

# WIKIPEDIA - WOMEN IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Historians since the late 20th century have debated how women not shared in the French Revolution and what short-term impact it had on French women. Women had no political rights in pre-Revolutionary France; they were considered "*passive*" citizens, forced to rely on men to determine what was best for them. That changed dramatically in theory as there seemingly were great advances in feminism. Feminism emerged in Paris as part of a broad demand for social and political reform. The women demanded equality to men and then moved on to a demand for the end of male domination. Their chief vehicle for agitation were pamphlets and women's clubs, especially the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. However, the Jacobin element in power abolished all the women's clubs in October 1793 and arrested their leaders. The movement was crushed. Devance explains the decision in terms of the emphasis on masculinity in wartime, Marie Antoinette's bad reputation for feminine interference in state affairs, and traditional male supremacy. A decade later the Napoleonic Code confirmed and perpetuated women's second-class status.

## Traditional roles

Women had no political rights in pre-Revolutionary France; they could not vote or hold any political office. They were considered "*passive*" citizens; forced to rely on men to determine what was best for them in the government. It was the men who defined these categories, and women were forced to accept male domination in the political sphere.

Women were taught to be committed to their husbands and "*all his interests... [to show] attention and care... [and] sincere and discreet zeal for his salvation.*" A woman's education often consisted of learning to be a good wife and mother; as a result women were not supposed to be involved in the political sphere, as the limit of their influence was the raising of future citizens. The subservient role of women prior to the revolution was perhaps best exemplified by the Frederician Code, published in 1761 and attacked by Enlightenment philosophers and publications.

The highly influential Encyclopédie in the 1750s set the tone of the Enlightenment, and its ideas exerted influence on the subsequent Revolution in France. Writing a number of articles on women in society, Louis de Jaucourt criticized traditional roles for women, arguing that "*it would be difficult to demonstrate that the husband's rule comes from nature, in as much as this principle is contrary to natural human equality... a man does not invariably have more strength of body, of wisdom, of mind or of conduct than a woman... The example of England and Russia shows clearly that women can succeed equally in both moderate and despotic government...*" One of greatest influences foreshadowing the revolutionary and republican transformations in women's roles was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational treatise Emile (1762). Some liberal men advocated equal rights for women including women's suffrage. Nicolas de Condorcet was especially noted for his advocacy, in his articles published in the Journal de la Société de 1789, and by publishing De l'admission des femmes au droit de cité ("*For the Admission to the Rights of Citizenship For Women*") in 1790.

## Revolutionary action

When the Revolution started, some women struck forcefully, using the volatile political climate to assert their active the natures. In the time of the Revolution, women could not be kept out of the political sphere. They swore oaths of loyalty, "*solemn declarations of patriotic allegiance, [and] affirmations of the political responsibilities of citizenship.*" De Corday d'Armont is a prime example of such a woman: sympathetic to the revolutionary political faction of the Girondists, she assassinated the Jacobin leader, Jean-Paul Marat. Throughout the Revolution, other women such as Pauline Léon and her Society of Revolutionary Republican Women supported the radical Jacobins, staged demonstrations in the National Assembly and participated in the riots, often using armed force.

**Source:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_the\\_French\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_French_Revolution) (visited 22 September 2020 at 08:43)

**NOTE:** This text is just the introduction – so you need to click on the link above to read more...

# Women and the Revolution

Women participated in virtually every aspect of the French Revolution, but their participation almost always proved controversial. Women's status in the family, society, and politics had long been a subject of polemics. In the eighteenth century, those who favored improving the status of women insisted primarily on women's right to an education (rather than on the right to vote, for instance, which few men enjoyed). The writers of the Enlightenment most often took a traditional stance on "*the women question*"; they viewed women as biologically and therefore socially different from men, destined to play domestic roles inside the family rather than public, political ones. Among the many writers of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau published the most influential works on the subject of women's role in society. In his book *Emile*, he described his vision of an ideal education for women. Women should take an active role in the family, Rousseau insisted, by breast-feeding and educating their children, but they should not venture to take active positions outside the home. Rousseau's writings on education electrified his audience, both male and female. He advocated greater independence and autonomy for male children and emphasized the importance of mothers in bringing up children. But many women objected to his insistence that women did not need serious intellectual preparation for life. Some women took their pleas for education into the press.

Before 1789 such ideas fell on deaf ears; the issue of women's rights, unlike the rights of Protestants, Jews, and blacks, did not lead to essay contests, official commissions, or Enlightenment-inspired clubs under the monarchy. In part, this lack of interest followed from the fact that women were not considered a persecuted group like Calvinists, Jews, or slaves.

