

OLYMPE DE GOUGES AND THE DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND OF THE FEMALE CITIZEN

Background of Olympe de Gouges

Olympe de Gouges was a French playwright and political activist whose feminist and abolitionist writings reached large audiences. She began her career as a playwright in the early 1780s, and as the political tensions of the French Revolution built, she became more involved in politics and law. Personally, de Gouges was born to a petit bourgeois family – she believed she was an illegitimate daughter, and her supposed biological father's rejections of such claims might have influenced her later passionate defense of the rights of illegitimate children.

In 1773, de Gouges met a wealthy aristocrat with whom she had a relationship until the revolution began. According to her biographer (Olivier Blanc), de Gouges lived with several men throughout her life during the revolution who supported her financially. She strove to move among the aristocracy and to abandon her provincial accent. Upon the outbreak of the Revolution, Olympe de Gouges was filled with hope and joy for the great potential in the way of women's rights. She was quickly disenchanted when the National Assembly (and later the Legislative Assembly) repeatedly denied women the extension of *égalité*.

As such, in 1791, she joined the Society of the Friends of Truth, an association with the goals of equal political and legal rights for women. Also called the "*Social Club*", this club was seen as treasonous by the leaders of the Revolution, and although that was the case, they openly declared themselves republicans and sometimes even referred to themselves as utopian socialists.

De Gouges was a political conservative with allegiances divided between the monarchy and the National Assembly. In 1791, she demanded that the King's brothers return to France to silence rumors of international conspiracy. Later, in 1792, when King Louis XVI was tried for treason, she offered defense while proclaiming her republicanism - initially, the press mocker her, but her virulent attacks against Maximilien Robespierre turned the Jacobins against her.

Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen

The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen was published in 1791 and is modeled on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. Olympe de Gouges dedicated the text to Marie Antoinette, whom de Gouges described as "*the most detested*" of women. The Declaration is ironic in formulation. It states that "*This revolution will only take effect when all women become fully aware of their deplorable condition, and of the rights they have lost in society*".

The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen follows the seventeen articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen point for point, and it has been described by Camille Naish as "*almost a parody... of the original document*".

Call to Action

De Gouges opens her Declaration with the famous quote, "*Man, are you capable of being fair? A woman is asking: at least you will allow her that right. Tell me? What gave you the sovereign right to oppress my sex?*" She demands that her reader observe nature and the rules of the animals surrounding them - in every other species, sexes coexist and intermingle peacefully and fairly. She asks why humans cannot act likewise and demands (in the preamble) that the

National Assembly decree the Declaration a part of French law. Also they have seen many wars in combat with the men of France so they sought out for rights for themselves.

Preamble to the Declaration

In the preamble to her Declaration, de Gouges mirrors the language of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and explains that women, just as men, are guaranteed natural, inalienable, sacred rights - and that political institutions are instituted with the purpose of protecting these natural rights. She closes the preamble by declaring that *"the sex that is superior in beauty as it is in courage during the pains of childbirth recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen."*

Articles of the Declaration

Article I

The first article of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaims that *"Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility."* The first article of Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen responds: *"Woman are born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may only be based on common utility."*

Article II and Article III

Articles II and III extend the articles in the Declaration of Independence to include both women and men in their statements.

Article IV

Article IV declares that *"the only limit to the exercise of the natural rights of woman is the perpetual tyranny that man opposes to it"* and that *"these limits must be reformed by the laws of nature and reason"*. In this statement, de Gouges is specifically stating that men have tyrannically opposed the natural rights of women, and that these limits must be reformed by the laws of a political organization in order to create a society that is just and protects the Natural Rights of all.

Article V

Article V is unchanged from the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Article VI

De Gouges expands the sixth article of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which declared the rights of citizens to take part in the formation of law, to: *"All citizens including women are equally admissible to all public dignities, offices and employments, according to their capacity, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents."*

Article V through Article IX

Articles V through IX again extend the articles in the Declaration of the Rights of Man to include both women and men in their statements.

Article X

In Article X, de Gouges draws attention to the fact that, under French law, women were fully punishable, yet denied equal rights, declaring: *"Women have the right to mount the scaffold, they must also have the right to mount the speaker's rostrum"*. This statement would go on to be well-known and spread to wide audiences.

Article XI

De Gouges declares, in Article XI, that a woman can identify the father of her child. Historians believe that this could relate to de Gouges upbringing as a possible illegitimate child, and allows women to demand support from fathers of illegitimate children.

Article XII

This article explains that the declaration of these rights for women is a great benefit to society, and does not only benefit those protected by it. According to her biographer, Olivier Blanc, de Gouges maintained that this article be included to explain to men the benefit they would receive from support of this Declaration against the advice of the Society of the Friends of Truth.

