

Women and the French Revolution: the start of the modern feminist movement

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This article explores the role of women in the French Revolution, and how their challenges to traditional gender roles laid the foundations for the modern feminist movement.

The study of the French Revolution is often restricted to its impact on the Enlightenment ideas of influential men such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Locke. The contributions of women to the Revolution and the feminist movement can be overlooked.¹ Despite facing criticism and resistance from some of the very revolutionaries who championed liberty, women played a vital role in the Revolution by advocating for their own rights. They

challenged traditional gender roles and adopted positions of political power, becoming the embodiment of liberty, equality, and intellectual growth. The liberal ideas that originated during the French Revolution continue to propel the feminist movement to this day, leaving a lasting legacy.

The Revolution was a time of great political and social upheaval, and women were at the forefront of it. In addition to participating in political movements and challenging traditional gender roles, women began to assert their own intellectual capabilities, and to demand access to education.² This marked a significant shift from the pre-revolutionary period, when women were not seen as the intellectual equals of men. This demand for education and intellectual fulfilment among women was an

important precursor to the modern feminist movement.

Women in French society

The French Revolution marked a significant shift in traditional gender roles and the perception of women in society. Prior to the Revolution, women were largely confined to their domestic duties and family obligations, whilst public life was reserved for men. This societal construct, rooted in the patriarchal values of ancient Greece and Rome, tended to see women as a corrupting force. The myth of Pandora's box served as a classic example of this: Pandora's curiosity and disobedience resulted in the release of all the world's miseries and sorrows. It served as a cautionary tale about the dangers of female curiosity, and desire as the root of all evil and strife. The queen of France, Marie Antoinette, was a prime example of such beliefs. She was viewed by many as the cause of France's crisis and was mockingly referred to as *Madame Déficit* for her alleged extravagance. In particular, she was criticised for her role in the infamous diamond necklace scandal of 1784–85, when she was falsely accused of wanting a necklace meant for the mistress of Louis XV.³ In fact her reputation was largely undeserved.

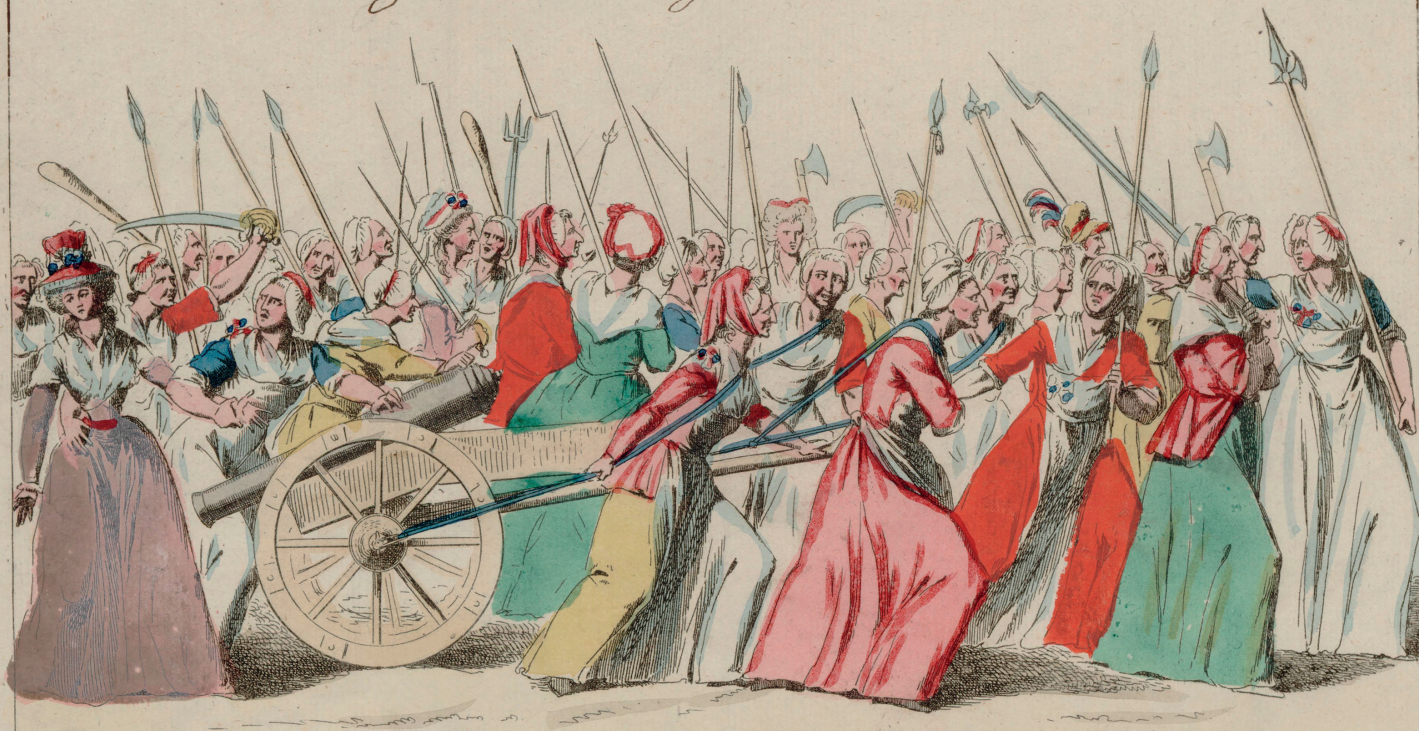
During the Enlightenment, some thinkers did advocate women's rights. John Locke, for instance, supported female property-ownership and divorce. But the idea of true gender equality was never fully embraced, which limited the agency of women. As Rousseau wrote in *Emile*, 'Mother, do not make a decent man out of your daughter. Make a decent woman out of her,' reinforcing the notion that women should remain within the domestic sphere and not challenge the natural order.⁴ But as the Revolution began, these traditional gender roles were challenged as women fought for their own rights and those of