Although women's property rights and financial independence met with many restrictions under French law and custom, most men and women agreed with Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers that women belonged in the private sphere of the home and therefore had no role to play in public affairs. Most of France's female population worked as peasants, shopkeepers, laundresses, and the like, yet women were defined primarily by their sex (and relationship in marriage) and not by their own occupations.

The question of women's rights thus trailed behind in the agitation for human rights in the eighteenth century. But like all the other questions of rights, it would get an enormous boost during the Revolution. When Louis XVI agreed to convoke a meeting of the Estates-General for May 1789 to discuss the financial problems of the country, he unleashed a torrent of public discussion. The Estates-General had not met since 1614, and its convocation heightened everyone's expectations for reform. The King invited the three estates—the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate (made up of everyone who was not a noble or a cleric)—to elect deputies through an elaborate, multilayered electoral process and to draw up lists of their grievances. At every stage of the electoral process, participants (mainly men but with a few females here and there at the parish level meetings) devoted considerable time and political negotiation to the composition of these lists of grievances. Since the King had not invited women to meet as women to draft their grievances or name delegates, a few took matters into their own hands and sent him petitions outlining their concerns. The modesty of most of these complaints and demands demonstrates the depth of the prejudice against women's separate political activity. Women could ask 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.

After the fall of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, politics became the order of the day. The attack on the Bastille showed how popular political intervention could change the course of events. When the people of Paris rose up, armed themselves, and assaulted the royal fortress-prison in the center of Paris, they scuttled any royal or aristocratic plans to stop the Revolution in its tracks by arresting the deputies or closing the new National Assembly. In October 1789 the Revolution seemed to hang in the balance once again. In the midst of a continuing shortage of bread, rumors circulated that the royal guards at Versailles, the palace where the King and his family resided, had trampled on the revolutionary colors (red, white, and blue) and plotted counterrevolution. In response, a crowd of women in Paris gathered to march to Versailles to demand an accounting from the King. They trudged the twelve miles from Paris in the rain, arriving soaked and tired. At the end of the day and during the night, the women were joined by thousands of men who had marched from Paris to join them. The next day the crowd grew more turbulent and eventually broke into the royal apartments,

killing two of the King's bodyguards. To prevent further bloodshed, the King agreed to move his family back to Paris.

Women's participation was not confined to rioting and demonstrating. Women began to attend meetings of political clubs, and both men and women soon agitated for the guarantee of women's rights. In July 1790 a leading intellectual and aristocrat, Marie-Jean Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, published a newspaper article in support of full political rights for women. It caused a sensation. In it he argued that France's millions of women should enjoy equal political rights with men. A small band of proponents of women's rights soon took shape in the circles around Condorcet. They met in a group called the Cercle Social (social circle), which launched a campaign for women's rights in 1790–91. One of their most active members in the area of women's rights was the Dutch woman Etta Palm d'Aelders who denounced the prejudices against women that denied them equal rights in marriage and in education. In their newspapers and pamphlets, the Cercle Social, whose members later became ardent republicans, argued for a liberal divorce law and reforms in inheritance laws as well. Their associated political club set up a female section in March 1791 to work specifically on women's issues, including civil equality in the areas of divorce and property.

The boldest statement for women's political rights came from the pen of Marie Gouze (1748–93), who wrote under the pen name Olympe de Gouges. An aspiring playwright, Gouges bitterly attacked slavery and in September 1791 published the Declaration of the Rights of Woman, modeled on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Following the structure and language of the latter declaration, she showed how women had been excluded from its promises. Although her declaration did not garner widespread support, it did make her notorious. Like many of the other leading female activists, she eventually suffered persecution at the hands of the government; while Etta Palm d'Aelders and most of the others only had to endure arrest, however, Gouges went to the guillotine in 1793. Public political activism came at a high price.

Women never gained full political rights during the French Revolution; none of the national assemblies ever considered legislation granting political rights to women (they could neither vote nor hold office). Most deputies thought the very idea outlandish. This did not stop women from continuing to participate in unfolding events. Their participation took various forms: some demonstrated or even rioted over the price of food; some joined clubs organized by women; others took part in movements against the Revolution, ranging from individual acts of assassination to joining in the massive rebellion in the west of France against the revolutionary government. The most dramatic individual act of resistance to the Revolution was the assassination of the deputy Jean-Paul Marat by Charlotte Corday on 13 July 1793. Marat published a newspaper, *The Friend of the People*, that violently denounced anyone who opposed the direction of the Revolution; he called for the heads of aristocrats, hoarders, unsuccessful generals, and even moderate republicans, such as Condorcet, who supported the Revolution but resisted its tendency toward violence and intimidation. Corday gained entrance to Marat's dwelling and stabbed him in his bath. He often took baths for a skin condition.

Most women acted in more collective, less individually striking fashion. First and foremost, they endeavored to guarantee food for their families. Concern over the price of food led to riots in February 1792 and again in February 1793. In these disturbances, which often began at the door of shops, women usually played a prominent role, egging on their confederates to demand lower prices and to insist on confiscating goods and selling them at a "just" price.

