Article

Framing Gender Identities in Education Philosophy: Jean Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft

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Abstract

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), one of the most influential thinkers of the 18th century, is well known for his espousal of human rights and freedoms. His ideas on education, described in his part-fictional and part-philosophical treatise *Emile* (1762), has influenced educational philosophies and pedagogic practices for over two centuries. While acknowledging the contributions of his ideas in developing the child-centred approach to education, this paper critiques his educational philosophy on the grounds that he recommended different education for boys and girls. In doing so, the paper draws on Mary Wollstonecraft's (1759–1797) powerful critique of his treatise, expressed in her book *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The paper concludes by pointing out that the dilemma posed by these influential thinkers—on the kind of education suitable for boys and girls—has remained in educational policies. It continues to restrict women's access to education even today. Thus substantive societal changes are required to enable women to access the desired goal of autonomy.

Keywords

Philosophy, education, policy, gender identities, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Mary Wollstonecraft

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Born at a point in history when ideas of human freedoms, individualism and the limits of state power were contentious issues, Jean Jacques Rousseau is one of those influential thinkers whose ideas have shaped modern nation states. His ideas, of natural goodness, individual freedom and the limits of state/social control, have fuelled 19th- and 20th-century struggles for democratic rights across the world. These radical libertarian ideas of the 18th century also influenced 19th-century women's struggles for civil liberties, not just in Europe but also across the Atlantic. Assessing his contribution to the making of modern democratic polity, Beardsley writes:

> Rousseau's impact on his age and the following one is probably far greater than that of any other single writer, and in more than one direction. His fresh way of looking at man and nature and the human community, the eloquence and fascination of his style, his passionate yearning for reform in government and social order, made him the inspiration and to many—the saint—of the [French] Revolution. (1959 reprint 1992, p. 318)

Rousseau was a man of many talents: Like his contemporaries Voltaire and Diderot, he achieved eminence in many fields—literature, political theory, music, morality and education. Elaborating on Rousseau's ideas of human nature, this paper focuses on his educational philosophy and child-rearing practices as delineated in his masterpiece *Emile* (1762). It then juxtaposes the discourse with an 18th-century feminist critique of Rousseau's ideas on education as articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft from across the English Channel. Written 30 years after the publication of *Emile*, Wollstonecraft's the Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) is a passionate plea to the French National Assembly, for gender equality in the proposed new education system.

Subsequently, locating Wollstonecraft's arguments within its historical context, the paper points out that the two discourses represent diagrammatically opposite views on gender identities, relationships and the purpose of women's education. Thus they also epitomise the fundamental dilemma with regard to women's education.

Rousseau's Construction of the Natural Man

The *Discourse on Political Economy* written for the *Encyclopaedia* (1775) and the *Contract Social* (1762) delineate Rousseau's original conceptualisation of the human being and the state. As Beardsley elaborates:

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> He understood better than his predecessors the distinction between factual and normative questions in social philosophy. He saw more clearly, too, the problem of 'social contract' was not historical but a logical one. He explored more profoundly the real nature of the bond that creates the unity of the state; he had the originality to reject the Natural Law theory, interpreted in the usual way, and to look for a new foundation of rights. Perhaps his most important achievement was his insistence that the sort of society we live in is up to us, for we are responsible, we choose; and he offered those who would accept this challenge a new and inspiring conception of man. (1959 reprint 1992, pp. 319–320)

The evolution of Rousseau's philosophical ideas about human nature is evident in his writings. In his prize-winning essay, *Discourse on Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences* (1750), he attacked civilisation as a corruption of nature and argued that modern man for all his knowledge and culture was inferior to the citizens of ancient Greece and Rome. He did not, in this essay, enunciate his famous principle on the goodness of natural man. He politicised this principle on the natural goodness of man in his second essay, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men* (1775) which, while idealising 'the state of nature', recognised the need for social order. In this *Discourse*, Rousseau portrayed the natural man—innately good, self-contented and self-sufficient. Through this depiction, he attempted to demonstrate that a society based on the notion of property was the root cause of corruption and unhappiness of modern man. His third essay *Discourse on Political Economy* written for the *Encyclopaedia* (1775) and the *Social Contract* (1762) are his most famous works on political philosophy. These works have sought to clarify fundamental terms (such as rights, liberty and law) and the universality in law (Beardsley, 1959 reprint 1992, pp. 319–320) and clearly articulate his idea of the essential goodness of the 'natural man'. What also becomes apparent through his political discourse is the need to balance individual freedoms with the pragmatic requirements of state organisation. His portrayal of the ideal male identity is developed by subsuming his romanticised ideas of the natural man living in a state of nature within his idealised image of the citizen of ancient Sparta. He sees the 'social man' (both autonomous and disciplined) of ancient Sparta as a preferable alternative to the 'natural man' living in nature (Jimack, 1993 reprinted 2009, p. xxi). As he writes:

> The natural man lives for himself; he is the unit, the whole dependent only on himself and on his likes. The citizen is but a numerator of a fraction, whose value depends on its denominator; his value depends on the whole, that is,

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> the community. Good social institutions are those best fitted to make a man unnatural, to exchange his independence for dependence, to merge the unit in the group, so that he no longer regards himself as one, but as a part of a whole, and is only conscious of the common life. (1762 reprint 2009, pp. 7–8)

Rousseau's novel *La Nouvelle Heloise* (1761) is equally important for understanding his notions of human identity of a man who is also in touch with his emotions. Through this novel, he cautions against the undiluted celebration of ideas over sensations or emotions. This is not to imply that he rejected rationality entirely, but rather to indicate that he stressed its prudential aspect (Durant & Durant, 1967, pp. 881–882). By breaching the notion of a mind and emotion/divide in human identity, he nurtured the Romantic Movement in literature. Durant and Durant describe this movement as:

> The rebellion of feelings against reason, of instinct against intellect, of sentiments against judgment, of the subject against the object, of subjectivism against objectivity, of solitude against society, of imagination against reality, of myth and legend against history, of religion against science, of mysticism against ritual, of poetry and poetic prose against prose and prosaic poetry, of neo-Gothic against neoclassical art, of the feminine against the masculine, of romantic love against the marriage of convenience, of 'Nature' and the 'natural' against civilization and artifice, of emotional expression against conventional restraint, of individual freedom against the social order, of youth against authority, of democracy against aristocracy, of man versus the state—in short the revolt of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth or more precisely 1760–1859 against 1648–1760: all these are waves of the great Romantic tide that swept Europe between Rousseau and Darwin. (1967, p. 887)

Transforming Child Rearing and Educational Practices

Rousseau's ideas of the ideal man and his critique of the prevailing society expressed in the *Discourses* are elaborated in his book *Emile*. The work, part educational treatise and part fiction, indicates his views on male and female identities and the kind of education required to unfold these identities. His ideas (especially his ideas on the education of the boy child) have an enduring appeal. The philosophy he expounded, seeks to uncover man's innate goodness evident in the state of nature. His philosophy stresses the all-round development of man (i.e., the

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development of the physical, emotional, rational and moral). The treatise dwells at length on the dress and diet of the child along with the development of the other aspects of the child's personality. More importantly, it stresses the importance of the child's learning preparedness in education. While discussing the learning milestones and development of the boy child, Rousseau argues, that a child needs to be provided opportunities to grow at its own pace, unfold its nature, and lead a care-free life. The boy child is to be guided by the tutor (without any form of overt discipline or control) to realise his potential. Moving between a discourse on educational philosophy and fiction, the tutor is revealed to be Rousseau himself (Rousseau, 1762/2009, pp. 30–44).

The importance of *Emile* lies in its attempt to reform the prevailing child-rearing practices of the 18th century. The treatment of babies in the upper-class households was a disastrous mixture of excessive pampering and stern discipline. Babies in upper class homes were looked after by wet nurses who frequently neglected them. As infants, they were swaddled tightly and when they grew up, they continued to be protected from fresh air and outdoor exercise. Formal instruction began at a very young age and children were sternly disciplined by their private tutors and later in boarding schools. The teaching–learning practices stressed learning by rote, lessons that did not have the remotest relevance to their everyday lives—these included scripture, ancient history, geography, heraldry and, above all, Latin. The idea of childhood as a valid state in itself was non-existent; children were harshly treated and often hastily inducted into adult roles (Jimack, 1993/2009, p. xxvi).

Rousseau's educational philosophy, detailed in *Emile*, is built on his assumptions of man's innate goodness and right to freedom. It aimed to inculcate in the boy child the masculine traits that he believed characterised the citizens of Sparta. He attributes vice to faulty education and social corruption (Rousseau, 1762/2009, p. 62). In essence, his system of education aimed to enable the child to develop at his own pace, without diminishing his sense of self-worth. The natural child is to be gradually trained to exercise rationality and adjust to social existence. Seeing contemporary society as corrupt, Rousseau argues for the need to bring up the child in the countryside, away from the corrupting influences of urban society. In the country, the child would grow up close to nature with all the possible freedom for play and exploration. Drawing from the example of peasants, primitive societies and particularly ancient Sparta, he argues that children should not be harshly disciplined or thwarted. He urged mothers to breastfeed their children and not swaddle them tightly. He believed that babies needed to be free, and in order to enable

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them to grow physically strong, he prescribed cold water baths, open air and physical exercise for children (1762 edition 2009, pp. 13–15).

