

WOMEN IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION:
THE FAILURE OF THE PARISIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT
IN RELATION TO THE THEORIES OF FEMINISM
OF ROUSSEAU AND CONDORCET

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Introduction

The French Revolution has variously been hailed as the war of the liberation of the human race and decried as a blood-thirsty lesson on the workings of mob mentality. Both of these viewpoints are viable: never before in the history of Western Civilization had there been such a mechanized and state-supported slaughter of citizens, or such a triumph for traditionally oppressed groups...of men. Women, despite their extensive participation in both the relatively orderly and legitimate political and legislative processes which characterize the first phase of the Revolution, as well as in the violence of the Terror, were no better off in 1804 when the Napoleonic Code was instituted than they had been when they marched to Versailles to fetch the king fifteen years earlier.

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The status of women did undergo significant fluctuation in the years between 1789 and 1804, and at one point (late 1792-early 1793) they had obtained the legal right to marry without parental consent, initiate divorce, name the father of an illegitimate child and secure monetary compensation for the seduction, and own property. Primogeniture was abolished along with the nobility, and equality of succession laws insured that female heirs would be allowed to inherit. How did the women of Paris achieve these ends, and more importantly, what forces dragged the hard-won triumph out of their hands and pushed them back beneath the restraining rule of their husbands and fathers? The answer lies in the contemporary notions about women and the image of the ideal revolutionary wife and mother propounded by the political leaders, philosophers, and even the women of the time.

What the Women Did

The women of Paris had traditionally been much involved in street politics, especially if the issue centered around subsistence.¹ These active Parisiennes expressed their opinions and channelled their energies through petitions, demonstrations, and the system of *taxation populaire*, whereby a large crowd composed mostly of women would seize a merchant's wares, distribute them amongst the populace at *le prix juste* (the fair price), and then return the proceeds to the shopkeeper. The Revolution heightened the political activity of Parisian women. They threw themselves into the spirit of the times, taking as their own the issues with which their husbands were grappling. For this reason, a woman's social class usually determined which issues she chose to embrace and fight for.²

Most of these issues were defined in the *cahiers des doléances* collected by the government when the Estates-General were summoned in May 1789. In these notebooks were listed the grievances of the entire country, laboriously copied out and delivered to the newly elected body to be mulled over and corrected. Although

women were denied representation in the Estates-General and had a much lower literacy rate than men, they made certain that their concerns were included in the *cahiers*. It is in these notebooks that the wide difference between reforms desired by the market women and those desired by bourgeois and noble women first becomes evident. The market women demanded protection of their professional rights through the reestablishment of medieval trade guilds and complained about their work conditions, filthy hospitals, and the social injustice of having daily to work hard eking out an existence while others earned money through taxes and lived lazy, extravagant lives. In contrast to the practical concerns and frustrations of the working women, the requests of aristocratic women focused on civil rights issues such as obtaining the vote, representation, equality in marriage, and initiating divorce.³

Two areas in which the demands of the two classes of women overlapped were education and prostitution. In a feat of logic that men must have deemed incredible for mere women to perform, the wives and mothers of France reasoned that without an education, poor and desperate girls had no way of supporting themselves save prostitution. And prostitution was obviously an extremely degrading profession, not to mention the fact that it threatened the sanctity of the home, and therefore the happiness of all members of the household. Thus, as the women assured their men in the *cahiers*, they were not seeking education and job opportunities to compete with the dominant sex or provide a diversion for well-off women who had children to care for, but to offer alternative professions to indigent women, and consequently to preserve the treasured domestic bliss.⁴ Although women deserved and were capable of benefitting from an education, their place was in the home and any knowledge they acquired should be used only to avoid prostitution, please their husbands, and intelligently rear their children.⁵ This attitude, held even by staunch advocates of women's rights, was one of those which led to the ultimate failure of the women's movement in Revolutionary France.

Not content with their passive role in constructing the *cahiers*, the Parisiennes sprang immediately into the spotlight at the onset of the Revolution during the October Days. On 5 and 6 October 1789, a crowd of six thousand Parisian women, accompanied by the National Guard, marched to Versailles to demand bread from King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette in person. Unlike later feminist clubs and movements, this expedition was made up of mixed social classes. A large percentage of the crowd were market women, but others were actresses or bourgeois housewives.⁶ They stormed the monarch's headquarters, and after the death of two of Louis' Swiss Guards, a small delegation of market women gained an audience with the king and the National Assembly. Their complaints mirrored many of those in the *cahiers*: the rich were hoarding grain, there was not enough bread, and what bread there was was exorbitantly priced. King Louis promised to produce bread for the masses, and allowed the women to escort himself, his family, and his court back to Paris. This put the sovereign monarch within reach of the irate populace where, the women assured him, he would find faithful advisors who could tell him how things really stood with his subjects, enabling him to act accordingly.⁷