A small but vocal minority of women activists set up their own political clubs. The best known of these was the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women established in Paris in May 1793. The members hoped to gain political education for themselves and a platform for expressing their views to the political authorities. The society did not endorse full political rights for women; it devoted its energies to advocating more stringent measures against hoarders and counterrevolutionaries and to proposing ways for women to participate in the war effort. Accounts of the meetings demonstrate the keen interest of women in political affairs, even when those accounts come from frankly hostile critics of the women's activities.

Male revolutionaries promptly rejected every call for equal rights for women. But their reactions in print and in speech show that these demands troubled their conception of the proper role for women. Now they had

to explain themselves; rejection of women's rights was no longer automatic, in part because the revolutionary governments established divorce, with equal rights for women in suing for divorce, and granted girls equal rights to the inheritance of family property. In February 1791 one of the leading newspapers responded explicitly to Condorcet's article demanding equal political rights for women. The editor, Louis-Marie Prudhomme, restated the view, commonly attributed to Rousseau, that nature determined different but complementary roles for men and women. During the discussion of a new constitution in April 1793, the issue of women's rights came up once again. The spokesman for the constitutional committee restated the arguments against equal rights for women, but he admitted that deputies had begun to speak out in favor of women's rights. He cited in particular the pamphlet by Deputy Pierre Guyomar insisting that women should have the right to vote and hold office.

As the political situation grew more turbulent and dangerous in the fall of 1793, the revolutionary government became suspicious of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. The society had aligned itself with critics of the government who complained about the shortage of food. It also tried to intervene in individual cases of arrest and imprisonment. But the club did not readily give in to its opponents. One of its leaders, Claire Lacombe, published a pamphlet defending the club. Her pamphlet opens a window onto club activities.

Despite attempts to respond to the charges of its critics, the club ultimately fell victim to the disapproval and suspicion of the revolutionary government, which outlawed all women's clubs on 30 October 1793. The immediate excuse was a series of altercations between women's club members and market women over the proper revolutionary costume, but behind the decision lay much discomfort with the idea of women's active political involvement. On 3 November 1793, Olympe de Gouges, author of the Declaration of the Rights of Woman, was put to death as a counterrevolutionary, condemned for having published a pamphlet suggesting that a popular referendum should decide the future government of the country, not the National Convention. Two weeks later, a city official, Pierre Gaspard Chaumette, denounced all political activity by women, warning them of the fate of Marie-Jeanne Roland and Gouges, two of several prominent women who went to the guillotine at this time. The Queen was executed on 16 October 1793, after a short but dramatic trial before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Roland, one of the leading political figures of 1792–93—she was the wife of a minister and hostess of one of Paris's most influential salons—went to her death on 8 November 1793, even though she was a convinced republican. Her crime was support for the "*Girondins*," the faction of constitutionalist deputies that included Condorcet.

After the suppression of women's clubs, ordinary women still had to make their way in a difficult political and economic climate. The Terror did not spare them, even though it was supposed to be directed against the enemies of the Revolution. A letter from a mother to her son illustrates the problems of provisioning and the haunting fear of arrest; the son of this woman was, as she feared, arrested as a "*counterrevolutionary*" (an increasingly vague term) and guillotined not long afterward. Many ordinary women went to prison as suspects for complaining about food shortages while waiting in line at shops, for making disrespectful remarks about the authorities, or for challenging local officials.

After the fall of Robespierre in July 1794, the National Convention eliminated price controls, and inflation and speculation soon resulted in long bread lines once again. The police gathered information every day about the state of discontent, and they worried in particular about the increasing shortages of February and March 1795. Women egged men on to attack the local and national authorities. These disturbances came to a head in the last major popular insurrections of the Revolution when bread rations dropped from one and a half pounds per person in March to one-eighth of a pound in April–May and rioting broke out. The first uprising took place 1–2 April 1795 (12–13 Germinal, Year III). A more extensive one broke out 20–23 May (1–4 Prairial). In both, women precipitated the action by urging men to join demonstrations to demand bread and changes in the national government. On 20 May a large crowd of women and men, armed with guns, pikes, and swords, rushed into the meeting place of the National Convention and chased the deputies from their benches. They killed one and cut off his head. As soon as the government gained control of the situation, it arrested many rioters, prohibited women from entering the galleries of its meeting place and from attending any kind of political assembly or even gathering in groups of more than five in the street.

