

TO REASON OR TO ROT: AN EXAMINATION OF ABORTION RIGHTS THROUGH WOLLSTONECRAFT'S *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN*

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The patriarchal ideologies that Wollstonecraft criticizes in her 1792 work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, still pervade modern society in many ways—one of the most palpable of which is the state's infringement on women's bodily autonomy through the regulation of abortion. Wollstonecraft's critique on the education of women in society, or as she calls it, the "false system of education" (29), illuminates a new perspective on the current, convoluted discourse surrounding abortion rights. By examining how Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* applies to the decades-long sociopolitical struggle for reproductive rights, I argue that, when the state criminalizes abortion, it is reinforcing a "false system of education" (29) by reducing women's identities to their reproductive abilities.

Although reproductive rights have always been a significant fixture in the lives of women throughout history, many of the reproductive rights struggles in Western society today can be traced to the criminalization of abortion the late 19th century (Petchesky 72). Around this time, the United States' legislation reflected an increased interest in "the centralization and rationalization of control over the movement, passions, reproduction, and secretions of bodies" (Petchesky 72). The state's sudden need to seize control of abortion was a reaction to the emergence of women's rights movements around the time of the Civil War—which were not only demanding the right to

vote, but also the right of voluntary motherhood (Siegel 929). Consequently, an anti-abortion movement surfaced, calling for the criminalization of abortion by emphasizing the importance of procreation. The argument put forth by the campaign against abortion was that without procreation, marriage was nothing more than "legalized prostitution" (Siegel 929). Underlying this anti-abortion movement was the fear that access to reproductive care could undermine the current social order where men were the dominant power in their families (Solinger 11). Thus, the criminalization of abortion was instituted to reinforce the stereotypical gender roles within marriages—where the man makes all the decisions, and the primary role of women is to procreate (Siegel 929). Regulating abortion then became an instrument of control, wielded by the state to enforce patriarchal ideals. To this day, the efforts of the state to exercise control over women through abortion laws continue. Most recently, the 2021 US Supreme Court Decision, *Dobbs v. Jackson*, effectively overturned *Roe v. Wade* and eliminated abortion as a constitutional right in the US (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*)—reminding us that the discussion of abortion rights is as important as ever.

As I will show, Wollstonecraft's commentary on the "false system of education" (29) explains how the state uses the regulation of abortion to tie women's identities to reproduction in

two different ways. First, I will examine how the “false system of education” contributes to the “miseducation” of women in their early years—where they are conditioned to adopt reproduction as part of their identities. Then, I will analyze how the regulation of abortion contributes to the other sphere of the “false system of education”—which is the neglect of women’s education. Specifically, I will discuss how being denied access to an abortion puts a strain on the lives of women, preventing them from seeking an education, and thus, an identity beyond motherhood.

As Wollstonecraft argues in her *Vindication*, central to the “false system of education” (29) in society is the miseducation of women. As Wollstonecraft describes, women are only taught to mind their manners, and tend to their beauty, when instead, “they ought to cherish ambition” (29). Wollstonecraft points out that the reason why women are only focused on acquiring surface-level accomplishments is because they have been raised to believe that “the only way women can rise in the world ... [is] by marriage” (32). Therefore, Wollstonecraft illustrates that the miseducation of women is caused by society teaching women that they should only ever aspire to gain domestic skills and accomplishments—like having a family—instead of developing rational minds. As Wollstonecraft explains, the idea that women should be relegated to domestic duties comes from the fact that they are seen by men to have inherent “desire[s] connected with the impulse of nature to propagate the species” (68). In other words, men have effectively reduced women as a means to an end—to their reproductive abilities—through the mass miseducation of women. Since women

are “miseducated” from a young age to believe that domestic abilities are crucial to their success in life, they begin to internalize the belief that reproductive abilities are a defining part of their identities.

