

Women in the French Revolution

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of women in shaping discourses of gender equality during the French Revolution (1789-1794), situating their activism within the intellectual framework of the Enlightenment. While Enlightenment philosophers often reinforced restrictive gender norms, new currents of thought about sexual equality inspired female activists to challenge entrenched hierarchies. Women engaged in food riots, organized political clubs such as the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, and produced groundbreaking works, including Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. These efforts highlighted the paradox of the Revolution: while women's clubs were banned and leading activists executed, their participation forced French society to confront women's capacity for civic engagement. Though legislative recognition of women's rights was suppressed, reforms in family law such as access to divorce and equal inheritance granted women new personal and economic autonomy. More broadly, women's unprecedented activism disrupted traditional gender expectations, compelling both men and women to reconsider women's social roles. The Revolution ultimately failed to achieve full gender equality, yet women's engagement left a lasting legacy by inspiring future generations to associate their struggle with universal ideals of liberty and justice. This paper underscores how women's activism reframed societal perceptions and contributed to the evolution of modern gender discourse.

Keywords

Gender Equality, French Revolution, Women's Activism

1. Introduction

As the fervor of the Revolution swept across France like wildfire in 1789, a symphony of voices rose up to defy the conventional norms of the ancient society. Amidst the calls for liberty, equality, and fraternity, the powerful voices of women

stood out, challenging the long-standing prejudices of an entrenched society and demanding more attention concerning gender equality. Yet despite their continuous efforts and substantial contributions, the actions of these women were underestimated and insufficiently documented in historical records. Thus, this essay is the untold story of how women's active engagement in the discourses around sexual equality during the French Revolution contributed to lasting societal changes. In the wake of the Enlightenment's emerging discourses around sexual equality, female revolutionary activists engaged in the French Revolution and aimed to secure civil rights and familial well-being. Even though political leadership within the Revolution unequivocally crushed the movements for gender equality, women's engagement left a lasting imprint on societal perceptions, raising awareness and invoking meaningful discussions on gender equality and political status. Unprecedented female activism underscores the paradoxical legacy of the revolution that both suppressed yet inadvertently incited societal awareness.

During the chaotic era of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1794, "political status" for women was defined by their exclusion from formal citizenship, which denied them the right to vote, to participate in political assemblies, or to hold public office: rights that were granted only to men under revolutionary law (Rose, 1995). Nevertheless, women played a pivotal role in shaping the discourses around sexual equality. Their ideas and actions stemmed from the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, a cultural movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that initiated revolutionary developments in philosophy, art, and political thought in Europe. While Enlightenment principles of universalism, equality and reason were interpreted in ways that exclude women, including arguments that political equality was incompatible with women's "natural" roles, these very ideals also paved the way for the questioning of traditional hierarchies within French society and the advocacy for the inclusion of women in pursuit of freedom and recognition. Sparked by the storming of the Bastille on July 14th, 1789, the French Revolution marked a period of radical political and social turmoil as well as the start of the French people's quest for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Against this backdrop, women actively engaged in the Revolution, striving to challenge the prevailing social and legal injustices present within the society. Notable figures like Olympe de Gouges, a female activist and playwright, as well as influential clubs such as the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, emerged as powerful advocates for sexual equality and women's rights in both households and politics.

2. Gender Equality during the Enlightenment

During the Enlightenment, the pervasive belief that women were inherently inferior to men led to their confinement in domestic roles and discouraged them from active social and political participation. Enlightenment philosophers commonly perceived women as biologically and socially distinct from men, which made them destined to take care of the household rather than make public and political appearances. As illustrated by renowned Enlightenment philosopher Jean Jacques Rous-

seau, women should “take an active role in the family by breastfeeding and educating their children” rather than venturing to take “active positions outside the home.” (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024). Rousseau’s perspective highlights that the deeply ingrained gender roles within society confined women within the domestic sphere. The emphasis on women’s responsibilities within the family not only deprived them of power in social and political realms but also strengthened the prevailing sexual inequities in French society.

Women’s inferior status can be attributed to both purposeful suppression and unconscious neglect by men during the Enlightenment. As historical novelist Candice Proctor exemplified in *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution*, not only were men found guilty of “passive neglect or unconscious discrimination”, but they were also “actively engaged in trying to keep women down in the subservient position to which they have been relegated” (Proctor, 1990). This quote highlights the deliberate efforts made by some men to suppress the power women wielded due to pride, jealousy, and fear of the female sex gaining excessive power. However, the neglect of women was not new to the Enlightenment. In fact, it was so prevalent before this era that biases had become deeply rooted in how societies perceived gender. Consequently, people took for granted that women were inferior beings and that they should be denied all social and political rights.