The vigorously structured education Rousseau offers in *Emile* (based on his understanding of child development) has an enduring pedagogic appeal. Critical of the prevailing curriculum that focused on learning by rote information that had no relevance to the everyday life of the child, Rousseau said, learning in a child occurred through sensory experiences. He believed that the child should be guided to make prudential choices through experience. Most importantly, he emphasised the need for learning preparedness in the child before the introduction of a planned curriculum. Based on his ideas on the stages of growth and maturation, he argued that the characteristics of each stage would determine the learning preparedness of the child: Up to the age of 12 years, he says, the child should be left free and allowed to develop his physical body. The guiding principle during this stage should be to leave the child alone; the child should be free virtually from birth to explore the world about him and to gain from different kinds of physical experiences. Since sensations are the first instruments of knowledge, the sensory experiences of the child would be the basis for his future moral and intellectual education. The child is to be taught through experience and not through verbal lessons. In the course of time, he learns to submit to the inevitable and is ready for learning (1762 edition 2009, pp. 5–47).

Learning preparedness is the key precept in Rousseau's philosophy of education. He believed graded and constructive learning experiences should be introduced between 12 and 15 years when the child learns to exercise his reason and make rational choices. Reasoning, however, is a capacity that is not yet fully developed during this period of growth and needs to be developed through controlled experiences. Rousseau concurred with John Locke that sensations were the basis for the development of rationality, but did not accept Locke's view that the child could comprehend abstract concepts at this stage of his development (1762 edition 2009, pp. 48–152).

Rousseau's pedagogic position was that no attempt should be made to teach or force the child to read books before he was ready to learn. The introduction of words and concepts beyond the understanding of the child would lead to error and possibly vice. In Rousseau's schema, total ignorance is preferable to false knowledge, and only when the child develops his reasoning faculty that he should learn. An important aspect of Rousseau's education was the need to learn manual skills. This skill would enable the child to acquire social responsibilities that would enable him to become both a social and a natural man. Rousseau believed

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that the child's reasoning capacity should be developed on the basis of the child's observation and experience (1762/2009, pp. 153–205). Subsequently, describing adolescence to early adulthood as a critical stage marked by the development of both reason and passion, he argues for the introduction of intellectual, moral and religious ideas based on rationality. During this period, the budding adult should be allowed to learn what he wants to learn without pressure or coercion from others (1762 edition 2009, pp. 206–383).

Although Rousseau tended to downplay the educational aspect of the book and stress its moral aspect, the publication of *Emile* has exercised a profound impact on the theory and practice of education. The moral values he propounded were built on his belief in the natural goodness of man. His intuitive understanding of learning readiness and controlled freedoms in bringing up children has an enduring appeal. His ideas continue to inform contemporary pedagogic practices (Jimack, 1993/2009, p. xxvi) and influenced educational philosophies of many countries for over two centuries. Describing the lasting value of the work, Jimack writes:

> *Emile* rapidly became famous throughout Europe and from the moment it appeared it began to exercise a profound influence on both the theory and the practice of education in different countries; it is doubtful whether any major educational reformer since Rousseau has not in, some measure, drawn inspiration from him. Perhaps it is some indication of *Emile's* greatness that it has meant different things to different ages and different societies. Today, more than two hundred years since it was published, it has still not been left behind. Recent critics have, for instance, demonstrated that many of Rousseau's principles, particularly on the psychology of learning, anticipate uncannily the findings of modern scientific investigators, At the same time, though wet–nurses and swaddling clothes no longer trouble us, the two fundamental concepts of *Emile*, natural goodness, and controlled freedom, continue to be at the root of much modern educational debates. (2009, p. xli)

Sophy

The ambiguities of his philosophy, however, become obvious when he discusses female education in Book V of *Emile* through the persona of Sophy—a young girl destined to be *Emile*'s partner and helpmate. As Rousseau explains in his introduction to the section:

> It is not good that man should be alone. *Emile* is now a man and we must give him his promised helpmeet. The helpmeet is Sophy. (*Emile*, Book V, p. 384)

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Based on his notion of an ideal man–woman relationship, Rousseau propagated a different curriculum and disciplinary practices in the rearing of the girl child. He believed that Sophy's role was to help *Emile* realise his human potential and develop those essential qualities required for good citizenship. Therefore he begins his treatise on women's education with the statement:

> Sophy must truly be a woman as Emile is a man. Sophy must possess all the characters of her sex which are required to enable her to play her part in the physical and moral order. (1762/2009, p. 384)

The constraints that Rousseau recommends for women's education are despite his observation that the biological difference between the two sexes is minimal. He writes:

> Let us begin with in what respect her sex differs from our own. But for her sex, a woman is a man; she has the same organs, the same needs, the same faculties. The machine is the same in its construction; its parts, its working and its appearance are similar. Regard it as you will the difference is in the degree. (1762/2009, p. 384)

