

Liberty for All?

An Exploration of the Status of Women in Revolutionary France

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The French Revolution of 1789 brought with it hope for a new social order characterized by liberty and equality for all. These concepts of liberty and equality stemmed from Enlightenment ideas that spread throughout France in the decades preceding the Revolution. While the Revolution's propagation of these ideas opened the path towards universal male liberation, they limited the social and political freedoms of women by confining them to the private sphere. During the Old Regime, women had no formal access to politics, but they were not alone, since most men were in the same exact position. However, after the Revolution women were explicitly and legally denied from any participation in government. While women largely accepted their subordination and confinement to the private sphere, revolutionary principles motivated them to fight for better treatment against government policies that invaded their domestic lives. Although at times helpful to the Revolutionary cause, women's involvement in the public sphere generated male anxiety due to fear of social ruin caused by female ignorance and insubordination. In an attempt to restrain women from interfering in their affairs, the men of the Revolution passed laws that deprived women of any social or political existence. Ultimately, the rigid belief in this gendered order prevailed, and the failure of the Revolution came to be blamed upon women. By inserting themselves into the foreground of politics, women countered the belief that they were "apolitical animals"; this stirred male fears about the female-initiated collapse of their ideal revolutionary social structure, and caused them to further repress female activity and liberties.

The Revolution of 1789 declared the French nation as sovereign, and it was postulated that no portion of the people could be allowed to exercise power over or make decisions for the population as a whole. The equality of rights was established by nature, and Robespierre defined this liberty as "the power that belongs to man to exercise, at his pleasure, all his faculties."¹ Rights belonged equally to all men, with no mention of women. The Enlightenment's increased emphasis on the individual and the "individuality of male destiny" enhanced male importance to an even greater extent. Man was the active component—it was for him to "go forth into the world, to do great deeds, and to think great thoughts."² Pierre Roussel further romanticized the male's superior nature: "In the male...his proud step, his original ideas, in a word, everything retraces in him the image of force, and carries the imprint of the sex that must master and protect the other."³

In the Enlightenment language of eighteenth-century France, the male was the absolute prototype—females were just a variation, an "other."⁴ There was hardly any attempt to apply the principles of liberty to the female sector of the nation. According to historian Candice E. Proctor, the discrepancy between the wording of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and its actual practice in relation to the sexes is so glaring that the authors probably did not even pause to consider women, who constituted half the population of France. Females in French society were always hidden behind the men in their lives.⁵ For all the progress made during the Enlightenment, the condition of woman in society was not improved. Even Diderot, who was considered to be "the epitome of enlightened thought," took woman's otherness and inferiority for granted.⁶

Females were the second sex, a deviation from the norm of the male. Women were incapable of reflection or comprehension of generalized conceptions, and thus, it was not in their destiny to be political animals. They were "indecisive and capricious, constantly overborne by their senses...and incapable of cold reason."⁷ In light of the advances in thinking and new scientific discoveries, the Enlightenment shifted the explanation of the essence of sexual difference, leading philosophers to believe that the key to woman's nature lay in her physical difference, especially her reproductive function. Hence, female unfitness for intellectual endeavors was caused by the fact that women were governed by their reproductive organs.⁸ Not only were they governed by their organs, they were also defined by them. The female was deprived of any existence in her own right, and was seen simply as a means of reproduction: "a giant

¹ Candice E. Proctor, *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1990), 110.

² Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶ James H. McMillan, *France and Women 1789-1914* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8.

⁷ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 13.

⁸ McMillan, *France and Women*, 5.

womb, an incubator of the male race.”⁹ While man was created to accomplish a variety of deeds, woman was created for this one purpose; she lived solely for the multiplication of the species. Any deviation from this appointed destiny would be an “unpardonable shock to society, nature, and God.”¹⁰ Woman’s nature constructed and limited her social identity by locking her in the private sphere.¹¹

The ideology of separate spheres—which identified women as primarily wives and mothers whose destiny was domesticity and the reproduction of the species—was now legitimized by the authority of science. By the end of the Enlightenment, the public sphere was very much masculinized, and there was a firm ideology supporting the Revolution’s exclusion of women from politics.¹²

