



MIND HAS NO GENDER

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759–1797)

IN CONTEXT

BRANCH

Political philosophy

APPROACH

Feminism

BEFORE

4th century BCE Plato advises that girls should have a similar education to boys.

4th century CE Hypatia, a noted female mathematician and philosopher, teaches in Alexandria, Egypt.

1790 In *Letters on Education*, British historian Catherine Macaulay claims the apparent weakness of women is caused by their miseducation.

AFTER

1869 John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* argues for equality of the sexes.

Late 20th century A surge of feminist activism begins to overturn most of the social and political inequalities between the sexes in Western society.

For most of recorded history, women have been seen as subordinate to men. But during the 18th century, the justice of this arrangement began to be openly challenged. Among the most prominent voices of dissent was that of the English radical Mary Wollstonecraft.

Many previous thinkers had cited the physical differences between the sexes to justify the social inequality between women and men. However, in the light of new ideas that had been formulated during the 17th century, such as John Locke's view that nearly all knowledge was acquired through experience and education, the validity of such reasoning was being called into question.

Equal education

Wollstonecraft argues that if men and women are given the same education they will acquire the same good character and rational approach to life, because they have fundamentally similar brains and minds. Her book, *A Vindication of*

the Rights of Woman, published in 1792, was partly a response to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), which recommends that girls be educated differently to boys, and that they learn deference to them.

Wollstonecraft's demand that women be treated as equal citizens to men—with equal legal, social, and political rights—was still largely treated with derision in the late 18th century. But it did sow the seeds of the suffragette and feminist movements that were to flourish in the 19th and 20th centuries. ■

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Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man.

Mary Wollstonecraft

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See also: Plato 50–55 ■ Hypatia of Alexandria 331 ■ John Stuart Mill 190–93 ■ Simone de Beauvoir 276–77 ■ Luce Irigaray 320 ■ Hélène Cixous 322