

# A revolution in manners

## Feminist Thinkers, part 1: Mary Wollstonecraft

The RoSa-factsheets aim to familiarise you with the scope of equal opportunities in Flanders. Each factsheet probes the situation in a specific area. Broad themes as well as specific ones are put into the spotlight, depending on the relevance and/or availability of information and numerical data. We do not intend to offer exhaustive information, our primary aim is to sketch the position of women in Flanders in a surveyable and accessible way. Since its founding in 1978, RoSa is the place in Flanders to look for information and documentation about equal opportunities, emancipation policy and women's studies.

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*Mary Wollstonecraft is considered to be, notably so in the Anglo-Saxon world, the mother of all feminists. Her best-known work: A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (dating from 1792), is the first elaborate argumentation for women's rights. Furthermore it marks the start of liberal feminism and the struggle for women's civil rights.*

*This fact sheet stresses this plea from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman<sup>1</sup> with a brief summary of various authors' criticism. Thus providing our readers with a sketch of the spirit of the times and of the ideas of liberal feminism.*

### **The spirit of the times: women deprived of citizenship**

The end of the eighteenth century finds women as second-class citizens. They have no status whatsoever in public life: they are not allowed to vote, cannot be elected, are not admitted to higher education, many professions are off limits to them.

Politicians and political thinkers of that era consider this to be normal: they agree that women should not be granted citizenship. Their arguments are not new, for centuries theoreticians have found women to be irrational, which exempts them from becoming full-fledged citizens.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle sees women as apolitical beings, belonging solely in the private home. Many centuries later, christianity adds another argument: the natural order, god given, places man over woman.

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century brings women no relief. The philosophers throw off the yoke of theology and absolute monarchy. All men are equal, possess a capacity for rational thinking, ergo have equal rights. But you've already understood: 'men' refers not to mankind, but literally to... the male species. Since women thereby are still branded 'irrational', they are deprived of these rights<sup>3</sup>. The 'social contract' of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, quite an influential thinker in Great Britain, also applies to men only. This social contract consists of a utopian state of society, where the people choose their leaders and where the general will, defined as

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the life and work of Mary Wollstonecraft, see "Mary Wollstonecraft" under the heading "Spot op" of the section "Publicaties" at [www.rosadoc.be/publicaties](http://www.rosadoc.be/publicaties)

<sup>2</sup> Voet, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Voet, p. 18.

some sort of sense of responsibility or good citizenship, rules. This democratic ideal is progressive, but not to the level of gender equity. Women's role may be an important one in Rousseau's vision - educating sons in the spirit of the values of citizenship - but this does not entitle women to that same citizenship. The man dominates the family; women and men receive different education, focusing on their different tasks within society.

The philosophy of Enlightenment doesn't make much difference in women's lives. As before, the exclusion of women is legitimized by gender differences, and they are considered a natural order and a status quo.<sup>4</sup> The industrialization and the emerging middle classes further aggravate the opposition between men and women. It is the new bourgeois ideal that sets the pattern for the power balance that will rule the ensuing centuries.<sup>5</sup>

The family was perceived as the breadwinner unit of the feudal system, a unit to which each member contributed.<sup>6</sup> The industrialization on the other hand generates wealth for the bourgeoisie, and this very much influences family relationships. The man becomes the breadwinner and operates in the public domain, whereas his wife commits herself solely to housekeeping and education, the private domain. Women wear the pants within the family, but are banned from the public domain and from citizenship. Within this bourgeois ideal the differences between men and women are brushed up and considered to be innate.

### **Women reject the arguments**

In contradiction to the period before the Enlightenment, a reaction now ensues.<sup>7</sup> The French revolution and the debates on political rights and citizenship which come in its wake, serve as a catalyst for the ideas on women's emancipation.<sup>8</sup> Very Important Women such as Etta Palm and Olympe de Gouges base themselves on the egalitarian ideas of the French revolution to demand this equality for women too.<sup>9</sup> Palm is exiled to her native Netherlands, de Gouges goes to the scaffold. In Britain too, the French revolution makes its mark.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is published in exactly that era. The ideals of the French Revolution do not fail to inspire her; at the end of 1792 she goes to Paris. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is first and foremost a well-constructed argumentation for women's citizenship. Yet this is not the sole reason why it has been much discussed. In the last paragraphs of this fact sheet, we will present a brief introduction to two controversial aspects of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

### **Reason as a foundation for human nature**

Many authors consider *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to be the starting point of modern feminism in the English-speaking regions, albeit a feminism of the middle classes.<sup>10</sup> The aristocracy and the middle classes were the only ones to be able to participate in the public forum. Previous to her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft published a first *Vindication*. In it she criticizes one of Burke's publications on the French revolution,

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<sup>4</sup> Voet, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Caine, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Caine, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> '...the 19th century, when it was generally accepted that women were incapable of benefiting from education or of exercising political judgement. It was also widely believed that women could have no respectable role outside the home, and that wives should be seen as the property of their husbands. These beliefs about women increasingly co-existed, however, with liberal and liberal democratic ideas about individual rights; these ideas provided a language through which women could articulate demands for change without challenging dominant political principles.' Bryson, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Caine, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Bock, p.46.