The suppression of women was considered a necessity for society. The woman must stay at home in order to keep a man’s house clean and raise his children. If all women left their homes and mixed freely with men, morality would suffer and virtue and modesty would be lost.¹³ “Since a woman’s happiness lay in submission and dependence, then it followed that any creed that promised to give her equality actually only threatened her happiness.” Any attempt to change these societal rules, any attempt by a woman to assume a masculine position in society, would cause disharmony, chaos, and misery.¹⁴

The guiding principle for women was passivity—a woman’s virtues were patience, resignation, compliance, and meekness.¹⁵ Abbe Sieyès outlined the distinctions between active and passive citizenship in his pamphlet, citing that “women, as such, children, foreigners, those who do not contribute anything to public affairs, should under no circumstances actively influence any such thing.” As women were seen as being naturally passive, this view could not be changed. The term *citoyenne*, or female citizen, was in itself an oxymoron—women could not truly be counted as citizens if they were excluded completely from the civic virtue of participation in the public sphere.¹⁶

The “Cult of Republican Motherhood,” the Revolutionary ideal of a woman’s citizenship and patriotism, was perfectly in accordance with traditional eighteenth-century standards for feminine conduct. The best form of patriotism was for a woman to stay at home. Woman was “exalted as a nurturer and for her readiness to sacrifice” as the mother heroine figure in Republican ceremony.¹⁷ A woman’s role in the “moral regeneration of the citizen” was crucial, and it was the noblest occupation for a Republican woman to raise good citizens and future husbands.¹⁸ “Since it was woman who had tempted man out of the paradisiacal garden, then it must also be woman who could lead him back into the promised land.”¹⁹ Women could lead the creation of a new and better world and save France and the Revolution by renewing the virtues of love, devotion, and modesty.²⁰

This language encouraged many women to look upon their roles as wives and mothers with a new positivity. However, for most male revolutionaries, this language of subordination was used to “assign women to only an ancillary role in the great enterprise on which they were embarked.”²¹ The Cult of Republican Motherhood and its tenets provided the men of the French Revolution with one of the best rationalizations for denying women political rights, economic opportunity, and education.²² Instead of emphasizing the female inadequacy and powerlessness that underlay it, this role model allowed women to revel in the “glory” of their potential social influence on the next generation.

This sort of feminine optimism resonated throughout the first days of the Revolution, and women were hopeful that they would be able to contribute effectively to the regeneration of the French nation. However, these women were doomed to be disappointed by their limited political power. Among the very few who advocated for women’s equality were Olympe de Gouges and Théroigne de Méricourt. These women used Enlightenment language of equality to advocate full citizenship rights for women.²³ Using revolutionary terminology, they described men as “tyrants”

⁹ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 3

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Olwen H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 4.

¹² Lindsay A. H. Parker, “Family and Feminism in the French Revolution: The Case of Rosalie Ducrollay Jullien,” *Journal of Women’s History* 24, no. 3 (2012).

¹³ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ Susan P. Conner, “In the Shadow of the Guillotine and in the Margins of History: English-speaking Authors View Women in the French Revolution,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1, no. 3 (1990).

¹⁷ Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 38.

¹⁸ McMillan, *France and Women*, 13.

¹⁹ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 56.

²⁰ McMillan, *France and Women*, 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 61.

²³ Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 23.

to whom women had been “enslaved.” The male sex became a “privileged order” over “second class” women, who were fighting against a “male aristocracy.” The increased rate of literacy among women gave rise to a number of female authors who expressed frustration over society’s view of women. However, their writings consisted mostly of complaints, as “very few people went so far as to launch systematic attacks on their society’s assumptions about women.”²⁴

While women might have been legally powerless, the Revolution’s view of women did extend a certain type of influence to them. The Revolution put females on a pedestal, embodying the images of “angels, saints, goddesses, and queens.” Chaumette tried to reconcile the female sex’s lack of civil and political existence by promising them, “you will be the divinity of the domestic sanctuary; you will reign over all that surrounds it, by the invincible charm of beauty, grace, and virtue.”²⁵ The view that a woman’s power lay in her virtue perpetuated a concept of female influence and even dominance. Rousseau comments, “She raises in her own heart a throne to which all come to render homage.” In effect, these men viewed this as the “tyranny of the weak over the strong.” Despite their subordinate position and lack of education or political and economic opportunity, women were still believed to have a considerable amount of influence and power.²⁶