Furthermore, due to their traditional upbringing and limited exposure to discourses on gender equality, women did not question their inferior social status. As Proctor highlights, “Women had been born and raised dependent, and though they might complain about an influence, most continued to accept their condition as natural” (Proctor, 1990). Women’s conventional upbringing exemplifies how societal influences contributed to sexual inequalities during the Enlightenment. The prevalent belief that women were reliant on men, instilled in their minds since birth, deprived them of the motivation to assert their deserved social and political rights by challenging male authority. In most cases, women took for granted that they should remain in the household and attend to children and chores rather than demand equal political and civil rights. Thus, even though men and women were not innately different, women’s ignorance due to lack of exposure and the profound impact of societal norms hindered them from recognizing the deprivation of their rights.

Despite pre-existing prejudices towards women in French society, thoughts about sexual equality emerged among defenders of the feminine cause during the Enlightenment, calling for a shift in attitude towards the acknowledgment of women as equal counterparts of men. An increasing number of people began to demand the “recognition of [women’s] existence as autonomous human beings” in addition to questioning “the tradition that insisted on emphasizing the differences between the sexes to the extent of making women almost alien beings” (Proctor, 1990). The emergence of advocates for gender equality reflects the transformative shift in perspective brought by the Enlightenment. The increasing demand for women’s rights and equality signifies a growing awareness in political and social activism,

bringing with it the reevaluation of societal perceptions of the ability and potential of women. This period marks the start of a significant milestone in the history of gender equality, as these emerging thoughts laid the foundation for movements and protests seeking equal opportunities during the French Revolution.

Gender equality was a discussion in which women themselves increasingly came to play a part during the Enlightenment. As explained in the book *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution*, women's voices were being heard more than ever before due to "an increase of literacy and the growing number of female authors" during that period of time. The empowerment of women through education led to a transformative shift in their perspectives as they gradually began to challenge the existing prejudices against the female sex in society. To exemplify, almost every eighteenth-century female writer in France expressed "varying degrees of frustration and discontent with her society's view of women" (Proctor, 1990). Empowered by education and using literature as a medium to express their discontent, women themselves began to press back against confining societal norms and discrimination.

Nevertheless, advocacy for gender equality during the Enlightenment was in its early stages and remained limited to thoughts and discourse. As evidenced by Proctor, women asked for "better education and protection of their property rights", but even "the most politically vociferous among them did not yet demand full civil and political rights" (Proctor, 1990). Thus, women's efforts for sexual equality remained in its opening stages in the Enlightenment, and the movement was not in its most radical phases to demand total equality within the political realm. Furthermore, in eighteenth-century France, only a small number of individuals, whether male or female, dared to "launch systematic attacks on their society's assumptions about women" (Proctor, 1990). This quote illustrates that although there were thoughts about sexual equality during the Enlightenment, few put it into action. Even so, the discourses surrounding gender equality that emerged during the Enlightenment paved the way for later more rigorous protests during the French Revolution.

3. Women's Activism during the French Revolution

The French Revolution became a key turning point in sparking actions on existing discourses about gender equality during the Enlightenment. While women's rights received less attention in the eighteenth-century advocacy for human rights, it, like other movements for freedom, gained significant momentum due to the Revolution (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024).

The profound societal changes and the reevaluation of men's rights and liberty during the French Revolution prompted women to actively challenge the limitations they faced. Their engagement took various forms, including demonstrations and riots "over the price of food", the establishment of "clubs organized by women" and movements against the Revolution, ranging from "individual acts of assassination" to "massive rebellions in the West of France against the Revolutionary government" (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024). In addition to their revolutionary

activism, many women also participated in counter-revolutionary movements, particularly in regions such as the Vendée, where they defended traditional Catholic values and the monarchy. Some women acted as messengers, hid refractory priests, or even took up arms alongside royalist forces. Their involvement in these uprisings demonstrates that women's political engagement was not monolithic. Rather, it reflected diverse loyalties and convictions shaped by class, region, and religion ("The French Revolution. The War in La Vendée," 1853). Women advanced the advocacy of gender equality by actively engaging in the public sphere, thus challenging entrenched biases regulating that they are only capable of maintaining the household.