<sup>10</sup> To be correct: it is the first elaborate argument in English defending women's rights. Coole, p. 91.

in which Burke advances hierarchy as a naturally given fact. Wollstonecraft's reply is her first *Vindication*, a plea for equality between all human beings, regardless of class or breed, and based on her notions on human nature. In this respect the second *Vindication* is a sequel to the first.<sup>11</sup> The egalitarianism is stretched to include women. The book dives right into Wollstonecraft's ideas about human nature: the main characteristic of civilization is reason. Reason, in combination with virtue and knowledge, is the foundation of society and its applicable laws.<sup>12</sup>

Since reason is humanity's main characteristic, all humans possess this quality. A noticeable lack of reason can thus only be the result of a faulty education or socialization, not of an innate deficiency. A lack of reason therefore cannot be attributed to sex or class, but rather to a deficit of education.

Wollstonecraft makes a clear distinction between the situation we are living in and the (ideal) state we could be living in, provided everyone finds him/herself in a state of reasonability, a civilization based on reason. In doing so she explicitly dissociates herself from Rousseau, whose 'natural (imaginary) state' is more perfect than civilization.<sup>13</sup> This is not the case in Wollstonecraft's construction. The existing irregularities stem from an insufficient control of passions and emotions.

### Reason as a foundation for feminine nature

This same difference between the factual and the desirable situation applies to women.<sup>14</sup> Many arguments have been used throughout the ages to prove that women are less rational than men.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless there exists but one human characteristic that comprises human nature, and this characteristic is reason. Women and men start out equal. All differences between men and women, save physical strength, are the result of education and socialization. If women are unable of thinking for themselves, are shallow or weak, then it is the result of that education. In a paragraph on the military, she depicts men who, because of faulty socialization, show a lack of rationality.<sup>16</sup>

Education is therefore a crucial factor in Wollstonecraft's argumentation.

Bringing the emotions under control of reason is a condition to moral virtue, both for women and men. From a very early age, women are conditioned to please men. Women leave their emotions free rein. These aspects of femininity<sup>17</sup>, dixit Wollstonecraft, have been 'construed' through education - whereas Rousseau sees them as innate.<sup>18</sup>

Exactly this makes Wollstonecraft's claim very revolutionary for its time. As we've stated before, Rousseau was very influential in this period of time. Rousseau's theory can be understood, from a historical point of view, as a theoretical justification of the ongoing separation of the sexes: the public domain as men's unique place, the private domain as women's.<sup>19</sup> To Wollstonecraft, Rousseau's image of women is not just unnatural, but also 'un-virtuous', unethical.<sup>20</sup> The moral standard is the same for men and women. Hence Wollstonecraft's plea for 'a revolution in manners', an upheaval of the way men and women relate to each other. Women are emotional, sensitive, but also jealous: through proper education these characteristics can be weakened, allowing friendship (thriving better in male circles) to get the upper hand to strong emotions.<sup>21</sup> The relationships themselves between men and women might then be friendship rather than passion-based, an altogether too strong emotion in the kingdom of reason. Control

<sup>11</sup> Waithe, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Mendus, p. 16

<sup>15</sup> Wollstonecraft, p.100

<sup>16</sup> Waithe, p. 158

<sup>17</sup> Wollstonecraft takes a lot of trouble over surveying all different forms in which a deficient education becomes noticeable: see Wollstonecraft, p. 300-319.