Even at this early stage of the Revolution, attempts were made to disguise the role that women were playing, and playing successfully. The governmental investigation of the October Days, the Chatelet Inquiry, promoted a conspiracy theory which declared that the women who participated in the march on Versailles had been bribed and led by men, and that many of those involved were not women at all, but men in women's clothing.⁸

The most outstanding individual of the women's movement of the French Revolution was Olympe de Gouges, a Parisian playwright who wrote "The Declaration of the Rights of Woman" in 1791. This document was a response to the new French constitution of September of that same year, "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," which divided the population into "active" and "passive" citizenry according to wealth, social class, and sex. With even certain classes of men having their rights

restricted, it is no surprise that all women fell into the “passive” category.⁹ De Gouges was a monarchist, and as such was not trying to overthrow the traditional French government. This left her free to concern herself exclusively with the question of women’s rights.

Olympe de Gouges had made a name for herself as early as October 1789, when she appeared in front of the National Assembly to propose a radical reform program. She propounded the necessity of full legal equality of the sexes, wide job opportunities for women, a state alternative to the private dowry system, schooling for girls, and the creation of a national theater where only plays by women could be performed. De Gouges’ commitment to the “natural, inalienable” rights of women sprang from a deeper belief in the full equality of all people, including those of other races. She felt that the natives being exploited in French colonies should be granted their freedom and legal equality, even if it cost France her empire.¹⁰

Many of these reforms were reflected in de Gouges’ “Declaration,” which mirrored the Constitution, ascribing the same rights to women which had already been given to men. De Gouges advocated the establishment of a National Assembly of Women, which would represent the concerns of the weaker sex and work with the Assembly of Men to promote happiness for all. A single standard of justice is necessary to a moral state, de Gouges wrote, even though the sexes may be separately represented. This radical playwright also demanded complete freedom of speech for her sex. “Woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum,” she declared in a speech in front of the Assembly.¹¹

The reasoning behind Olympe de Gouges’ beliefs, like that of other philosophers of the times such as Wollstonecraft and Condorcet, was that “if the grounds for universal human rights are to be meaningful...they must apply to all sentient beings without exception.”¹² Women, endowed by nature with the same mental capabilities as men, had a natural right to education and self-government, as did men. Unfortunately for the cause, no one ever questioned the view that women also had a natural duty to remain

in the domestic sphere and raise children. This conflict between two views of the natural position of women ultimately led to the failure of the women's movement of the French Revolution.

Perhaps the most significant female participation in the French Revolution came in the early 1790s with the advent of the women's political club. Such associations, which provided members with intellectual stimulation and a way to exert political pressure on the National Assembly, proliferated during the Revolution, but none admitted women until January 1790, when *Le Confederation des amis de la vérité* (The Confederation of the Friends of the Truth) was founded. In addition to having a general policy supportive of the crucial women's rights questions of female education and wife-initiated divorce, this club offered a women's section, led by Dutch immigrant Etta Palm D'Aelders. Palm declared the Women's Section to be dedicated to the task of achieving legal rights for women. Among the desired reforms were elimination of primogeniture, protection against wife beating, a divorce bill favorable to women, and political equality between the sexes.

Palm evidently decided that a mere Women's Section was not strong enough to serve her purposes, and after giving an impassioned speech concerning each woman's ability to further the Revolution by influencing her family, in March of 1791, she established *Les Amies de la vérité*, a club entirely for women.¹³ The club exacted prohibitive dues, so membership was restricted to the upper class. *Les Amies* functioned as a social as well as political club: the women spent a great deal of time and money assisting the poor. As the first exclusively female club, *Les Amies* also cleared the way for the establishment of *Les Citoyennes republicaines revolutionnaires* (The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women), the most radical women's club of the French Revolution.

The Society was founded in February 1793 by Pauline Leon, an unmarried chocolate maker, and Claire Lacombe, a provincial actress. It was a well-organized, ruthless league which supported the Jacobin takeover and demanded that the Terror be rigorously enforced "for the protection of the citizens." The

Citoyennes would patrol the streets and markets attired in a uniform of *le bonnet rouge* (the red liberty cap), a tricolor ribbon, and trousers, searching out individuals suspected of counterrevolutionary activity whom they would bring before the revolutionary tribunals for trial. They carried daggers and pistols in defiance of the law barring women from bearing arms, and were not squeamish about using them. Feminist issues were not so important to the *Citoyennes* as was Revolutionary ideology.¹⁴ They were a group of women caught up in the fervor of the Terror and the ecstasy of revolution. They did not worry about their femaleness—they were people determined to care for the Fatherland by promoting the Revolutionary ideals.

