

Is Wollstonecraft Still Relevant in 2026 India? Lessons from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman for Today's Working Women

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In February 2026, as women in Patna, Bengaluru, Delhi, and beyond chase careers in IT, medicine, startups, academia, and civil services, Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 masterpiece *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* remains strikingly prophetic. Written amid the fervor of the French Revolution and Enlightenment ideals, this 13-chapter treatise is not just an early feminist manifesto—it is a systematic demolition of the idea that women are naturally inferior, and a passionate demand for their full humanity through equal, rational education.

The Core Summary and Themes of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft dedicates her work to French statesman Talleyrand, urging national education systems to include girls on equal terms with boys. Her central thesis: women are not born inferior to men; they are made so by defective education and societal conditioning.

Key themes and arguments woven throughout the book:

The Primacy of Reason — Wollstonecraft opens by asserting that reason is what elevates humanity above animals. Virtue flows from reason cultivated through knowledge. Women, denied rigorous education, are kept in a state of “childhood” — focused on beauty, charm, and pleasing men rather than developing intellect and moral strength.

Education and Virtue — The heart of the book. She condemns the “false system of education” that teaches girls superficial “accomplishments” (music, dancing, embroidery, manners) to make them alluring mistresses or obedient wives, not rational companions or capable citizens. True education, she insists, should build reason, independence, and virtue in both sexes equally. Without it, women remain

weak, dependent, and unable to fulfill duties as wives, mothers, or members of society.

Gender Inequality and Women's Degradation — Women are treated as a “subordinate beings,” not part of the human species. This subordination arises from custom, not nature. Men's tyranny (in education, law, and marriage) degrades women, fostering vanity, cunning, and weakness instead of strength and honesty.

Marriage as Friendship, Not Subordination — Wollstonecraft rejects marriage as master-slave or mere romance. She envisions egalitarian unions based on mutual respect, esteem, and intellectual companionship. Passion fades; lasting harmony comes from friendship between equals. Unequal marriages produce unhappy homes, poor parenting, and societal vice.

Women's Roles in Society and Rational Motherhood — Educated women would raise virtuous, reasoning children (benefiting the nation), contribute productively, and strengthen families. She argues women are essential as educators of the next generation—if kept ignorant, they hinder progress of knowledge and virtue.

Critique of Rousseau and Others — She directly challenges Rousseau's view in *Emile* that women should be educated only to please men. Wollstonecraft insists duties differ by sex, but virtues and moral responsibilities are the same.

In essence, the book argues that denying women rational education perpetuates misery for individuals and society. Empower them, and everyone gains: better marriages, wiser mothers, stronger citizens.

Echoes in 2026 India: The Struggles of Working Women

Over 230 years later, Wollstonecraft's diagnosis feels eerily familiar in India.

Latest PLFS data (January 2026) shows overall female LFPR at 35.1% for ages 15+. Rural stands at 39.7%, urban at 25.5%. Urban female workforce participation lingers around 23% in many reports. Despite girls outnumbering or matching boys in higher education (especially in fields like medicine and engineering), sharp drop-offs occur after marriage or childbirth.

This mirrors Wollstonecraft's warning: superficial or unequal preparation leaves women dependent. In India, many face a modern version of her “accomplishments”—societal pressure on beauty, family expectations, “adjusting”

in marriage, and the invisible load of household management. The “second shift” persists: full-time jobs plus disproportionate childcare, elder care, and domestic duties lead to burnout, career stalls, or exits.

Wollstonecraft would see the motherhood penalty clearly—women exiting formal work post-childbirth, part-time shifts, or opting out of promotions. She’d argue we still educate women partially: degrees yes, but sustained independence, leadership, and shared domestic roles? Not fully.

Her vision of marriage as friendship speaks to today’s debates on paternity leave, mental load, and egalitarian homes. In many Indian households, unequal burdens echo her critique of subordination that weakens both partners and children.

Why Wollstonecraft Matters More Than Ever Here

India layers unique realities—caste, class, regional norms, safety concerns, dowry pressures—but Wollstonecraft’s universal call for reason-based equality transcends borders. She prefigures Indian pioneers like Savitribai Phule (who fought for girls’ education as liberation) and modern drives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao.

Progress is real: rural female LFPR edges up (often via self-employment or necessity), pay gaps narrow in formal sectors, policies evolve (creches, flexible work in some companies). Yet urban educated women remain underrepresented in leadership, and systemic barriers endure.

Wollstonecraft’s unfinished revolution demands we dismantle structures that infantilize women: through education fostering independence, workplaces accommodating life stages, homes sharing burdens equally.

In 2026 India, as working women shatter ceilings daily, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is no historical footnote. It is a blueprint: educate women as full humans, treat them as equals in mind and duty, and society flourishes.