Nevertheless, Rousseau prefers to see gender identities as biologically determined and innately different. He writes:

> Yet where sex is concerned man and woman are unlike; each in the complement of the other; the difficulty in comparing them lies in our inability to decide in either case what is a matter of sex and what is not. The general differences present themselves to the comparative anatomist and even to the superficial observer; they seem not to be the matter of sex; yet there are really sex differences though the connection eludes our observation. How far such difference may extend we cannot tell; all we know for certain is that whether man and woman are alike we had to do with the characteristics of the species; where they are unlike we have to do with the characteristics of sex. (1762/2009, p. 384)

From this biological determinist argument on gender differences springs Rousseau's prescription for different education for boys and girls. While the curriculum for boys should encourage and develop in them the essentially masculine traits of strength/activity, the curriculum prescribed for girls should focus on their 'so-called' feminine traits of weakness/passivity. Rousseau acknowledges that all babies are born weak and need to grow strong with good nutrition and physical activities, but his concern is selective: For, while boys should be educated to develop physical

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strength and autonomy, girls should be prepared for her future role as wife and mother. Therefore restrictions should be placed on a girl's physical movement, intellectual autonomy and she should be taught to defer to the views of others. To him, this is what would lay the foundation for an ideal and harmonious family in the future. He argued:

> A perfect man and a perfect woman should no more be alike in mind than in face, and perfection admits of neither less nor more.
>
> In the union of the sexes each alike contributes to the common end, but in different ways. From this diversity springs the first difference which may be observed between man and woman in their moral relations. The man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive; the one must have both the power and will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance. (Rousseau, 1762/2009, p. 385)

In what appears as a flight of male fantasy, Rousseau adds:

> A woman is specially made for a man's delight. If man in his turn ought to be pleasing in her eyes, the necessity is less urgent, his virtue is in his strength, and he pleases because he is strong. I grant you this is not the law of love, but it is the law of nature which is older than love itself …. If a woman is made to please and to be in subjection to man, she ought to make herself pleasing in his eyes and not provoke him to anger, her strength is in her charms, by their means she should compel him to discover and use his strength. (1762/2009, p. 385)

Apart from seeking to please the man, the woman must be subjected to his authority and not provoke his anger. The woman's charm lay in her submission to the man's authority. But at the same time, Rousseau wanted the woman to enable the man to discover his strength through resistance. Seeing desire aroused through this dangerous dance of the sexes, he felt both partners could exult in the other's victory. This he felt was the origin of attack and defence, of the boldness of one sex and the timidity of the other. It was also the origin of the feminine qualities of shame and modesty that nature had endowed on the woman to enable her to conquer the strong. Nature, he said, had endowed woman with the potential to stimulate man's passion, in excess of his power to satisfying them. It thus makes him dependent on a woman's goodwill.

In his view, modesty was a virtue in a woman and it was her duty to bear and rear children. Therefore, it was not necessary for her to have the same kind of education suitable for a man. This is not to suggest that

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Rousseau believed that the girl child should be denied opportunities to develop her physique, treated harshly and denied education. But the education he recommended aimed at fulfilling an instrumental role in society—women were created to fulfil men's needs and raise a family. The need for her education is to enable her to bring up her children. He writes:

> [If] a woman is quite unaccustomed to think, how can she bring up her children? How will she know what is good for them? How can she incline them to virtues of which she is ignorant, to merit of which she has no conception? She can only flatter or threaten, she can only make them insolent or timid; she will make them performing monkeys or noisy little rascals; she will never make them intelligent or pleasing children. Therefore it is not fitting that a man of education should choose a wife who has none, or take her from a class where she cannot be expected to have any education. (Rousseau, 1762/2009, p. 445)

Perhaps it is his own insecurities that make him say:

> But I would a thousand times rather have a homely girl, simply brought up than a learned lady and a wit, who would make a literary circle of my house and install herself as its president. A female wit is a scourge of her husband, her children, her friends, her servants, to everybody. (1762/2009, p. 445)

Rousseau was also against women's participation in the public domain. He argued that a woman could not nurse her child one day and be a soldier the next. Hence he did not quite subscribe to the views expressed in Plato's *Republic* which assigned the same gymnasium for both women and men. He critiques Plato for assigning the same kind of work for men and for women and argues that women should have a suitable education to enable them to become good wives and mothers. Women, he says, should not be like men and should know the art of pleasing men. They should not try to usurp the male role. Her education should complement that of a man; it should aim to make him love and respect her. She should train the man in childhood and tend to him in his manhood. She should seek to make his life pleasant. Women's bodies are not the same as men's; hence, while she needs physical education it should be less strenuous. Although he did not prescribe harsh treatment of girls, he felt that they should be made docile and should be taught to accept authority. They should be taught to be attentive and industrious. Education for self-development and as means of realising human

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excellence was not considered necessary for them. He also argued that women should conform to the religious beliefs of their husbands as they were incapable of understanding theological ideas (1762/2009, p. 408).