One of the main reasons why women begin to internalize reproductive abilities is because there is a persistent pressure on women to take control of their reproductive care from a young age. This is exemplified through the fact that women are taught from a young age to be primarily responsible for providing/taking different forms of birth control when engaging in heterosexual penetrative sex. It is important to note that out of all available birth control methods, eleven of them, including the contraceptive pill, intrauterine devices, and birth control patches, are designed to be used by cisgender women (Shahvisi 328-336). In contrast, only two birth control methods are designed for cisgender men: condoms and vasectomies (328-336). Even in cases where men use contraception, ninety-one percent of the time, women are predicted to have been “involved in ensuring contraception” (Shahvisi 328-336). Thus, women are often the ones who have to shoulder the burden of using/providing birth control based on what is available. In this way, society treats girls “like women, almost from their very birth” (Wollstonecraft 109) because they are told—from the time they first begin engaging in/thinking about sexual activity—that reproductive care is their responsibility as women in society.

The disproportionate responsibility placed on women to monitor their reproductive care from a young age only worsens when the state criminalizes

abortion. There is a strong link between restrictive abortion laws and increased stigma surrounding abortion due to legislation's role in "conveying messages of social or moral disapproval" (Jozkowski et al. 443-461) to society. In addition, studies have shown that public opinion tend to hold women and healthcare providers the "most responsible for illegal abortion" (Jozkowski et al. 443-461). So, when abortion is criminalized, not only do women potentially face the criminal punishments enacted by the state, but they also face a secondary punishment—in the form of the social stigma associated with seeking an illegal abortion. As a result, women are more likely to closely regulate their sexual activity, out of fear of the added societal consequences of getting pregnant and having to seek out an illegal abortion. The looming threat of interpersonal and legal punishment forces women into impossible situations of internal turmoil where they essentially become "slaves to their bodies" (Wollstonecraft 70) because so much of their lives—and in turn, their identities—are determined by their ability to reproduce.

In this sense, the societal conditioning of women to internalize reproduction as a part of their identities can be viewed as part of the larger, centuries long, miseducation of women that Wollstonecraft describes in her *Vindication*. As Wollstonecraft says, women are only seen to be valuable through their connection with men as "daughters, wives, and mothers" (52), only defined by their capability of "fulfilling those simple duties" (52). So, women are "miseducated" into believing that domestic duties, including reproductive care, are their sole responsibility, and this is further

demonstrated and perpetuated by the unavailability of alternative birth control methods. Furthermore, this means that when the state criminalizes abortion, there is an even larger responsibility put on women to regulate their reproductive care, which pushes women further into a state of "perpetual conflict" (110) where they are no longer able to distinguish between their individual identities and their ability to reproduce. Therefore, the state weaponizes abortion regulation as a means to spread the patriarchal delusion that reproduction is all a woman is capable of—which is what Wollstonecraft pinpoints as the detrimental belief shaping the false education of women.

Another critical message Wollstonecraft conveys in her *Vindication* is that the "false system of education" is not just the miseducation of women—where women are manipulated into embodying an identity placed on them by men—but is also the complete neglect of women's education. As Wollstonecraft states, because men desire for women to serve men's interests instead of forming their own identities, they purposely "endeavour to keep women in the dark" (51). Since the "false education" of women is focused on only teaching women to strive towards domestic achievements, what little knowledge they are able to learn is "rather by snatches; and ... in general, [is] only a secondary thing" (49). Thus, women's education remains neglected because they only learn secondarily from men—who have vested interest in keeping women in a subordinate position. Whilst men are allowed to obtain reason, which effectively acts as the "power of improvement" (80), women are "not allowed to have this distinction" (80);

they are forever destined to only acquire knowledge from men and shape their identities around the desires of men. However, as Wollstonecraft argues, the ability to practice reason is inherent in us all (80). So, why should women's identities be chained to the ideals of man if they are capable of reason? Indeed, Wollstonecraft points out that, for this exact reason, women cannot remain uneducated—they must have “employment of life, an understanding to improve” (90) or else women are just left to “procreate and rot” (90). However, it is apparent that, in many instances in modern society, women still carry extraordinary burdens that inhibit them from obtaining a fulfilling employment in life—one of them being the responsibilities that come with motherhood.