<sup>18</sup> Mendus, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> 'From the premise that men and women are naturally different, Rousseau developed a theory of politics which separated men and women into different spheres of activity-the men dominating in the public or political realm, while women ruled in the private or domestic sphere.' Mendus, p. 18

<sup>20</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 312.

over emotions is not merely a moral imperative, but also a political necessity. Social order and political peace are dependent upon the use of reason and the tempering of passions.<sup>22</sup>

Wollstonecraft clearly also envisages more structural changes, aside from this new etiquette. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she is not quite clear though, on how far these changes should go. Women need to develop their intellect, but legal reform is additionally required in order to allow women to study and to work. She wants civil rights for women, in order for them too to be able to work for the common good. For those remaining barred from this public event, cannot but occupy themselves with petty matters, emotional (particular) problems. It is however the duty of every member of society to concern oneself with the common good.<sup>23</sup> Not all interpretations agree on the implications of this duty. Barbara Caine, for one, thinks that Wollstonecraft was in fact an advocate of the vote for women, but was afraid (given the spirit of the time) to openly and directly phrase this demand.<sup>24</sup>

### The tension between equality and difference

The accent that Wollstonecraft puts on this 'revolution in manners', and her vagueness about structural change, make her vulnerable to criticism. According to many authors and by modern standards, her striving for equality is not quite consequent. She doesn't make a claim for a revolutionary transformation of society. Her main desire is a revolution in manners between the sexes.<sup>25</sup> She makes an appeal for co-education - a risqué thing in those days - but the aim is to improve the relationships between the sexes from an early age.

Wollstonecraft keeps stressing the difference between men and women. Raising children remains women's main goal.<sup>26</sup> Wollstonecraft does resist the exclusion of women from public life based on their so-called inherent lack of rationality, but in all other respects simply adopts Rousseau's ideas about labor division based on sex, women as mothers, men as breadwinners.<sup>27</sup> Although she states the case that to run a home takes the same kind of rationality required for political citizenship, she in no way questions the division of labor between men and women. A woman is capable only of fulfilling this particular task if she has been properly educated and acts rationally.<sup>28</sup>

The tension between equality and difference may also be looked upon from a positive angle. Liberal feminism, with its uni-dimensional striving for equality, has its disadvantages. To a liberal feminist, women's rights are human rights. A liberal feminist strongly stresses autonomy, thereby actually demanding an extension of existing liberal principles.<sup>29</sup> Yet after the situation had been legally 'put right' (long after Wollstonecraft's time), the reality of it was still lagging behind. Its opponents were and are blaming liberal feminism for upholding masculine values.

Individual freedom, which is also in our society the foundation of the philosophy of equality, is a masculine standard, which cannot 'as is' be applied to women. Inequalities from the private domain do influence the public domain. Women, for instance, experience difficulties in building their careers, since they are still taking the majority of care-giving upon themselves, and are unable to combine this with the high pressure and irregular hours that a top job requires. Liberal feminism has a problem with these factual inequalities. Collective services (such as centrally organized childcare facilities) are hard to fit into a liberal ideology.<sup>30</sup>

Mary Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, is still giving heed to the differences between men and women. For her, the differentiating factor is motherhood, which she tries to

<sup>22</sup> Mendus, p. 23

<sup>23</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 306.

<sup>24</sup> Caine, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Sanders, p. 17

<sup>26</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 313.

<sup>27</sup> Caine, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 315.

<sup>29</sup> Bryson, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Bryson, p. 13.

interpret as rationally as possible by stressing the mother's role as that of a (ratio-inspired) educator with a strong sense of citizenship.<sup>31</sup> Another argument in Wollstonecraft's favor is the emphasis she places on the interconnectedness between the family (the private domain) and the public domain, plus the emphasis on women's civic responsibility. She pleads so to speak for politicizing the private domain.<sup>32</sup> In a day and age when the separation between these two spheres is being executed, Wollstonecraft's idea cannot be labeled anything other than progressive.

### The tension between reason and emotion

On several occasions Wollstonecraft has been attacked about the limited interest she attached to emotions and, parallel to this, she has been also attacked about the gap between her theory and her own practice. Wollstonecraft was posthumously torpedoed for her turbulent love life. After her husband published his memoirs, Wollstonecraft became persona non grata. Even in feminist circles, where it was feared that she had blemished the cause. Present day feminism, on the other hand, sees a tendency to reconcile her biography with her work, thus trying to safeguard her legacy.<sup>33</sup>

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argues the case for marriage based on friendship. Passion, after all, is the enemy of reason. Marriage becomes a kind of social contract between equals.<sup>34</sup> When situated within the framework of liberal feminism, hers not such a crazy idea after all. Many a liberal theory has a problem making statements about domestic violence or the status of the housewife. Due to the strict separation between private and public domain, the family is not part of the public domain - hence the family is ruled by love, not law. Wollstonecraft solves this issue by interpreting marriage as a contract between citizens. Those ascribing to her revolution in manners, of course...

### Literature

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<sup>31</sup> Caine, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Mendus, p; 25.

<sup>33</sup> Mendus, p. 15

<sup>34</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 312.

<sup>35</sup> Mendus, p. 26.