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## Our Debt to Mary Wollstonecraft, Moral and Intellectual Pioneer for Women

By Susan Roberts

I teach a course entitled Leadership in Writing at the United States Coast Guard Academy that includes both male and female Officer Candidates. The women in my class are strong and unafraid to accept challenges. They perform jobs often seen as men's work, live by the Coast Guard's Core Values of Honor, Respect and Devotion to Duty, and balance their time between being on active duty and being wife, mother, or both. In our classes, we focus on examples of leadership in the military and civilian world.

To mark Women's History Month in March, I asked each Officer Candidate (OC) to select a female who exemplifies leadership and to present a speech about her. Their choices included Hillary Rodham Clinton, Sarah Palin, Margaret Thatcher, Queen Boudicca, Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, Sally Ride, Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks, Susan B. Anthony, Mother Teresa, and Marie Curie. I responded by noting, "I see no one has claimed Mary Wollstonecraft." A few moments of silence were followed by a series of questions: "Who is she?" "Is she in politics?" "Is she a writer?" "Why did you expect us to know her name?" and "Did she have anything to do with the Coast Guard?" I responded, "She was an eighteenth century writer. Women today owe her a debt of gratitude for we are beneficiaries of her ideas, which were quite revolutionary for her times. She advocated moral and intellectual education for women in a world where a woman's voice rarely counted." One of the handful of female OCs in class was curious enough to claim Wollstonecraft as the figure for her

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leadership speech, and all of the students were introduced to the life of this woman, the social changes she called for over two hundred years ago, and the impact of her work on opportunities for women then and now.

### Biographical Overview

Born in England in April of 1759, Mary Wollstonecraft was the second child of a family of seven. Her early years were challenging as her father spent the family fortune on drink instead of his family and her mother favored the oldest son. Ever resourceful as a child and young woman, Wollstonecraft ventured to open a school in 1784. By 1787, she found herself working as editorial assistant to publisher Joseph Johnson in London. Through her work, she associated with some of the famous thinkers, writers, and political commentators of the day including Tom Paine, William Blake, and William Godwin. Developing both writing and editorial talents by 1789, "... Wollstonecraft was established as a translator, reviewer, and minor author ..." (Todd 7).

Haunted by her childhood experiences, Wollstonecraft fought social and moral conventions grounded in male privilege at the expense of women and children. She was headstrong and filled with determination and her own opinions, which she boldly expressed in speech and writing. She advocated moral upbringing for women but engaged in a long-term and tumultuous affair with Gilbert Imlay, an American with whom she parented daughter Fanny in May 1794. When Imlay ended the relationship, Wollstonecraft unsuccessfully attempted suicide, and she was left alone to provide for herself and her child. As Janet M. Todd noted, "Clearly

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Wollstonecraft came to her ideas on women's sorry situation from her own experiences as a dependent and independent woman" (9). Attracted to William Godwin, she became pregnant with his child and married him. Wollstonecraft found an intellectual equal in Godwin, and their relationship gave her freedom and stability that had eluded her for so long. After the birth of Mary, her second daughter, Wollstonecraft developed an infection due to complications with the delivery, and she died a few days later.

Active as a writer even while becoming a mother, Wollstonecraft authored a work entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) that brought her attention as one of the eighteenth century's leading feminists, and her ideas began to have had a far reaching impact on the moral and educational development of women.

#### Her Stances on Women's Education and Virtue

Wollstonecraft emphasized the value of education for women, but she called for something more than opportunities to learn needlework and social graces. She stressed that a woman's education should shape body, mind, and emotions, eventually leading to a sense of independence. Although Wollstonecraft's thinking was ahead of her time, it reflected philosophies of the Enlightenment, which championed the power of education, social reform, and moral worth and development as the right of individuals including women.

Wollstonecraft designed *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* expressly as a retaliatory response to philosopher Edmund Burke and what she considered his masculine folly. She rallied to defend Richard Price, her ally and benefactor, from the

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sharp-tongued attack of Burke; as a result, she leveled harsh criticism against those practices and principles that blatantly discriminated against women. Throughout her work she consistently emphasized her main thesis: Education was necessary for women, and through moral education women would acquire virtue, knowledge and honesty.