The pattern of expecting women to be responsible for the “domestic realm” continues into adulthood, as there is an overwhelming societal expectation that women should be primarily responsible for parenting children. As Betty Friedan describes in *The Feminine Mystique*, the “ideal” family in Western society traditionally required women to accept the occupation of “housewife,” whereas men were in charge of financially providing for the family (Friedan 18). This “ideal” family was associated with “pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye ... [and] depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school” (Friedan 18). Although society has strayed from this idealization of the “nuclear family” that Friedan wrote about in the 1960's, society's expectations of women's roles in the home remain the same. It is a long-established fact that women are more likely to be the primary caregivers for

One of the undeniable consequences of the state criminalizing abortion is that many women are involuntarily plunged into motherhood before they are ready to raise children. Since women are far more likely to be the primary caregiver of a child, denying women access to abortion not only forces motherhood on them, but in many cases, often alters the trajectory of their lives. Studies have shown that women who are denied an abortion report serious financial struggles in the following years, with many of them not being able to cover basic living expenses (Foster et. al. 1290-1296). Moreover, considering that many of the women who seek abortions do so because they believe that they cannot financially support a child (1290-1296) and have lower levels of education (1290-1296), barring them from getting an abortion propels them further into the cycle of poverty. Being denied an abortion restricts women from going beyond motherhood because, as previously discussed, they now hold a disproportionate responsibility to care for a child. Many of the women denied an abortion can hardly survive financially, let alone have enough mental capacity and capital to fund a social life or seek higher education outside of motherhood. In this sense, the criminalization of abortion puts women in an impossible predicament where being a mother dictates their life outcomes and becomes the defining factor in their personal identities.

Through this lens, the state then becomes complicit in the false system of education that Wollstonecraft describes because it contributes to the mass neglect of women's education. By denying women access to abortions, the state is physically preventing women from gaining an identity outside

motherhood. As women are robbed of the ability to pursue personal ambitions—whether that is an education, a fulfilling means of employment, or anything else that enriches their lives—they are also being robbed of the ability to pursue reason. It is not to say that women who are mothers cannot possess reason—but rather it is to say that forcing motherhood on women significantly limits their ability to govern their identities because childcare often monopolizes their lives. In this sense, the state obscures the pursuit of reason from women and “keep[s] women in the dark” (Wollstonecraft 51) by making reproduction their primary purpose in life. However, as Wollstonecraft states, the ability to reason is essential to gaining “an immortal soul” (90) and becoming a complete person. So, when the state criminalizes abortion, it not only hinders women’s ability to reason, but it also strips them of their humanity. When women do not have the right to an abortion, the message from the state is clear: women are not considered to be full, and complete human beings, capable of determining for themselves what is best for their bodies, their health, and their lives. Without education, women cannot develop the ability to reason; and without reason, women can never gain an individual identity separate from reproduction. It is essential then, for women to have the ability to determine for themselves if they want to have an abortion, not only because they are capable of reason, but because of the lasting impacts pregnancy and motherhood can have on their lives.

As the state’s grip tightens around women’s reproductive freedom, the question, “[i]s this all?” (Friedan 15) is raised by women again and again. We

ask ourselves, is this all “[we] were ... created for?” (Wollstonecraft 89). It is important, in these moments, to keep the beliefs and ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* at the back of our minds. As I have shown, Wollstonecraft’s idea of a false system of education highlights how the state uses the regulation of abortion as a means to diminish women’s identities to their ability to reproduce through both the miseducation of women, and the neglect of women’s education. Wollstonecraft wrote her *Vindication* with the belief that we were all born with the inherent ability to reason (80). If women are denied this ability through abortion restriction, then their identities become perpetually tied to being objects of reproduction; ultimately, under these conditions, they are left by society to merely “procreate and rot” (90). Thus, we must always remind ourselves of Wollstonecraft’s belief that women were made for so much more than procreation—we were made to be “rational creatures” (31)—capable of deciding for ourselves what is best for our lives; capable of learning, growing, and becoming better than what we have been taught by the world.

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