Many women enthusiastically participated in protests for food during the French Revolution due to the responsibility of feeding their families. Throughout the revolutionary decade, the scarcity of food supplies in markets led to continuous worry among women, who in turn expressed their discontent frequently, occasionally resorting to violence. They played an essential role in food riots, "egging on their confederates to demand lower prices and to insist on confiscating goods and selling them at a 'just' price" (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024). Although most women did not concern themselves directly with the advocacy for political and social rights for the female sex during the French Revolution, their active participation in protests for food allowed them to contribute to broader societal changes by making their voices heard through challenging economic inequalities. As Guillaume Débat, researcher in the history of modern France and the French Revolution, highlighted in *Women in the French Revolution*, "Women had just achieved a sensational appearance and a spectacular outbreak on the political scene" (Débat, 2020) through standing out in their demand for food. Thus, the French Revolution marked the start of an era where women became increasingly conscious of their collective power and played a significant role in advocating for broader social and economic changes.

Building upon women's active involvement in food riots, the establishment of women's political clubs during the French Revolution underscores their increasing desire for civil engagement. One prominent example of an exclusively feminine political club was the "Société des femmes républicaines révolutionnaires" or the Society of Republican Revolutionary Women. Established by a group of citoyennes at the Commune of Paris on May 10th, 1793, it had a membership range of two hundred to six hundred members (Proctor, 1990). Enthusiastic participation in the Society of Republican Revolutionary Women highlights that many women during the French Revolution had aspired to move beyond the household toward political activism.

Utilizing the platform provided by political clubs, women sought to not only gain a more fundamental understanding of politics but also advocate for civil rights, societal reform, and economic empowerment. Débat illustrates that the members of these clubs hoped to obtain "political education for themselves" while at the same time "made stirring speeches against aristocrats, merchants, and counterrev-

olutionaries”, putting forward “a great number of economic and political demands” such as women’s rights to vote and to carry arms (Proctor, 1990). In seeking legislative knowledge, women challenged the barriers of ignorance and lack of education that have historically marginalized them from public engagement. In turn, their output back to society through speeches and calls for change is an accurate reflection of the collective wisdom gained from their quest for political knowledge. For instance, members of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women petitioned the National Convention to enforce price controls on essential goods, arguing that the protection of the poor was a moral duty of the Republic. They also marched through Paris in revolutionary attire, demanding that all women wear the tricolor cockade, a symbol of their commitment to the Revolution and to civic equality (Shusterman, 2014). Women’s active participation through political clubs symbolizes a transformative advancement in gender equality, as it dismantled entrenched biases and fostered a more inclusive society that they themselves increasingly became a part of.

Amongst the fervent participants of political clubs, individual women stood out for their contributions that led to significant advancements in gender equality during the French Revolution. One prominent leader in the demand for women’s rights was Marie Gouze, who wrote under the name of Olympe de Gouges. Her most notable contribution was the authorship of the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen in 1791, created in response to the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, from which women were notably excluded (Warman, 1791). By drafting this declaration, de Gouges expressed the urgent need for societal reform and the dismantling of conventional norms that have led women to be marginalized in legislative acts.

In the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, de Gouges demanded fundamental equality between men and women, challenging prevailing societal norms that have relegated women to an inferior position. At the forefront of the declaration, she emphasized the foundational principle that “woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights” (de Gouges, 1791). This opening proclamation defies the commonly held belief that since women were inherently inferior and thus dependent on men, they should not be granted political and public rights. Subsequently, de Gouges advances to advocate for female citizens’ active participation in the law’s formation, arguing that it should be an authentic reflection of the general will of the society (de Gouges, 1791). In doing so, she not only underscores the importance of women’s participation in the government but also strives for a more inclusive and representative legal system considerate of the female sex.

4. Legacy of Women’s Advocacy for Sexual Equality during the French Revolution

Despite women’s active engagement in the discourses on gender equality during the French Revolution, they were ultimately excluded from the public sphere, as evidenced by the downfall of political clubs such as the Society of Revolutionary

Republican Women. Even though women enthusiastically advocated for their civil and societal rights and responded to critics' accusations, "the club ultimately fell victim to the disapproval and suspicion of the revolutionary government, which outlawed all women's clubs on 30 October 1793" (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024). The government's ban on all women's clubs delivered a severe blow to the momentum of the propagation for gender equality, extinguishing an essential platform through which women were able to make their thoughts heard and actively contribute to shaping societal norms and policies.

Furthermore, individual female activists were eliminated by the French government because of their advocacy for gender equality and equal rights for women. Olympe de Gouges was put to death as a counterrevolutionary on November 3rd, 1793, for having "published a pamphlet suggesting that a popular referendum should decide the future government of the country, not the National Convention" (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024). The reason for De Gouges' execution illustrates that the government is reluctant to allow women to participate in making political decisions and expressing their opinions on legislative acts. In fact, by the end of 1793, four years into the Revolution, "all of the movement's principal advocates had been eliminated one way or another" (Proctor, 1990). The government utilized the deaths of these prominent female leaders to demonstrate to the public the consequences of women daring to challenge male authority and engage in political discourses. Thus, the deaths of many female activists became a great loss to the advocacy for sexual equality and women's rights in that era.

