

## 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.

“I am about to display ‘the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers,’ ” Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in the introduction of her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Wollstonecraft, born in London in 1759, was one of the first women during the late 18th century actively to call for the rights of women. Wollstonecraft was the daughter of a silk weaver who was disappointed that his second child was not a son who could earn wages for the family. During this period in England, women had virtually no rights. 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.

Stop here  
and discuss



- **Where was Wollstonecraft born?**
- **What was Wollstonecraft one of the first women to do?**
- **What rights were women not granted in England during the late 1700's?**

Women led a restricted life during this time. Men generally thought that women had an inferior intellect and considered them weak. Many laws in England and the United States reflected this view. For instance, in most states, men controlled all the family's money and could spend it any way they wanted. Even if a woman entered a marriage with money inherited from her family, it was immediately turned over to her husband. If a woman worked, all her wages were also given to her husband. Women could not sue for divorce; only men could. Wollstonecraft criticized these attitudes and practices in a novel called *The Ways of Women* (1798), which appeared a year after her death. She argued that women had capabilities equal to men and that women should be allowed, in some ways at least, to control their own lives.

Stop here  
and discuss



- **What was the general attitude of men toward women in the late 1700's?**
- **In what ways was marriage unfair to women?**
- **What did Wollstonecraft argue in her novel *The Ways of Women*?**

Wollstonecraft left home at age 19. She did not want to get married and be controlled like many other women she knew. Wollstonecraft, who seemed always ready to take risks, helped her sister escape from her husband, even though her sister was considered stolen property. She raised a daughter by herself, for which she was subjected to frequent humiliating discrimination. Later, Wollstonecraft became a servant to a wealthy widow, then a

seamstress, schoolteacher, and finally governess to the Viscount and Lady Kingsborough in Ireland. She was not happy having to work at menial jobs, but she had more freedom than a married woman. When she was not working, she wrote about women's rights. In her classic book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which was widely read in Europe and the United States and influenced many supporters of women's rights, Wollstonecraft demanded justice for women.

Stop here  
and discuss



- **Why didn't Wollstonecraft marry?**
- **What kinds of jobs did Wollstonecraft hold?**
- **What impact did her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* have?**

Wollstonecraft felt that the restrictions placed on women were both unnatural and unwise. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she wrote, "It is time to restore women to their lost dignity and to make them part of the human race." Only in a society in which women had an independent voice in government, Wollstonecraft argued, could they rise above the image of inferiority placed upon them by men. Wollstonecraft firmly believed that the image of inferiority for women was generated by men. "Men seem designed by [God] to attain a great deal of virtue...till women are almost below the standards of rational beings...in a state of childhood." Wollstonecraft demanded equal opportunities for success in both business and in politics and insisted that men recognize the achievements of women. Women "must have a civil existence [job] in the State, [whether] married or single. Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses.... They might also study politics...[and] Business of various kinds."

Stop here  
and discuss



- **How did Wollstonecraft feel about the restrictions placed on women?**
- **According to Wollstonecraft, who had created an image of inferiority for women?**
- **What rights did Wollstonecraft want women to be granted?**