

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. This is our third year and we are delighted to sponsor this event. Delighted to have our partners the Australian High Commission and delighted to have NUS debate team – continuing to work with us.

Debates have been part of society for a very long time – And, take on a variety of differences

In Tibet the Buddhist Kings enjoyed a rich history of debate - the usual form is a debate between a Challenger, standing and asking questions, and a Defender, sitting and answering those questions.

The Challenger punctuated a question by a dramatic clap hand – at which time the Defender was to respond. The right hand represented meaning – especially the practice of compassion and the left hand represented wisdom.

Bringing the two hands together represents the joining of wisdom and method. At the moment of the clap, you hear the left foot stomp down and that represents slamming shut the door to rebirth.

Debating societies began in London in the early eighteenth century, and were a prominent fixture of society.

The origins of the debating societies are not certain, but by the mid-18th century, London fostered an incredibly active debating society culture.

Similar to today, the topics ranged from current events and governmental policy and the societies welcomed participants from both genders and all social backgrounds, making them one of the best examples of the enlarged **public sphere of the Age of Enlightenment**.

Let's look at this period of the **ENLIGHTENMENT** for a moment – as there are direct correlations to what we're doing today – WOMEN

It is fascinating that the **The Enlightenment** was a time when writers and thinkers sharply debated questions about women's rights.

The Enlightenment Period – 17th & 18th century a cultural movement of intellectuals.

It is even more fascinating or maybe a little scary that we are still talking about women's issues today.

In the Enlightenment period – the Issues of women’s were framed in terms of “patriotic motherhood.” “liberty,” “natural rights,” and “emancipation” from familial control.

Both male and female Enlightenment thinkers and writers appeared on both sides of the issues.

One of the most famous debates was:

Mary Wollstonecraft, a **BRITISH FEMINIST** and writer of the influential “**A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,**” responding to a French proposal to educate girls only up the age of eight, **when they then should be trained in domestic duties at home.**

She feared the ideas of the famous writer **Jean-Jacque Rousseau**, who in his novels, such as Emile (1762), **drove home the point that women’s education must prepare them to serve men. Rousseau glorified women as WIFE & MOTHER**

Rousseau: “.....WHAT is most wanted in a woman is gentleness – A man, unless he is a **perfect monster**, will sooner or later yield to his wife’s gentleness, and the victory will be hers.

Rousseau argued that, **Little girls always dislike learning to read and write, but they are always ready to learn to sew.** The search for abstract and speculative truths for principles and axioms in science, for all that tends to wide generalizations, is beyond a woman’s grasp.”

Wollstonecraft responds: “What opinion are we to form of a system of education, when the author (Rousseau in Emile) says...‘**Educate women like men, and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.**’

She SAYS: **I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves. The most perfect education, in my opinion, is ...to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent.**

Wollstonecraft maintains that women deserve of the same fundamental rights as men.

Looking around the room today – it is obvious that we have moved beyond the issues presented by Rousseau and Wollstonecraft. Men and women – are educated at the same rate – as a matter of fact in some countries the percentage of women graduating from university and with higher degrees has surpassed men.

How far have we come?

I believe **A LONG WAY** – certainly along way away from Rousseaus education idea for women.

But I can also argue that some of these “feelings or thoughts” permeate women’s lives today.

Are there areas where inequality in education of girls and boys still exists?

In some countries – YES. But not here, **not in Singapore.**

But....

Are there areas where inequality still exist ? Women are 50% of the workforce but disappear – as they move up to higher levels of business, academics, NGO’s, public organisations – there numbers SHRINK.

So you see – I can argue both sides – in some areas women have advanced and in other areas there is still room for improvement.

But arguing both sides is a good thing - isn’t that what debates are about? Isn’t that what we are here to do today.

So, I will close leaving you with one quote :

Don’t raise your voice, improve your arguments. (desmond tutu)

Thank you for your time and GOOD LUCK!