It was quite evident that males feared this latent female superiority. As historian Candice E. Proctor writes, “The greatest scorn of all was reserved for the woman who tried to compete with men in their own sphere.” There was a growing belief that women had somehow gained tremendous power and influence in society, and it was for the worse.²⁷ Diderot actually envisioned a secret conspiracy of all women that would seduce and rule over men. Many believed that having learned men’s weaknesses and vices, women would use them to corrupt and control men.²⁸ A growing portion of French society believed that it was the women of the Ancien Régime that had ruled and ruined their nation—similar to the manner in which Marie Antoinette’s personality had been distorted in order to assign her blame for the coming of the Revolution. The frivolous, shallow salon women of the Ancien Régime were said to be responsible for the degradation of the arts and sciences.²⁹

Although women were formally excluded from the throne and the government of France, they were said to be in control of the nation. The constant need to protect male superiority led to fear and exaggerated claims about feminine assault and the power of the female sex. Males passed more laws in order to fortify their own dominance.³⁰ “The revolution did not just forget women, it consciously excluded them.” The makers of the French Revolution were determined to prevent an increase in female influence on the government, and so they attempted to do away with it by constructing the Republic of 1792 against them.³¹

Not completely successful in its attempt to eliminate the political intervention of women, the revolutionary government was left to bear witness to women’s participation. Their political action ranged from “subtle actions like joining uncounted voices with men’s in a vote, in addition to overt methods of participation like taking part in violent journeys.”³² Even before the Revolution, women had engaged in forms of political protest by championing neighborhood and community values, sanctioned to do so by tradition, custom, and their status as mothers.³³ Similarly, women of the Revolution took to defending their domestic interests. The sans-culotterie exhibited her “right to petition, denounce, fill the tribunes of the Assembly, and criticize politicians to remind them of whose interests they were supposed to represent.”³⁴

During the October Days, the role of women was decisive. A group of 800-2000 women ransacked Hotel de Ville and marched to Versailles with arms and ammunition in order to force the King to acquire adequate grain supply for the city.³⁵ The march was a success, and credit was given entirely to the women. This political intervention of women of the popular classes went beyond previous experience. “The fact that women turned to the National Guard and the National Assembly for assistance is indicative of their appreciation of the new political context and their iden-

²⁴ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ Connor, “Guillotine,” 246.

³² Parker, “Family and Feminism,” 41.

³³ McMillan, *France and Women*, 20.

³⁴ Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

tification with the Revolution.”³⁶ Although women were denied the formal rights of active citizens, they learned how to become *de facto* citizens.

Another example of feminine political activity was *Le Club des citoyennes republicaines revolutionnaires*, which was founded in May 1793. In the creation of this club, two traditions met—“the new tradition of structured political organization through a women’s club and the age-old tradition of direct female action that had produced the October Days.”³⁷ The club was extremely militant and threw itself into the struggle against the Girondins. Some club members even took to extreme physical measures and attacked Theroigne de Mericourt, a prominent female Girondin.³⁸

Not all female activity was in defense of the Revolution. Village women associated the Revolution with increasing misery, and they “put up resistance to a Revolution which they regarded as an alien and urban... imposition on their traditional way of life.”³⁹ They organized minor urban demonstrations in the market, refusing to surrender goods in exchange for assignats.⁴⁰ But above all, the peasant women refused to accept the revolutionary government’s interference in religious matters. Peasant women “opposed the revolutionary cult of the Supreme Being and the program of radical dechristianization which the Jacobins attempted to implement in the provinces.”⁴¹ In a demonstration in front of the Temple of Reason in June 1794, the entire female audience rose, turned their backs on the altar of liberty, and exposed their bare buttocks to express their feelings toward the new deity.⁴² Slowly, peasant women transformed themselves into the epitome of the counter-revolutionary. They started riots in churches, encouraged their sons to defect from the military, and refused to send their children to state schools. They nullified all attempts by the Directory to establish a rule of law.⁴³