La Liberté by Jeanne-Louise.
An allegory of the French Revolution

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Epoques de la Révolution Fuite de Paris à Versailles



*Fuite de Paris à Versailles à Versailles, du 5 Octobre 1789.
D'après la Suite des femmes parisiennes de la halle & autres qui recoururent
à leur départ - du Lundi à 3 heures Après midi
pour Ramener avec eux du Palais le Roy*

others, becoming the embodiment of liberty, equality, and intellectual growth. The views of many women, drastically changed over the course of the Revolution. New ideas of class, education, and individual rights were emerging, and these were particularly espoused by women who saw a role beyond the home. They saw their rights as intangible and natural, and thus not to be denied. Such ideas were particularly discussed at length in the *salons* of Paris.⁵ These *salons* were often hosted by the wives of distinguished men and existed even before the Revolution. Such women wielded a significant amount of influence in politics and were often regarded as men's intellectual equals.⁶

Revolution and the emergence of a feminist movement

One of the enduring marks left by the women of the French Revolution was their role in the development of a feminist movement. Before the Revolution this barely existed: in general, women were not seen as capable of advocating either for their own rights or for those of others.⁷ The Revolution marked a significant shift in this regard, as women began to participate actively

in the political process. Women such as Olympe de Gouges and Pauline Léon challenged traditional gender roles.⁸ The Revolution also saw the development of new laws which helped to establish the rights of women as equal political actors. These legal and ideological changes paved the way for future feminist movements. They helped to shape modern understandings of gender equality and the recognition of the rights of women.

The initial phase of the Enlightenment saw an expansion of the idea of equality, but many remained sceptical of the increasing presence of women in the public sphere. One notable figure who challenged traditional gender roles was Olympe de Gouges, a pioneering feminist and human rights activist during the Revolution. In 1789, the National Assembly issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which established a constitutional monarchy.⁹ However, de Gouges was angered by the fact that the preamble of this document excluded women. In response, she wrote her own version entitled, *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. Here she argued for the equal treatment of women under the law, and the right of women to participate in politics. De

Gouges believed that women should have the same rights as men to receive financial support for their children, and argued that this was necessary to ensure the well-being of families.

In addition to her advocacy for women's rights, de Gouges was also an abolitionist, demonstrated in her essay, *Reflections on Black Men*, published in 1788. At the time, France was a slave-holding society, and de Gouges's abolitionist views were unpopular. In an act of defiance, she presented her declaration to the queen, Marie Antoinette, hoping to bring attention to the cause of women's rights. However, later revolutionaries such as Robespierre saw this as support for the monarchy, and de Gouges was subsequently labelled a royalist. Despite her dedication to equality and justice, de Gouges faced significant opposition from many of her contemporaries. She was ultimately arrested and executed in November 1793, during the Reign of Terror.

During the Revolution, many women took it upon themselves to be its exponents, and actively participated in public life. This was exemplified by the Women's March to Versailles in October 1789, where an armed mob of women, angered by bread shortages and the high cost of living, forced the royal family

A depiction of the execution of Olympe de Gouges



to move from Versailles to Paris. These women believed that by bringing the royal family to Paris, they could exert more influence on the government and help ensure that their grievances were addressed. Women such as Théroigne de Méricourt, a peasant who was inspired by the Revolution, represented the societal changes taking place in France. De Méricourt was known for deliberately dressing in a masculine manner and for her speeches at the radical Cordeliers' Club.

The club, named after the Cordeliers' Convent in Paris where it met, was known for its fervent support of the Revolution. It was an important forum for political discussion and was a key player in the events leading up to the Women's March. Its members included Georges Danton and Jean-Paul Marat, and it played a role in the fall of the Bastille and the early days of the Terror. This period of the French Revolution saw a significant increase in the number of women who were actively advocating for their rights and participating in the public sphere.