For Wollstonecraft, lack of education was the cause of all feminine misery, and since women were denied the opportunity to expand their mental activities in many cases, they could never attain virtue. Thus, they assumed artificial codes of behavior to gain some type of masculine respect and were content to remain ignorant to attract men who would profess love for them. However, women could never remain objects of desire for indefinite periods of time, and even though they sacrificed their youth and middle age to husband and family, women were always restrained by the masculine notion of “the desire of being always women ... [which was] the very consciousness that degrades the sex” (Wollstonecraft 156).

The author sought to partially remedy these problems through the establishment of an educational system of day schools designed to strengthen the fiber of mind, body and heart. As a combination of public and private schools, these new centers of learning would be co-educational and provide women with accessibility not only to an education but also to a virtuous status. Inevitably then, as the author hoped, the myth of masculine superiority would be destroyed at least on an intellectual level, since she admitted that no one could deny men’s physical strength as a natural characteristic.

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Once women received this ideal education of mind, body and heart, they could assert their rights and seek legal and political participation instead of cultivating vanity and indolent behavior designed to please men. Wollstonecraft found women to be lazy and thought that laziness would continue to be a female characteristic unless both mental and bodily moral stamina were required of them. She believed that a sound moral education could enlarge the mind. As a result, feminine blind obedience would cease, and women would no longer be veiled in ignorance under the guise of innocence.

Wollstonecraft's idea of virtue was a composite of goodness, justice, respect, honesty and chastity. Furthermore, she advised the female sex to cultivate modesty and reserve, for women could not remain complacent to be mere objects of pleasure with many vices and follies. Instead, she envisioned that women should reach their full potential through intellectual self-improvement, not embellishments designed to make them physically pleasing to men.

Society could not expect virtuous women unless independence from men became a reality. In Wollstonecraft's mind, without a more equitable system of rights, masculine ignorance and pride would further undermine society. Until women could shed their feminine weakness and learn to develop moral virtues, they would find themselves victims of masculine contempt. Wollstonecraft affirmed that as women became strong willed and morally educated in virtuous behavior, they would earn their equality to men as human creatures and understand that they were "... placed on this earth to unfold their faculties" (Wollstonecraft 32).

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## Enlightened Ideals

Mary Wollstonecraft became a daughter of the Age of Enlightenment as she sought to apply the discipline of ethics and morality to educational and social affairs for women. She drew on rationalism and Newton's idea of an ordered physical world, a world where women could and would have a role, and incorporated ideas from Locke and Hume into her writings. With an emphasis on the mind, where "inner worlds of thought and emotion could be applied to the social sphere as well" (Berlin 27), she saw connections between learning and self-improvement that went far beyond the educational opportunities available to females in the eighteenth century. Locke influenced her work more than the other philosophers and intellectuals, and "although John Locke did not write specifically about the education of girls, many of Mary's ideas paralleled his" (Flexner 59). Both Locke and Wollstonecraft shared a concern for children's diet and health; both opposed any attempt to impede children's interest or curiosity; and both affirmed good character development through intellectual discussion.

Building on her familiarity with Locke's work, Wollstonecraft expanded her knowledge through experiences such as journeying to France to study the philosophies behind and witness effects of the French Revolution. She concluded that the French Revolution was "... the natural outcome of intellectual development in Europe and a sign of genuine social improvement" (Todd 11-12). While in France, she immersed herself in Voltaire's works, for as a writer he looked to explain man and nature in a new rational light, without superstition or theological dogma.

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Returning to England and continuing her quest for knowledge, Wollstonecraft discovered writings by Richard Price who influenced her moral philosophy and concern for conscience. As a preacher, theologian, and philosopher, he advocated a humanitarianism that was quite liberal for the times. Price assisted Wollstonecraft throughout her life, and he was, in fact, a father figure who shared his liberal philosophies with her. Unafraid to speak out on social issues, Price condemned poverty, misery, the lack of educational and career opportunities for females, and the limited future defined for women by men. Heeding the ideas of Locke and Price, Wollstonecraft saw "... that mind and faith go together and enlighten each other" (Flexner 145). Furthermore, she realized "... that reason, no less than faith, comes from God and that they do not conflict" (Flexner 145). Wollstonecraft wanted opportunities for women that would ensure them a real education and preparation for pursuing careers outside the home. She recognized that education of mind and morals would not necessarily improve women's place in society, emancipate them or provide them career opportunities. However, Wollstonecraft felt that changes in women's educational opportunities could become catalysts for society to be reconstructed in ways that would allow women to be full participants in new social settings based on equality and humanitarian concerns.