The Vindication of the Rights of Woman

We would perhaps fully concur with Mary Wollstonecraft's scathing criticism of Rousseau's educational ideas in her book *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The book was necessitated by the need to forestall the proposed legislation *Rapport sur l'instruction publique* by Charles Maurice de Tallyrand-Perigord in the French National Assembly in 1791. In his recommendations for a national system of education, Tallyrand had written:

> Let us bring up women not to aspire to advantages which the Constitution denies them but to know and appreciate those which it guarantees them... men are destined to live on the stage of the world. A public education suits them: it early places before them all the scenes of their lives: only the proportion is different. The parental home is better for the education of women; they have less need to learn to deal with the interests of others, than to accustom themselves to a calm and secluded life. (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2012)

Passionately putting forward her case for women's education, Wollstonecraft takes head-on educationists who sought to obstruct learning opportunities for girls. Perhaps it was because of the far-reaching influence of Rousseau's educational treatise that it became the primary target of her ire. Justifying the need to challenge Rousseau's treatise she writes:

> I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and consequently more useless members of society. I might have expressed this conviction in a lower key; but I am afraid it would have been the whine of affectation, and not the faithful expression of my feelings, of the clear result, which experience and reflection have led me to draw. (1792/2012, p. 33)

She begins her discourse with the question of what distinguishes a man from brutes and suggests that it is reason, virtue and the ability to control base passions. Therefore, she argues that the perfection in a human being

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and capacity for happiness must be judged on the basis of our capacity to reason, virtue and knowledge that distinguishes the individual and directs laws that govern society. She writes:

> [T]he perfection of our nature and capability of happiness must be estimated by the degree of reason virtue and knowledge that distinguishes the individual, and direct the laws which bind society: and that, from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow, is equally undeniably if mankind be viewed collectively. (1792/ reprint 2012, p. 23)

It follows that her critique of Rousseau and other scholars who held similar opinions on women's education stems from her understanding that women also need to develop the capacity to making prudent choices and take moral responsibilities for their actions. Making no effort to be polite or persuasive, she points to the limitations of male reasoning:

> Men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they can scarcely trace how, rather than to root them out. The mind must be strong that resolutely forms its own principles; for a kind of intellectual cowardice prevails which makes many men shrink from the task, or only do it by halves. Yet the imperfect conclusion thus drawn are frequently very plausible, because they are built on partial experience, not just, through narrow views. (1792/2012, p. 24)

In her opinion, the idea that boys and girls need different types of education to fulfil their respective roles was only a justification for male tyranny and an attempt to keep women dependant. *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a scathing indictment of the prevailing gender relationships, built on the socio-economic and political powerlessness of women. This powerlessness, she argues, results in the development of the traits of avarice, dependency, passivity and physical frailty in women, which in turn are used as excuses by men to further deprive women of their autonomy and keep them in perpetual servitude. Her arguments are developed from her wide teaching experience and her study of educational philosophy:

> I have turned to various books written on the subject of education and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools. But what has been the result? A profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes originating from one hasty conclusion. (1792/2012, p. 17)[1]

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Wollstonecraft recognises the role that socialisation plays in the development of feminine identity. Since marriage is the only vocation available to women and their survival depends on male approval, women seek to conform to male ideas of beauty, emotions and frailty rather than on the development of their intellect or powers of discrimination. The perceived intellectual inferiority in women is because of the desultory education they received. It is also because they have few entitlements in society and are therefore dependent on male goodwill. This dependency makes them develop those traits that are pleasing to men. Discussing the consequences of such stereotyping and denials of educational opportunities, she argues:

> The conduct and manner of women, in fact, evidently prove, that their minds are not in a healthy state; for like the flowers that are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived in maturity. One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exception, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect. (1792/2012, p. 17)

Contending Rousseau's Ideas of Gender Relationships

Wollstonecraft begins by questioning the validity of Rousseau's idealisation of the state of nature over civilisation and his pedagogic assumption that the child should be brought up away from the corrupting influences society. She writes:

> Reared on a false hypothesis his [Rousseau's] arguments in favour of a state of nature are plausible, but unsound. I say unsound; for to assert that a state of nature is preferable to civilization, in all its possible perfection, is, in other words, to arraign supreme wisdom; and the paradoxical exclamation, that God has made all things right, and that the error has been introduced by the creature, whom he formed, knowing what he formed is as unphilosophical as impious. (1792/2012, p. 25)