Although some women rebelled against notions of passivity by taking the call for action upon themselves, these women did not counter major gender stereotypes in doing so. “Women had been born and raised as dependent, and though they might complain about a lack of respect and recognition... most continued to accept their condition as natural.”⁴⁴ The letters of Rosalie, a bourgeois woman who lived through the Revolution, provide insight into a real French woman’s experience. The superior influence of patriarchy, with unequal freedoms and responsibilities for the sexes, persisted throughout her writings. In writing to her husband, she maintains that “the difference in our manners of reasoning and thinking is that which nature places in our sexes: I am woman and you are man.”⁴⁵ In a letter to her friend, she explained that she subordinated herself to her husband’s superior intelligence and patriarchal authority.⁴⁶ Most French women took it for granted that they were naturally different from and less intelligent than men. According to Proctor, “the women who took part in the journees of the Revolution were thinking about bread, not women’s rights.” They did not mean for their demonstration to change the social order, and most would have defined their sex’s role in very similar terms to what the men of their day would have used, not realizing that their actions were challenging the validity of that stereotype.⁴⁷

Even women who recognized and objected to the miserable existence of females advised their own sex to submit to men. Madame de Maintenon claims, “Our sex is even more exposed to suffering because it is always dependent... They [men] are masters; one can only suffer with good grace.” These women saw themselves as revolutionaries who also believed in equality, but they were by no means women’s rights advocates.⁴⁸ The main proponents of female rights, such as Olympe de Gouge and Etta Palm d’Aelders, still condemned women for neglecting their households. Accusing women of neglecting the duties and responsibilities of motherhood, Olympe de Gouge exclaims, “Oh, Women! What have you done? What have you produced?” Women were still responsible for maintaining domestic and moral order, and de Gouge goes on to proclaim that too many women are “mixing in the public clubs [and] deserting their homes, and it is necessary to lead them back there.”⁴⁹

³⁶ McMillan, *France and Women*, 22.

³⁷ Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 28.

³⁸ McMillan, *France and Women*, 23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰ Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 94.

⁴¹ McMillan, *France and Women*, 26.

⁴² Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 118.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁴ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 28.

⁴⁵ Parker, “Family and Feminism,” 50.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 184.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

This is not the only case in which Olympe de Gouge invokes feminine stereotypes. In her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, de Gouge includes these stereotypes as part of her rhetorical strategy, “conceding that women were indeed different... which was precisely why [men] refused to include them within the category of active citizens.”⁵⁰ De Gouge, like many other women, did not see the problem with the language of the ideal Republican mother that promised “equality in difference.”⁵¹ Leaders of the supposedly “liberal” *Le Club* also “held aloft the role of motherhood, conceded their frailty compared to men, and promised that their political activism would only be part-time, so as not to detract from their womanly duties.”⁵² They did not realize that this characterization was meant to deny them access to the public sphere.

Men were wrong in assuming that women were passive and completely apolitical. Women were interested in patriotism, and some had even displayed the “explicitly” male virtue of courage.⁵³ “No one had ever contemplated giving women a voice, but [even so] they had created fundamental change.” This aroused real fear in politicians, and they hoped to avoid any such recurrence at all costs. The enactment of a riot act after the October Days showed that politicians were taking a much harsher stance on public attempts to promote change.⁵⁴ The riotous action of peasant women also had a powerful impact on the Republican revolutionaries. These women would “haunt the politicians of the nineteenth century and serve to conform their efforts to deny women the vote.” They maintained that these women were unintelligent beings because of their alleged persistent irrationality. Officials displayed their latent antifeminism in their vocabulary of abuse towards peasant women, calling them “*femelettes, bigotes, moutons, fanatiques,*” etc.⁵⁵ Men became convinced that “women were slaves of superstition and the natural enemies of the Enlightenment.”⁵⁶

Once unimpeded by their political rivals, the Jacobins no longer needed the support of *Le Club*, which they had once applauded. With its zealous action in promoting The Terror and anti-Girondin ideas, *Le Club* threatened to increase the danger behind political intervention by women. In September 1793, Chabot of the Jacobins complained, “It is these counter-revolutionary *bougresses* [sluts] who cause all the riotous outbreaks, all over bread. They made a revolution over coffee and sugar, and they will make others if we don’t watch out.”⁵⁷ Politicians clearly recognized the ability of women to disrupt the course of politics. Although it was because of their political ideas that the Jacobins decided to eliminate *Le Club*, it was on the basis of their sex that they attacked them.