Progressive and astute in her ideas about family relationships, she realized that parental authority could either destroy or engender children's attitudes and the scope of their mental accomplishments. Thus, she emphasized the important roles that parents as well as educational systems play in fulfilling society's obligations for

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instructing offspring—both males and females—in moral behavior and correct principles of ethics.

Wollstonecraft was a firm believer that education of women's intellect would provide a conduit for their moral education as well and ultimately produce sensible and ethical if not ideal citizens, wives and mothers. Her male critics countered with the argument that formal schooling for women could lead to domestic incompetence, but Wollstonecraft was wise enough to recognize this criticism as yet another tactic designed to perpetuate and perpetuate the idea of feminine weakness. Wollstonecraft insisted that the ideal woman must be the essence of goodness in virtue, truth, justice, education, chastity and rights, yet this ideal woman, even by today's standards, was a very utopian creation. Her high standards for women might have been based on very personal conceptions of feminine life and character. Ironically, this ideal image is one that Mary Wollstonecraft herself could not attain.

Wollstonecraft's relationships with Imlay and Godwin appeared to contradict her own somewhat Puritanical standards, but they and other personal experiences made her feel that she knew what other women needed and solidified conceptions of virtue and chastity that she sought to impose on society at large. Having found a circle of friends and literary acquaintances that advanced her intellectual and moral development, Wollstonecraft expected other women to seek out experiences that would improve their education, moral development and lots in life and, further, lead them to challenge traditional masculine-feminine relations. In her mind, members of both sexes were fully capable of destroying or improving each other. This premise



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prompted Wollstonecraft to call for a “revolution in female manners ... to make them as a part of the human species... reinforcing themselves to reform the world” (Flexner 145).

### Position as a Vanguard for Women’s Rights

Wollstonecraft was ahead of her times with her advocacy for governmental representation that included women and her suggestion that women should enter business enterprises and professions that were masculine territory at the time. Wollstonecraft’s work, written more than two hundred years ago, is relevant today. Today’s women embody many of the rigorous standards Wollstonecraft envisioned. Females at the Coast Guard Academy have much in common with Mary Wollstonecraft. Like her, they are unafraid of life’s challenges, and they are women of character who advocate for and put social change into action. Female OCs adhere to the Coast Guard’s Core Values; they seek truth and justice; they are educated and will further their education while in the military; most importantly, though, they are involved in careers outside the home and family sphere. They have earned a place alongside men because of their physical stamina, determination, pursuit of excellence, dedication to duty, courage, valor, achievement, competitive spirit, humanitarianism and resilience.

As representatives of modern women, female OCs in the Coast Guard have achieved many of the goals Wollstonecraft advocated. In particular, Wollstonecraft would be pleased and moved that the Coast Guard, although a military service focusing on humanitarian missions, expects its members—both male and female—

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to adhere to a formalized concept of morals and values. In *Character in Action, The U.S. Coast Guard on Leadership*, authors Donald T. Phillips and Admiral James M. Loy (Ret.) stress that the Coast Guard mandates a specific set of values:

The noble cause, a different kind of military, small decentralized teams, heritage and tradition, and the seas are all well woven into the fabric of the United States Coast Guard. Equal to these, however, and perhaps even more ingrained into the culture are the core values of *Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty*. These three tenets govern behavior and conduct, are part of every individual's performance evaluation, and may not be turned off after work. They are about more than just being in the Coast Guard. Every person is expected to abide by the core values all the time, as a way of life. There are no exceptions. (12)

The Coast Guard's focus on service to others, values and proper conduct would satisfy Mary Wollstonecraft's call for these traits in her expectations for females and males alike. Over more than 200 years, generations have witnessed societal and cultural revolutions that have fulfilled many of Wollstonecraft's goals and propelled women into the mainstream of the military, government, religion, education, business, medicine and law. These changes have carried forward the philosophy behind *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and its emphasis on moral and intellectual education for women as mechanisms for improving the lives of women and men. The future that Wollstonecraft envisioned assures her a prominent place in the history of the feminist movement and in the circle of feminist philosophers. All women should know Mary Wollstonecraft's name and her contributions to society because we owe her a debt of gratitude for changes in many

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parts of our world that allow women's voices to be heard and that allot women rights and opportunities to fulfill their intellectual and moral potentials as human beings.

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