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On the basis of her wide teaching experiences, she critiqued Rousseau's assumptions that private tutoring of a pupil away from society could effectively educate a child to assume the role required in a liberal/democratic state.[2] She believed in schooling that had a socialising effect on children and hence she was critical of Rousseau's assumption that learning could take place in isolation through the long-term interaction of a tutor with his pupil. She writes:

> Men and women must be educated in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has cried all before it and given a family character, as it were to the century. It may then fairly be inferred that till society be differently constituted much cannot be expected from education. It is, however, sufficient for my present purpose to assert, that whatever effect circumstances have on the abilities, every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason. (1792/ 2012, p. 33)

The crux of her criticism of Rousseau is his construction of masculinity and femininity—a construction that is built on the unequal power relationship between the sexes. But she also faults Rousseau's educational treatise in which he depicts the ideal social man as one who is modelled on men in ancient Sparta. Wollstonecraft questions the idealisation of this aggressive model of masculinity by terming Spartan society as 'barbarian'. Drawing attention to their cruelty to slaves and the wars they waged, she asks if such a model of citizen is suitable for building modern nation states. She writes:

> Next to state of nature, Rousseau celebrates barbarianism, and apostrophizing the shade of Fabricius, he forgets that in conquering the world, the Romans never dreamed of establishing their own liberty on a firm basis, or of extending the reign of virtue. Eager to support his system he stigmatizes, as vicious, every effort of genius; and uttering the apotheosis of savage virtues, he exalts those to demi-gods, who were scarcely human—the brutal Spartans, who in defiance of justice and gratitude, sacrificed, in cold blood, the slaves who had shewn themselves heroes to rescue their oppressors. (1792/2012, p. 25)

Conversely, she critiques his idea of the ideal woman and derisively remarks that when weakness and dependency are encouraged in women, they develop an innate cunning. She writes:

> Women are, in fact, so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence, that I do not mean to add a paradox when I assert, that this artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannize and gives birth to cunning, the

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> natural opponent of strength, which leads them to play off those contemptible infantile airs that undermine esteem even whilst they excite desire. Do not foster these prejudices, and they will naturally fall into their subordinate yet respectable station in life. (1792/2012, p. 21)

In Rousseau's view traits such as lassitude, passivity and lack of serious purpose were part of women's nature. Wollstonecraft points to the innate contradictions in his position by arguing that if these traits were part of women's nature, why not allow them to unfold naturally? Where was the need to reinforce such traits through education? She then asks the pertinent question, why do men seem to appreciate those traits in women they would see as contemptible in themselves. She demolishes his arguments on the need for differential education for boys and girls as an excuse for male tyranny. She writes:

> To account for, and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been brought forward to prove that the two sexes in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character, or to speak explicitly women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue. Yet it should seem, allowing them to have souls that there is but one way appointed by Providence to lead mankind to either virtue or happiness. If women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence? Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and grovelling vices. Behold, I should answer the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakens, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needles, for at least, twenty years of their lives. (1792/2012, p. 30)

To sum up, like liberal philosophers of her times, Wollstonecraft was concerned with the overthrow of the tyranny of the aristocrats and the establishment of a democratic polity. Her critique of Rousseau's ideas on education stemmed from her assertion that women were also 'human creatures who in common with men are placed on earth to unfold their faculties' (1792/2009, p. 17). The points of her disagreement with Rousseau were as follows based on his:

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(1) assumption that boys and girls should be educated differently to fulfil their socially prescribed roles;
(2) essentialist arguments on the innate biological differences between the sexes and his disparaging stereotypes of women;
(3) double standards of sexual morality that assumed that, women must entice, seduce and submit to male desire;
(4) assumption that in 'this dangerous game of sexual desire' a woman must have 'enough skill to know when not provoke a man to anger and when to submit'; this, Wollstonecraft said, reduced women's lives to a life in a 'Turkish seraglio'; and
(5) notion of motherhood where a woman who is taught to be submissive is unlikely to exercise control on her children or train them in the right use of reason.

The Intended Beneficiaries

If Rousseau in *Emile* is concerned about the education of children of property-owning, elite families, Wollstonecraft in *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* focuses on middle-class women—not the aristocracy or the lower classes. As a product of the radical intellectual currents of her times, she viewed the aristocracy as a redundant institution which would wither away with the establishment of democracy. She was therefore not concerned with the education of a decadent class of people. Her failure to include lower-class women in her educational reform was perhaps because she could not visualise a more egalitarian society or consider how education could possibly help them. Wollstonecraft's writings, nonetheless, indicate her sensitivity and concern for the plight of the poor. She addressed the needs of middle-class women because she believed they lived in a more 'natural' state and could be reformed.