With the government's ban on all women's political clubs and the deaths of many renowned female activists, women not only failed to gain political rights, but their social status deteriorated as well. No legislative actions were ever made by any of the national assemblies to grant civil liberties to women (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024). Thus, despite the efforts of many defenders of gender equality, women's voices remained marginalized and their calls for civil rights were ignored. Moreover, as Proctor highlighted in *Women, Equality and the French Revolution*, "by codifying and standardizing French law, the Revolution and the Napoleonic period that followed it could be said to have deteriorated the position of women in French society. It also made their classification as second-class citizens all the more obvious" (Proctor, 1990). Due to the compounding effects of judicial change and governmental oppression during the French Revolution, women's advocacy for political rights not only failed to gain legislative success but also triggered a detrimental backlash, further solidifying existing societal norms considering women as inferior to men and incapable of making rational political decisions.

However, women's fight for gender equality during the French Revolution was not without success. Their active participation in food riots and protests led to an increase in power within their families as divorce and equal inheritance were made possible by the law. As family courts became "the only entitled institution to settle family disputes and conflicts", divorce became a feasible option for French women. In addition, "the National Assembly proclaimed equality between wives and hus-

bands in marital life as well as in separation” (Debat, 2020). enabling women to gain more power within their marriages. The option of divorce empowered women to have more control over their lives, while at the same time marking a shift in societal perceptions of recognizing them as autonomous human beings instead of being affiliated to their husbands through marriage. Furthermore, the establishment of “an egalitarian inheritance system for both boys and girls in April 1791” (Debat, 2020). By the Assembly granted women and girls greater economic power, liberating them from the reliance on their husbands for financial sustenance and thereby becoming more independent while making personal decisions. Thus, the egalitarian inheritance system marks a significant milestone in dismantling gender-based economic disparities deeply rooted in French society.

Women’s active participation in the advocacy for gender equality prompted reflection among both men and women, leading to the reevaluation of societal perceptions of gender roles in France. Men of the day were “both frightened and bewildered” by the “heroism and courage displayed by women in the Revolution”, as they were conventionally expected to be “gentle” (Proctor, 1990). The surprise and shock that women’s actions evoked in men suggest the movement’s success in disrupting traditional gender norms, prompting men to realize that women were capable of exhibiting courage and strength beyond the household to the public and political spheres. Additionally, as Constance Pipelet, a well-known writer, poet, and feminist, observed at the end of the Revolutionary decade, movements for gender equality “had forced women to become more aware of their status in society” (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024). Under the influence of many prominent female leaders, women became increasingly aware of the inherent inequalities they faced since birth and began to recognize their collective ability to reshape their social and political status. Although female revolutionary activists did not achieve any legislative success, their actions have undeniably inspired many to realize that their potential could extend far beyond reproduction and conventional household chores.

Building upon this period of reevaluation and reflection, the active engagement of women during the French Revolution inspired later generations of movements for gender equality. While political and social activism for gender equality experienced moments of ascent and decline, women began to play another role in French society. As exemplified in artworks and literature produced decades after, “most of the major revolutionary values—liberty, equality, fraternity, reason, the Republic, regeneration—were represented by female figures” (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, 2024). These symbolic representations of women not only solidified their position in society as active participants in the French Revolution but also embodied their virtues of integrity and courage that shaped the revolutionary era. In addition, the actions of female activists have enabled “later generations of women to associate their cause with the increasingly popular one of freedom and humanity” (Proctor, 1990). With their enthusiastic participation in the French Revolution, women have passed down their legacy in pursuit of equality and justice, ensuring a continuum of empowerment that transcends time and generations.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, despite the deeply rooted historical perception of women's inferiority in French society, the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment sparked discourses around sexual equality and women's rights. The subsequent French Revolution elevated these discussions into actions, thus marking a pivotal moment in history where women actively engaged in protests for food, challenged conventional norms ingrained within society, and advocated for equal political and social rights. Female activists such as Olympe de Gouges stood out in combatting systemic injustices in the French government, while political clubs for women, such as the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women created a platform for them to voice their thoughts. However, due to governmental oppression and legislative challenges, political clubs were prohibited and numerous advocates for gender equality were executed, delivering a heavy blow to women's demand for political rights and eroding their positions in French society. Nevertheless, women obtained more personal autonomy, facilitated by divorce and the establishment of equal inheritance rights. Moreover, the French Revolution not only stimulated societal reflection on women's roles but continues to serve as an enduring source of inspiration for later movements advocating for gender equality and women's rights.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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