The Society tried to force its revolutionary ideology on others by putting a proposal through the National Assembly in September 1793 making the tricolor cockade mandatory public attire for all women. When the Assembly refused to be so cooperative concerning the question of rehabilitating prostitutes, the Society broke its ties to the Jacobin Party. This was the first in a series of events which alienated the *Citoyennes* from public support, and eventually led to their downfall.¹⁵

In October 1793, members of the Society attacked market women in the streets who were disobeying the law by not wearing the tricolor cockade. The market women responded by storming a Society meeting and beating several members, and then filing a formal complaint with the National Assembly. The Assembly, with the unfriendly Jacobins in the majority, thereby dissolved all women's political organizations. When a delegation of *Citoyennes* appeared in the galleries a few days later to protest this decision, the Assembly refused to let them speak and voted never again to allow a deputation of women to be heard. The women were chided for forsaking their families and reminded that their place was in the home. (It must be noted, however, that most of the militant Parisiennes had either already raised their children or hadn't had them yet. The political activities of these women were not tearing them away from their families.)¹⁶ In a particularly condescending speech, Rep. Pierre Chaumette declared that women had no place

in the public sphere, as they had proven by their extreme actions towards each other, and reminded them of the well-deserved fate of Olympe de Gouges, who had been guillotined as a counterrevolutionary earlier that year.¹⁷ After this defeat, women could do no more than circulate petitions and silently watch the proceedings of the National Assembly from the galleries. They were to remain at home and garner information from their husbands, fathers and sons.

Two years after the dissolution of the women's clubs, women once more found a reason to raise their political voices. In February 1795 the state-supported workshops which had provided jobs for the poor for nearly six years were disbanded, and the bread ration was reduced to a meager two ounces a day.¹⁸ The women of Paris responded with the traditional bread riots. These riots, however, were not met by the leaders with traditional aplomb. By May, the Assembly had passed laws requiring women to stay in their houses, and stating that groups of five or more women found on the streets would be disbanded by force and held under arrest.¹⁹ Nor were women any longer allowed to sit in the Assembly's listening galleries. The political activism of women in the French Revolution had come to an end.

Ideas and Ideals about Women

There were a variety of ideas about women circulating at the time of the French Revolution. Among the most prominent were those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Marquis de Condorcet, the former being heartily antifeminist, and the latter just as heartily profeminist. The two philosophers agreed on the fact that the proper vocation for a lady was that of a housekeeper, but held conflicting beliefs when it came down to the method by which a woman might be best trained for her role.

“Rousseau saw women as a gender with functions totally separate from men, with no overlap of activity.”²⁰ Women were by nature constructed to flourish only in a domestic environment,

pleasing their husbands and bearing them children. Their frail constitutions were not made to deal with the toils and troubles of life in the public sphere, or the burden of knowledge. Women were not, however, completely useless. They were naturally modest and chaste, and were morally superior to men. The supreme duty of a woman was to create a haven of serenity for her husband to relax in when he chose to withdraw from the world outside, and to properly raise the children. Since these were the boundaries set for women by nature, education and political rights were not necessary to their existence, and would probably damage any chance of their happiness, as well as that of their families.

Rousseau felt that the only education a young girl needed should be provided at home by her mother rather than in a school. She should be allowed to run around outdoors to improve her health, and taught that women were made to marry, keep house, raise children, and improve the lives of their men. Religion should be left out of the education, as the girl's husband could teach her what she needed to know about God once she reached adulthood. Maternity was the culmination and purpose of life for a woman. Nature had created her that way, and granting women education and political equality with men would merely upset the natural order of things and cause problems.²¹

Unlike Rousseau, Condorcet believed that women shared identical political rights with men. In his essay "On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship," published in 1790, he wrote:

Now the rights of men result simply from the fact that they are sentient beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning concerning those ideas. Women, having the same qualities, must necessarily possess equal rights. Either no individual of the human species has any true rights, or all have the same. And he or she who votes against the rights of another of whatever religion, color, or sex, has thereby abjured his own.²²

Having dealt with the charge of mental inferiority, the Marquis turned his attention to the assertion that women were physically unable to cope with the stress induced by the responsibility of properly exercising one's rights. "Why should people

prone to pregnancy and other passing indispositions be barred from the exercise of rights no one would dream of denying those who have gout or catch cold easily?" he demanded.²³