The Vindication of the Rights of Woman was an attempt to extend the boundaries of human rights to women. It has the distinction of being the first sustained argument for women's emancipation based on a cogent ethical system (Kramnick, 1983, p. 25). Her ideas were shaped by the cataclysmic political events of the 18th century—when the radical political debates on the rights of man and the limits of state power fomented the French Revolution. As a writer, political commentator and critic, she was vociferous in her support of the French Revolution and was among the first to critique Edmund Burke's criticism of the rise of people's power against the traditional structures of governance. Wollstonecraft further argues that reasonable and just rights of the citizens existed *per*

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se regardless of traditions (Kramnick, 1883, p. 16). It is possible to discern the influences of John Locke's *Second Treatise* (1689) and Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762) in her writings. The crux of the discourse was that political power derived its legitimacy with the consent of the citizens it sought to govern. Such consent could be withdrawn by each individual as freely as it was given. Further, since the power to change political institutions was with the people, the people needed to be educated to be able to exercise that power with discrimination.

Wollstoncraft's attempt to make women's rights a part of the political debates of the time grew out of her intimate knowledge of the situation of women of her times. The industrial revolution of the 18th century had radically altered the socio-economic conditions of the people and impacted the existing power equations in the family. This is not to argue that sexism did not prevail in the earlier centuries, but rather, to indicate that within the limits imposed on women in the 17th century, women from among peasants, small farmers, petty traders and artisans enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy and their work was vital to the household economy (Karmnick, 1983, p. 29).

The disruption of the household economy caused by the industrial revolution and changing land relationships created widespread land alienation among the peasants/small farmers. Additionally, the large factories and centralised businesses that developed during the period destroyed household industries and also created a spatial separation between the domestic sphere and the workplace. These changes affected women's domestic roles: While poor women and children migrating to the industrial hubs were forced to work in low-paying jobs under abysmal conditions, middle-class women found themselves increasingly confined to their roles as wives and mothers (Karmnick, 1983, pp. 29–30). Wollstonecraft's ideas were developed on the basis of her personal struggle to earn a living in a man's world and also her early experiences of teaching. She also knew of the debilitating boredom experienced by women restricted by conventions to the mundane domestic sphere.

Despite the importance of her work, Wollstonecraft's scholarship received scant notice during her lifetime and she faced the derision of male thinkers. And yet, the ideas that she ignited continued to simmer through the feminist consciousness in subsequent generations so much so that the when the 19th century suffragists from across the Atlantic– Susan Antony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton published the first of their three volume *History of the Women's Suffrage* in 1889, Wollstonecraft's name heads the list of earlier feminists who had inspired them (Rossi, 1974, p. 40).

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Delineating Diverging Views

The central point of the debate rests on the age old controversy on the relative importance of nature and culture in the normative construction of gender relationships. Rousseau used a biologically determinist argument to justify male domination and to deprive women of all freedoms that he said men were entitled to. Pointing to the weakness of the argument, Wollstonecraft, ironically says, if nature had designed women as passive, vain and without purpose, these traits would unfold naturally and did not need to be reinforced through education. In contrast to these ideas, Wollstonecraft's educational reform aimed at ensuring that women's equal worth as human beings was acknowledged. She demanded opportunities for women to develop their intellectual capacities and avail of opportunities for self-growth.

Critical of Rousseau's essentialist position on the construction of gender identities, she denied that a happy marriage and family life could develop out of the unequal power relationships between the sexes. The foundation of a happy family life, she believed, could only emerge when the equal worth of women was recognised and women were treated as rational human beings rather than objects of sexual desire. No doubt, Wollstonecraft (like Rousseau) did not question the prevailing notion that women were primarily responsible for child rearing. Her position, however, differs from Rousseau's on two grounds: she does not assume that women's roles should be restricted by motherhood; and (2) she points out, women, socialised into weakness/emotional dependency, would not be able to satisfactorily fulfil their motherhood role and discipline or instil values in their children.

Through her incisive criticism, Wollstonecraft pointed out that Rousseau remained a product of his times in his failure to question the prevailing patriarchal construction of gender relationships. His much touted position on the essential quality of human goodness is also gendered for he sets different standards of human goodness for men and women.

Implications for Gender Justice

That a revolutionary thinker like Rousseau could not transcend the prevailing barrier of sexist thought indicates how deep rooted these ideas were. In essence, this debate between Rousseau and Wollstonecraft on education encapsulates the fundamental dilemma regarding women's

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education in the 19th and 20th centuries in many countries. The contentious issue in India since the 19th century has been on the kind of education women should receive. Should it be the same kind of education as men's? Or should the education of women be restricted to training them to fulfil their marital and child rearing obligations? By and large the consensus among reformers was that women should be trained to fit into their future roles as wives and mothers. The assumption was that if they were given the same kind of education as men, it would unsex them [*sic*]. Accordingly, education was not intended to teach women independence of thought and action or vocational training. It was assumed that girls could not cope with a strenuous work-load and therefore the curriculum prescribed included elements of reading, writing and arithmetic, music, hygiene, needlework, embroidery, the vernacular and the English languages. This was supposed to be 'just enough' so as not to mar their womanly nature (Karlekar, 1991, pp. 89–90).