At the time it was considered unethical for a woman to engage in public debate with a man, but this did not prevent Mary Wollstonecraft, in England, from publicly challenging the ideas of Edmund Burke, member of the British Parliament and a critic of the Revolution. In *Reflections On The Revolution In France* (1790), Burke had argued that France had weakened its own institutions by introducing such drastic changes. Wollstonecraft's decision to publicly challenge Burke's ideas through her pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) was a bold and pioneering response that challenged traditional gender roles and paved the way for more women to engage in public discourse.¹⁰

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft argued for the equal treatment of men and women under the law and for the need for education for women. She believed that education was essential for the development of a person's character and that it was necessary for women to be able to fully participate in society as equal citizens. Wollstonecraft also argued that the current system of education, which prioritized appearance and manners over intellectual development, was damaging to women and hindered their progress. She believed that women should be allowed to pursue their own interests and passions, and that they should be free to choose their own paths in life. Wollstonecraft's ideas had a significant impact on the women's rights movement. Because of her actions, she is still regarded today as the mother of the modern feminist movement.

Male support for women's rights

A few men were supportive of women's rights during the Revolution, and actively advocated for their inclusion in society. One notable example was the Marquis de Condorcet, who worked closely with his wife, Sophie, to call for universal suffrage in his pamphlet *On the Admission of Women to Civil Rights*. Condorcet strongly advocated full political rights for women, also publishing a newspaper

article arguing that women were essential to the functioning of a modern French society. They therefore deserved equal rights to men. These ideas inspired many proponents of women's rights to come together in a group called the *Cercle Social*, which launched campaigns for women's rights between 1790 and 1791. However, Condorcet's views were met with criticism, particularly from Louis-Marie Prudhomme, who argued that God had created men and women differently, and that it was essential for women to remain confined to their homes for the greater good. Despite such opposition, the efforts of women like Sophie de Condorcet, and the support of allies like the marquis, helped pave the way for the movement.¹¹

Challenges and opposition

Criticism and resistance did not deter other women from advocating for their rights or from participating in the Revolution. One was Pauline Léon, who established the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, and called for the formation of a female militia. Despite repeated refusals from the National Assembly, many women requested to join the military during the wars, when France was in desperate need of soldiers. Some, like the Rameau sisters, even disguised themselves as men in order to fight. However, during the Terror, all women's political clubs were closed.



The attack on the Legislative Assembly, August 1792

But Charlotte Corday's assassination of Jean-Paul Marat in July 1793 helped established the idea of women as a separate entity with their own agency. Corday took it upon herself to assassinate Marat, who was known for publishing lists of 'enemies of the Republic' in his newspaper, *L'Ami du Peuple*. Despite being supportive of the Revolution, Corday believed that Marat's actions were leading to unnecessary bloodshed. During her trial, she reportedly stated that she had killed one man in order to save a thousand. Although some initially suspected that Corday had been instructed by a man, investigations yielded no evidence of this. She was executed the same month.

The impact of the French Revolution on feminism

The French Revolution did not result in the immediate empowerment of women. Many symbols of the Revolution, such as Liberty and Equality, were depicted as feminine but this did not necessarily represent the reality of women's experiences. Such allegories depicted virtues as female, but were not intended to be a form of feminist representation. However, it is important to recognize the significant participation of women in the Revolution and the emergence of ideas about universal equality. Women stood in long bread lines, supported the war effort, and formed their own political clubs.¹² Despite the fact that women were not granted political rights, many ideas about other rights, such as the right to property and the right to end a marriage contract, persisted after the Revolution and even after Napoleon I seized power. His Civil Code of 1804 allowed women to marry as they pleased, a significant departure from the traditional constraints on women's marital choices.

The legacy of the Revolution

The impact of the French Revolution on women's rights extended beyond the immediate events of the time. The ideals of the Revolution, such as liberty and equality, were one element behind the adoption of the 1893 Electoral Bill in New Zealand, for example, which made it the first country to grant women the right to vote. Kate Sheppard, a leading suffrage campaigner in New Zealand, credited women of the French Revolution, such as Olympe de Gouges and Pauline Léon, as sources of inspiration for her own activism. In the United States, the idea of universal natural rights, central to the American



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Revolution, was also influenced by the ideals that had earlier emerged in France.

The women of the French Revolution set a precedent for others to follow. Even though women in France itself did not gain the right to vote until 1944, their actions had laid the groundwork for future advances. The participation of women in the Revolution, and the emergence of ideas about universal equality, challenged traditional gender roles and contributed to the development of the modern feminist movement. The French Revolution was not a straightforward progression towards women's empowerment. But it did mark a significant shift in the way that women were perceived and how their potential for political participation was viewed. The contributions of these women live on and their efforts continue to be celebrated and remembered as a crucial moment in the fight for gender equality.

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