Article XIII through Article XVI

Articles XIII through XVI extend the articles in the Declaration of the Rights of Man to include both women and men in their statements.

Article XVII

The seventeenth article of the Declaration expresses sexual equality of marriage, and that upon marriage, women and men are found equal in the eyes of the law - this means that upon divorce, property is split evenly between the involved parties, and property cannot be seized without reason from women (just as is the case for men).

Postscript to the Declaration

De Gouges opens her postscript to the Declaration with a declaration: "***Woman, wake up; the tocsin of reason is resounding throughout the universe: acknowledge your rights.***" In her first paragraph, she implores women to consider what they have gained from the Revolution - "*a greater scorn, a greater disdain.*" She maintains that men and women have everything in common, and that women must "*unite under the banner of philosophy.*" She declares that whatever barriers women come up against, it is in their power to overcome those barriers and progress in society. She goes on to describe that "*marriage is the tomb of trust and love*" but fails to write laws that apply to unmarried women - she leaves this to men, but implores men to consider the morally correct thing to do when creating the framework for the education of women.

De Gouges then writes a framework social contract (borrowing from Rousseau) for men and women, and goes into details about the specifics of the legal ramifications and equality in marriage. In many ways, she reformulates Rousseau's Social Contract with a focus that obliterates the gendered conception of a citizen and creates the conditions that are necessary for both parties to flourish.

According to de Gouges's journal, what ails government are fixed social hierarchies that are impossible to maintain. What heals a government is an equal balance of powers and a shared virtue. This is consistent with her continuing approval of a constitutional monarchy. Marriages are to be voluntary unions by equal rights-bearing partners who hold property and children mutually and dispense of same by agreement. All children produced during this union have the right to their mother's and father's name, "*from whatever bed they come.*"

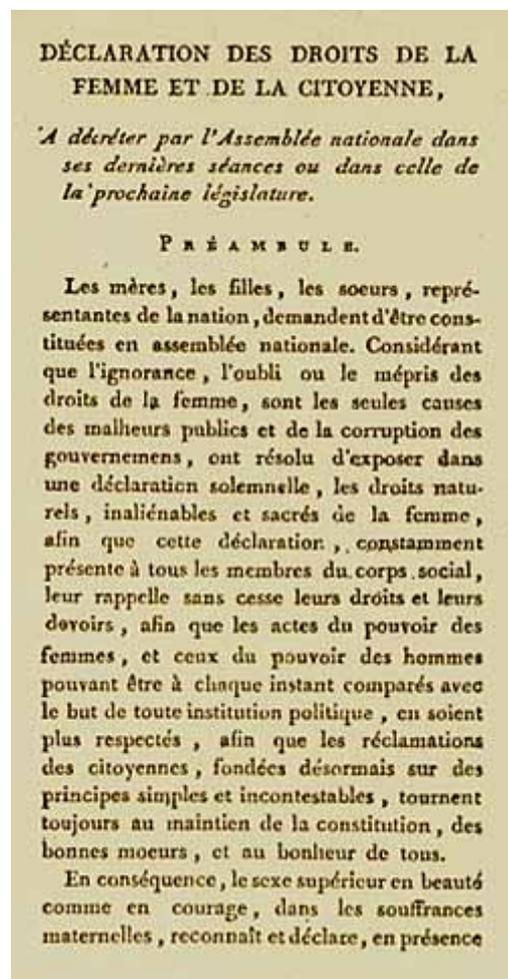
Reactions to the Declaration

In response to the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, many of the radicals of the Revolution immediately suspected de Gouges of treason. The Jacobins (led by Robespierre), upon seeing that the Declaration was addressed to the Queen, suspected de Gouges (as well as her allies in the Girondists) of being Royalists. After de Gouges attempted

to post a note demanding a plebiscite to decide between three forms of government (which included a Constitutional monarchy), the Jacobins quickly tried and convicted her of treason. She was sentenced to execution by the guillotine, and was one of many "*political enemies*" to the state of France claimed by the Reign of Terror.

At the time of her death, the Parisian press no longer mockingly dismissed her as harmless. While journalists and writers argued that her programs and plans for France had been irrational, they also noted that in proposing them she had wanted to be a "*statesman*." Her crime, the *Feuille du Salut public* reported, was that she had "*forgotten the virtues which belonged to her sex*." In the misogynistic environment of Jacobian Paris, her feminism and political meddling were a dangerous combination.

De Gouges was a strict critic of the principle of equality touted in Revolutionary France because it gave no attention to who it left out, and she worked to claim the rightful place of women and slaves within its protection. By writing numerous plays about the topics of black and women's rights and suffrage, the issues she brought up were spread not only through France, but also throughout Europe and the newly created United States of America.



SOURCE: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_the_Rights_of_Woman_and_of_the_Female_Citizen
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