Like Rousseau, many Indian social reformers and policy makers used specious arguments to justify a different curriculum for women. This dilemma apparent in educational philosophy translates itself into policies and programmes for women in India. The Indian Education Commission (1882), for instance, clearly recommended a different curriculum for girls on the assumption that they could not cope with one that was rigorous. Such similar ambiguities are evident in post-Independence education policies regarding the content of women's education. The National Committee on Women's Education (1956) set up to scrutinise the special problems of women's education, on the one hand, emphasised the need to bridge the gap between the education of men and women and on the other, reiterated the traditional values of society. Similar contradictions are found in all the important commissions such as the University Education Commission (1948–1949); Secondary Education Commission (1952–1953); National Commission on Women's Education (1958); National Council for Women's Education; Baktavatsalam Committee (1963); and National Committee on Women's Education (1970). These commissions displayed a lack of clarity in defining the purpose of women's education, the contentious issue being: should women be educated to fulfil their human potential (as Wollstonecraft would have argued) or should they be educated to fulfil their familial roles (as Rousseau would have argued). The only dissenting voice during this period came from the Hansa Mehta Committee Report of 1962, which stated that the 'so called psychological differences between the sexes arise not out of sex but social condition [*sic*]'. Despite recognising

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that the prevailing gender differences were products of social conditioning, the Committee added that social transformation could not take place overnight, and therefore, there was a need to accept at least for some time, certain gender differentiation in the role women play (Mishra, 1966, pp. 129–135; Poonacha, 2015, pp. 154–157). This failure of policies to set clear goals for women's education has resulted in an overwhelming apathy in implementing programmes for women's education. It is only after the rise of feminist political struggles for equality since the 1970s that there has been a change in educational policy.

The report of the Committee on the Status of Women, better known as *Towards Equality* (1974), saw education as a double-edged sword, which, on the one hand, could strengthen traditional gender roles, and on the other, could become a powerful medium of social change (Khullar, 2005, pp. 14–15). The exploration of these possibilities at the First National Conference on Women's Studies, held in Bombay, led to lobbying by feminist scholars for change in the purpose and content of education. Their demand for the introduction of women's studies in higher education as a means of realising gender equality was incorporated in the National Policy on Education (1986). The policy included a section on education as a means of establishing gender equality and recognised women's studies as an instrument of social change (Desai, Mazumdar, & Bhansali, 2003, pp. 44–80). Women's education was no longer seen as a means to an end—to enable women to fulfil their familial roles or even as a means of national progress. It had an intrinsic value, to enable women realise their potential and thereby establish gender justice.

Wollstonecraft's arguments find a resonance in the contemporary feminist contentions that attitudes and principles which subordinated women must be repudiated before a real change in woman's condition could be permanently established. No doubt her arguments are not entirely tenable: in essence her argument encapsulates a fundamental weakness apparent in the classical liberal discourse which, while according formal equality, does not take into account the existing differences in human conditions. Her treatise did not discuss the substantive changes in existing social structures and in prevailing gender relations that would be necessary before women could claim the desired goals of autonomy; nor did her treatise discuss the need for men to share household and parenting responsibilities if real change is to be initiated in gender relationships. She perhaps assumed that there would be working-class women available to enable middle-class women to fulfil their intellectual and creative aspirations.

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This criticism is not to negate the courage of a woman who voiced her dissent against popular opinions on gender relations and on women's education. Many of her concerns and arguments uncannily anticipate the contemporary arguments on gender equality and equality of opportunities. Her contribution as a serious philosopher is beyond question. It is therefore ironic that while Rousseau achieved iconic status as a philosopher, Mary Wollstonecraft's contributions remain largely unacknowledged, as perhaps has been the fate of many women thinkers and scholars.

Notes

1. Unlike Rousseau who only had a year's experience of tutoring two young sons of M.de Maby in Lyon (Jimack, 1993 [2009], p. xvii) and no experience in parenting any child. In his book Rousseau, confesses that he gave away five of his children born through his relationship with Therese Levasseur to the foundling home (Durant & Durant, 1967, pp. 881–888).
2. It cannot be forgotten that Mary Wollstonecraft was writing in the wake of the French Revolution. Her writings reflect the influence of the ongoing libertarian discourse of the time. It mainly sought to include the women's question in what was essentially a male discourse. Ironically, while Rousseau's work on the social contract epitomised the essence of the libertarian arguments regarding the relationship of the individual with the state and provided a powerful justification for the French Revolution, he remained conservative on the woman's question.

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