**Group 3**

**A Vindication of the Rights of Women**

Mary Wollstonecraft, 1792

While the Enlightenment was dominated by men, there were possibilities for active involvement by women. Several women played particularly important roles as patrons and intellectual contributors to the gatherings of philosophes and members of the upper-middle-class and aristocratic elite held in the salons of Paris and elsewhere. It was, however, far more difficult for a woman to publish serious essays in the Enlightenment tradition. Indeed, Enlightenment thinkers did little to change basic attitudes about the inferiority of women. One person who managed to do both was Mary Wollstonecraft, (1759-1797) a British author who in 1792 published A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. The book was a sharply reasoned attack against the oppression of women and an argument for educational change. In the following excerpt Wollstonecraft addresses the author of a proposed new constitution for France that, in her opinion, does not adequately deal with the rights of women.

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| Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect toits influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous? unless freedom strengthens her reason till she compre­ hends her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good. If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; andthe love of mankind, from which an orderly trainof virtues spring, can only be produced by con­ sidering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman at present shuts her out from such investigations. In this work I have produced many arguments, which to me were conclusive, to prove that the prevailing notion respecting a sexual character was subversive of morality, and I have contended, that to render the human body and mind more perfect, chastity must more uuiver­ sally prevail, and that chastity will never be respected in the male world till the person of a | woman is not, as it were, idolized, when little virtue or sense embellish it with the grand traces of mental beauty, or the interesting simplicity of affection. Consider, sir, dispassionately these observations, for a glimpse of this truth seemed to open before you when you observed, "that to see one-half of the human race excluded by the other from all participation of government was a political phenomenon that, according to abstract princi­ ples, it was impossible to explain."If so, on what does your constitution rest? If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by a parity of reasouing, willnot shrink from the same test; though a different opiuion prevails in this country, built on the very arguments which you use to justify the oppression of woman-prescription. Consider-!address you as a legislator­ whether, when men contend for their freedom, and to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own happiness, it be not incon­ sistent and unjust to subjugate women, even though you firmly believe that you are acting in the manner best calculated to promote their happiness? Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him of the gift of reason? |