In contrast to popular opinion, Condorcet held that women as well as men were reasonable creatures, and that they did possess a sense of justice. The fact that they obeyed their feelings rather than their consciences hinged upon, not Nature, but society. That would change once their minds were expanded through education and they had gained the confidence which comes from being considered equal citizens. This would also increase their capabilities to properly raise their children and provide stimulating company for their husbands. Like Rousseau, Condorcet felt that the place of the woman was in the home. The main difference between the two philosophers lies in the fact that Condorcet believed that granting women political rights would not pull them away from the domestic sphere, but would better equip them for performing their duties.²⁴

Nearly everyone, including the women themselves, agreed with Condorcet's appraisal of the situation. Even the radical Mary Wollstonecraft did not foresee such a calamity as a mass exodus of women from the domestic realm if they were to succeed in their quest for equal rights. The ideal woman of the Revolution was an intelligent wife and mother who could readily converse with her husband and bring her children up to love their fellow citizens and the Republic. It was never in the public mind that women should be anything more than loving housewives, and all efforts to win rights were aimed at improving the female's ability as such. This vision of women greatly inhibited the feminists in their drive for equality. They argued that, not only did they have the natural capabilities to make positive use of education and political rights, but that they needed the knowledge to better fulfill their natural roles as wives and mothers. Despite the truth of these statements, the terms used tended to reinforce stereotypes and promote sexual inequality.²⁵

Despite the promotion of traditional stereotypes as a method of securing new rights, for a while it did seem that women

were making some headway. As stated in the Introduction, there was a time when women enjoyed nearly equal status with men. After all that the weaker sex had done for the Revolution, and in light of all of the rational arguments in favor of women's rights, why were women once again demoted to the status of second class citizens, denied any participation in the public sphere and reduced to complete dependence on the men in their lives? What were the reasons behind this backsliding?

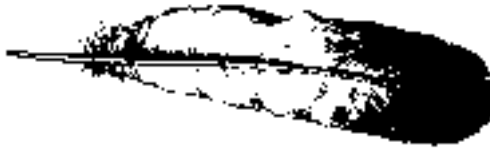
Conclusion

Women were obviously important contributors to the popular movement during the French Revolution. They staged demonstrations and food riots, presented petitions to the National Assembly, and brought the royal family back to the governmental capital. They agitated ceaselessly for the political and civil rights they felt they deserved, and backed up their demands with well-thought-out logical arguments. They were supported in their pleas for equality by such influential Enlightenment thinkers as the Marquis de Condorcet and Mary Wollstonecraft. With so many forces pushing to catapult women into the public arena and win for them equal rights, what caused their defeat? How did the men in government manage to overcome the women's movement with such ease, placing the second sex back in the home, under the auspices of father and husband once more? The answer is simple. Everyone, whether or not they supported women's aspirations to equality, believed that women belonged in the home, caring for their families. Anything they gained through education or legal equality was simply to enrich them in their roles as wives and mothers.

After the violent altercations between the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women and the market women in October 1793, the National Assembly's worst fears concerning women seemed to be realized. Rather than using the new civil and political freedoms they'd won to better care for their families, the women

were brazenly swarming in the streets brandishing weapons at each other, meddling in political affairs that they obviously did not understand, and generally causing disorder. The Assembly felt that women had proven themselves “lacking in the necessary moral and physical strength required to debate, to draw up resolutions, and to deliberate,” as Andre Amar, Chairman of the Committee of General Security declared after the complaint of the market women was filed.²⁶

Thus, when women broke out of the traditional mold and used their newfound rights for purposes other than to converse with their mates and educate their children, they found themselves right where they’d started, pushed back into the home and the suffocating embrace of their husbands and fathers.



¹ Joan B. Landes, Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) p. 109

² Landes, p. 105

³ Mary Linnear, Daughters of Time: Women in the Western Tradition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982) p. 104; Darline G. Levy, Harriet B. Applewhite, and Mary D. Johnson, Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979) p. 14

⁴ Linnear, p. 105; Landes, p. 109

⁵ Landes, p. 123

⁶ Linnear, p. 105

⁷ Landes, p. 110

⁸ Ibid., p. 111

⁹ Ibid., p. 122

¹⁰ Landes, p. 124

¹¹ Ibid., p. 126

¹² Ibid., p. 125

¹³ Ibid., p. 120

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 141

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 143

¹⁶ Harriet B. Applewhite and Darline G. Levy, Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990) p. 63

¹⁷ Landes, p. 145

¹⁸ Linnear, p. 108

¹⁹ Dorothy McBride Stetson, Women's Rights in France (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) p. 29

²⁰ Linnear, p. 96

²¹ Ibid., p. 97

²² Landes, p. 114

²³ Linnear, p. 105

²⁴ Landes, p. 116

²⁵ Ibid., p. 123

²⁶ Ibid., p. 144