

Chapter 2: “The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed,” [Vindication of the Rights of Women](#) Mary Wollstonecraft. 1792.

Outline of chapter

In this chapter, Wollstonecraft argues that women must not be kept in a state of childish innocence. She compares them to men who are conscripted at an early age, and who are taught to value outward displays of virtue over critical thinking.

- Argument that woman is the weaker sex: “To account for, and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been brought forward to prove, that the two sexes, in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character: or, to speak explicitly, women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue” (18).
- On ignorance and beauty: “Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, OUTWARD obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives” (18).
- On the maintaining of childlike/childish innocence: “Men, indeed, appear to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner, when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood” (19).
- On education: “Men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it, and given a family character, as it were, to the century. It may then fairly be inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education” (20).
- “In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason” (20).
- On men who write about women: “...that my objection extends to the whole purport of those books, which tend, in my opinion, to degrade one half of the human species, and render women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue” (21).
- She compares the education of soldiers to that of women: “Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness. Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same; all the difference that I can discern, arises from the superior advantage of liberty which enables the former to see more of life” (22)... “The great misfortune is this, that they both acquire manners before morals...The consequence is natural; satisfied with common nature, they become a prey to prejudices, and taking all their opinions on credit, they blindly submit to authority” (23).
- “Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience” (24).