



Biographical Briefing on Mary Wollstonecraft

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Mary Wollstonecraft and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Mary Wollstonecraft, born in London in 1759, was one of the first women during the late eighteenth century to actively call for the rights of women. Wollstonecraft, the daughter of a silk weaver, left home at the age of 19, angry that all her family's small resources went to the oldest son (she was the oldest daughter). At that time, laws supported men's control of the family's money. For instance, even if a woman entered a marriage with money inherited from her family, it was immediately turned over to her husband. If she worked, all her wages were given to her husband. Wollstonecraft did not want to get married and be controlled by her husband like many other women she knew. Instead she established her own small school. Later, she left to work as a servant to a wealthy widow, then as a seamstress, schoolteacher, and finally governess to the Viscount and Lady Kingsborough in Ireland. During the French Revolution in 1789, she lived in France, where she worked and wrote about the rights of women and the French Revolution. She was not married when her first daughter, Fanny, was born in 1794. The next year, Wollstonecraft tried to commit suicide. Eventually she married the famous writer William Godwin after she became pregnant with his child. Godwin, like Wollstonecraft, did not believe in the institution of marriage. He wrote that only his love for her and nothing else "could have induced me to submit to an institution which I wish to see abolished." Wollstonecraft died soon after giving birth to their daughter, Mary Shelley. Even after her marriage, society still condemned her for her unconventional behavior, and after her death she was renounced (spoken badly of) as a prostitute and a monster.



- **Why did Wollstonecraft leave home?**
- **What kind of work did she do after she left home?**
- **How did Wollstonecraft view marriage?**

Women led a restricted life during Wollstonecraft's time. Men generally thought that women had an inferior intellect and considered them weak by nature. Wollstonecraft attributed human nature and behavior to environment, as opposed to heredity. She believed that all people are equal and that every person possesses the natural right to determine his or her own destiny. Human nature can be perfected if education is improved and oppression ended. Oppressive systems—which include the rule of masters over slaves as well as the rule of husbands over wives—corrupt both the oppressed and the oppressor. Thus, all of society would benefit from equality and the end of male domination over women.



- **What was the general attitude of men toward women in the late 1700s?**
- **What did Wollstonecraft believe determined human behavior?**
- **How did she believe human nature could be improved?**

“I am about to display ‘the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers,’” Wollstonecraft wrote in the introduction of her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. During this period in England, women had virtually no rights of political participation. They could not receive an education, vote, or run for public office. In addition, women were not allowed access to the court system—they could not file a complaint, appear in court, or hire a lawyer. Women were not allowed to hold jobs in government, medicine, or a number of other occupations. Inequality between men and women is not the result of natural differences, Wollstonecraft believed, but rather the result of the powerful tyranny (cruel and unjust rule) of men. Women do not have the opportunity to prove their equality because men have kept them in inferior positions. “Let men prove [that women are weaker],” she wrote. If men truly want to confirm women’s inferiority, they must first treat women as equals, she believed.



- **Describe the status of women in eighteenth-century England.**
- **To what did Wollstonecraft attribute inequality?**
- **What did she argue that men must do if they want to prove women are inferior?**

While most of her writing centered on issues of equality between women and men in the home as a way to improve society, Wollstonecraft was also concerned with women’s role in civic life. She believed that humanity’s progress is held back by the fact that women are not allowed to fully contribute to society. She demanded that women, whether married or single, must participate in civic and political life, and that they be able to study professions such as medicine, politics, and business. Wollstonecraft compared the unjust rule of kings over their subjects to the unjust rule of husbands over their wives. She was opposed to monarchy (rule by a king or queen), as well as to all patriarchal (dominated by men) systems. Power corrupts, Wollstonecraft believed, and therefore is the enemy of society. She referred to the reign of monarchs and the color symbolizing royalty as the “pestiferous (harmful) purple,” and wanted to return to a state where every person was her or his own master. “Society will not be whole,” Wollstonecraft wrote in *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, “until the last king is strangled with the guts of the last priest.”



- **To what does Wollstonecraft compare the dominance of husbands over their wives?**
- **What role did she believe women should have in civic and political life?**
- **How did she feel about monarchs?**