Some speakers began to attribute all problems that Paris had suffered to the female sex. In October 1793, Amar presented the report on women’s clubs to the National Convention. The report was not even primarily concerned with women’s clubs, but it was a thorough denial of any notions of gender equality.⁵⁸ All women’s clubs were banned, and from October 1793, organized and separate political organizations for women disappeared.⁵⁹ The Jacobins also dismissed the feminine imagery of *liberté* that had identified the Revolution’s early phases and instead adopted the symbol of Hercules for their “Republic of Virtue.” The masculinity of Hercules reflects the power of the Jacobins themselves—“among *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, it was *fraternité* which had triumphed.”⁶⁰

As early as 1789, satirical pamphlets and journals portrayed the female sex as enemies of the Revolution, and as time went on, this characterization intensified.⁶¹ Portal, a committed Republican, explained that the defeat of the Republic was due to “a slip of a girl... who controlled the minds of the next generation and painted the Republic as the work of the devil.”⁶² Portal is one example of the myriad of elites who associated women with the Republic’s failure by emphasizing the existence of female counter-revolutionaries.⁶³ In need of a scapegoat, revolutionaries claimed that the whole event was undermined by irrational women who were in ignorant support of the papacy. Because women were made powerful through domestic influence, irrationality and ignorance had undermined reason and science—suggesting that an inversion of natural order in the home was the problem. Unless such power could be controlled by

⁵⁰ McMillan, *France and Women*, 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵² Connor, “Guillotine,” 254.

⁵³ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁶ McMillan, *France and Women*, 27.

⁵⁷ Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 35.

⁵⁸ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 161.

⁵⁹ Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 46.

⁶⁰ Connor, “Guillotine,” 245.

⁶¹ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 182.

⁶² Hufton, *Limits of Citizenship*, 137.

⁶³ Parker, “Family and Feminism,” 40.

the state, republicanism was destined to fail.⁶⁴

In 1789, supporters of sexual equality might have believed the French Revolution to be the awaited liberator of females. However, by 1793, it became obvious that as Revolutionary authority increased, so did the exclusion of women from active societal participation. By 1793, women had been denied the right of assembly, the right to petition the Commune, and formally excluded from the army. Females found wearing pants in the street were arrested, and the Revolution had destroyed the convents and parish classes that had once educated women. The rigidity of sexual differentiation and the moral code decreased economic opportunities for women, and in addition, the equal divorce laws of 1792 were soon abolished in 1795.⁶⁵ What limited power elite women had held during the Ancien Régime was destroyed along with all other privileges, which were now denied to all women.

The French Revolution of 1789 did not alter the traditional stereotypes for feminine behavior of that time period. Women were still seen as inferior to males. Women were trained to accept their subordinate condition as natural, and thus the action and protests of women can be seen as simply a demand for greater respect, rather than a demand for complete equality. The glorification of the ideal of republican motherhood was a male tactic to pacify women, while further pushing them away from the political sphere. According to men, the stability of social order relied on the maintenance of sex roles and the separation of the domestic sphere of women from the social sphere of males. When women did challenge this separation, men feared the loss of their power, and they effectively put down women by enacting legislation against them. Gaining a broader perspective on why women remained subordinate to male power for so long can definitely help our understanding of sexist attitudes that still exist today. The fact that a woman from today's world could potentially relate to an eighteenth century French woman in the midst of revolution is baffling, and yet, it emphasizes the eternal female struggle and illustrates how much women have still to gain.

⁶⁴ Proctor, *Women, Equality*, 143.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 169-171.

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