

### **Vindication of the Rights of Women**

Question 1. How does Wollstonecraft raise the voice for a respectable and rightful status to women in the contemporary society?

Mary Wollstonecraft's contemporary society pushed women to the margin relentlessly. Society used prejudices, mal-practices and mis-education to weaken women. False notion of beauty and delicacy stopped the growth of women. They were encouraged to be passive, and dependent on men. Women were deemed to have lesser capacity for reason and virtue. They were encouraged to be coquettish and cunning. They could use their physical beauty and sensuality as their power to manipulate men. Thus the women paid more importance to men's attention than to their own virtue or excellence.

Wollstonecraft concedes that women have their domestic duties to perform as wives or mothers. She also accepts that men are physically superior to women. At the same time, she asserts that both men and women are given equal faculties of reason, virtue and experience and knowledge. Thus women should also be given equal opportunities to exercise the power of reason. This would help them develop virtue and knowledge as the contemporary men did.

Wollstonecraft compares women to soldiers. Both these groups learn manners before morals. They learn only to obey and behave without questioning. They are never taught to think about the reason behind an action. They are only taught to prepare themselves for marriage. As a result, contemporary women participate in reprehensible things. Wollstonecraft holds the contemporary patriarchal society responsible for this.

Wollstonecraft proposes that education would help women come out of the misery they suffered from. Women's education would help women in performing the duty of motherhood. Education would help women develop intellectual dignity. This would make women friends with husbands. For Wollstonecraft, friendship is better than lust or love since friendship lasts longer.

Wollstonecraft also says that education helps unmarried women live dignified and respectable lives. Education would throw opportunities to unmarried ladies to protect their future. Education also would help women contribute to the progress of knowledge. So, to continue with progress, education is necessary for women. In this way, Wollstonecraft contributed greatly in initiating a discourse on rights of women.

Question 2. Write a note on Wollstonecraft's response to Jean Jacques Rousseau and Dr Gregory regarding the rights of women for education.

Answer: Mary Wollstonecraft argues against Jacques Rousseau mainly on two counts. Firstly, she rejects Rousseau's idea that evil is the permanent feature of human civilization. Rousseau thought that evil was a natural predisposition in human beings. He believed that human beings would permanently live in this state of nature and evil. This idea indirectly rejected any possibility of improvement in human nature. As an extension, this would suggest that women would have no chance of improving their condition. Wollstonecraft argues that the power of reason, virtue and knowledge provide human beings opportunity for improvement. Thus, through the exercise of these qualities contemporary women could aim for a better status in the male dominated society.

In addition to this, Wollstonecraft rejects Rousseau's notion that women are only created to please men. Rousseau advocated the idea that women are naturally coy and cunning. These qualities give women power over men. For Rousseau, women should try to be coquettish slaves

to appear more alluring to men. He advocated the kind of education for women which would help women develop these qualities. Wollstonecraft argues that both men and women are given equal power of reason. Both men and women can employ reason to develop virtue and knowledge. Therefore there is no reason to believe that women only have to be companions to men. She argues that education would help women in performing their important responsibilities as wives and mothers. With same quality of education that men receive, women would be better mothers. They would be able to raise their children in proper manner. Education would also help women strengthen her body and would teach to exercise reason. This would help them establish friendship with their husbands. This friendship is for her the foundation of lasting relationship. In this way, Wollstonecraft rejects Rousseau's idea that the alluring quality of women is important in men-women relationship.

Wollstonecraft declares that conduct manuals written by men were responsible for subjugation of women in the contemporary world. In this context she refers to Dr John Gregory's *Legacy to His Daughters*. In this book, Gregory says that women have a natural tendency to cultivate fondness for dress. Wollstonecraft contradicts this claim. She says that women love dress because they have been taught to appear alluring to have control over men. Dr Gregory's second suggestion is that women should hide their true feelings and emotions. In other words, he prescribes affectation in ladies to please husbands. Wollstonecraft raises her voices against these sorts of prescriptions. She says that education would help women depend less on their sensual power. Education would help women curb their wild and sensuous emotions. Then they would not require to practice affectation to gain affection of men.

Dr Gregory also suggests that women need no acquire the power of understanding if their only plan in life is to get married. Wollstonecraft says that women should be allowed to acquire the qualities of a rational being. Dr Gregory's advice lays down a system of slavery without the power to exercise reason. For Wollstonecraft, these women would not be able to perform their duties as mothers or wives. Women also are given the power to exercise their reason to achieve new heights of virtue and knowledge. For this women should get the kind of education men are given. In this way, Wollstonecraft becomes a pioneer in initiating the discourse of women's rights.