressing the dominant middle-class. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she demonstrates a distrust of the aristocracy – a core tenet in Marxist ideology – and seems to embrace a quasi-bourgeois view of the world. Wollstonecraft argued on the basis of an egalitarian social philosophy and the equal rights of all regardless of gender. Yet ironically, as she is much a product of her age, Wollstonecraft was not necessarily a champion for the lower classes and her ‘liberal’ education was not extensively liberal for in her national plan of education, she proposed that, after the age of nine, only those who were exceptional among the poor population be retained with the middle-class educational system. The ‘common’ poor should be separated from the rich and educated in a different school.