Even as the fortunes of women's political activism were rising and falling, women began playing another kind of role, as symbols of revolutionary values. Most of the major revolutionary values—liberty, equality, fraternity, reason, the Republic, regeneration—were represented by female figures, usually in Roman dress (togas). The use of female figures from antiquity followed from standard iconographic practice: artists had long used symbols or icons derived from Classical Roman or Greek sources as a kind of textbook of artistic representation. French, like Latin, divided nouns by gender. Most qualities such as liberty, equality, and reason were taken to be feminine (La Liberté, L'Egalité, La Raison), so they seemed to require a feminine representation to make them concrete. This led to one of the great paradoxes of the French Revolution: though the male revolutionaries refused to grant women equal political rights, they put pictures of women on everything, from coins and bills and letterheads to even swords and playing cards. Women might appear in real-life stories of heroism, but they were much more likely to appear as symbols of something else.

Although women had not gained the right to vote or hold office (and indeed would not do so in France until 1944!), they had certainly made their presence known during the Revolution. At the end of the decade of revolution, a well-known writer, Constance Pipelet, offered her views on its impact on women. Although she stopped short of repeating Condorcet's or Olympe de Gouges's demands for absolutely equal rights for women, she did insist that the Revolution had forced women to become more aware of their status in society. She also argued that the Republic should justify itself by offering women more education and more opportunities. Her writing shows that women's demands had been heard and that even if they had gone underground, they had not been forgotten.

Women participated in the French Revolution in many ways: they demonstrated at crucial political moments, stood in interminable bread lines, made bandages for the war effort, visited their relatives in jail, supported their government-approved clergyman (or hid one of those who refused to take the loyalty oath), and wrote all manner of letters and petitions about government policies. As symbols, however, they did not appear in their normal guise in ordinary life at the end of the eighteenth century. To take but one example, an early allegorical painting by the artist Colinart of a woman dressed like a Roman goddess is a far cry from the actual mother of 1790 wearing ordinary clothes and depicted with her children in another painting.

Although no one has completed a statistical study of female figures in revolutionary art, even a cursory review shows many more depictions of women as allegorical figures than of women in their actual roles of the time. The most popular figure was Liberty, who became, in effect, the preferred symbol of the French Revolution. Called Marianne by her detractors to signal that she was nothing but a common woman (perhaps even a prostitute), Liberty nonetheless became indelibly associated with the French Revolution, so much so that she still appears prominently on French money and in patriotic paintings and statuary. Liberty usually appeared in Roman dress, often in a toga, holding a pike, the people's instrument for taking back their liberty, with a red liberty cap perched on its tip (the liberty cap too came from Roman times—it was supposedly worn by recently freed slaves).

Liberty was often joined by another revolutionary virtue such as truth, as in the painting *Allegory of Truth* by Nicolas de Courteille. After the Republic was proclaimed in September 1792, depictions of the Republic as a female allegorical figure sometimes took over from Liberty. Liberty, Reason, Regeneration—as in this engraving of the Festival of Reunion of 10 August 1793 —Wisdom, and of course Equality and Fraternity, were all represented as women. These allegorical figures sprouted on every surface. Festivals featured them prominently, but so did the new republican calendar and the new revolutionary playing cards, which used Roman figures, both male and female, to replace the kings, queens, and jacks of old.

Why did women appear so frequently in these allegories and symbolic depictions? Why, for instance, does a giant female statue overshadow the scene in a painting by Lethière (Gillaume Guillon) showing a typical scene of registering for the draft. Although the picture is filled with ordinary people of the time, including many women, it emphasizes symbolically "*the country in danger*" through a gigantic female figure with her breasts exposed. The figure stands for "*the country*," which in French is a female noun (*la patrie*). As noted, it was iconographic tradition to depict virtues as female, but not as contemporary women. An artist signaled their symbolic status by dressing them in Roman or Greek garb or even by showing them half naked. No French woman would have dressed in this fashion, so no one would think that these women were real women.

In *Watch Yourself or You'll Be a Product for Sale*, the depiction of contemporary women, albeit women dressing to please men, women are dressed in contemporary fashion; they are not shown as Roman or Greek goddesses.

Any educated person would therefore immediately recognize when a woman was an abstract quality or idea and when she was simply a woman of her times or a particular noted woman. Women made good symbols because they could not hold office or participate officially in politics. That is to say, it was impossible to confuse a depiction of "*liberty*" with any particular political leader or official, who was by definition male. The French were extremely worried that one man might take power and establish a dictatorship. They preferred symbols that could not be identified with any specific male political leader. Instead, Liberty became the dominant political figure. As a result, no individual ever enjoyed the symbolic status accorded George Washington, say, in the new United States.

**Source:** <https://revolution.chnm.org/exhibits/show/liberty--equality--fraternity/women-and-the-revolution> (visited 22 September 2020 09:45)

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Here is a link inside this site to the Trial of Olympe de Gouges:

<https://revolution.chnm.org/exhibits/show/liberty--equality--fraternity/item/375> (22 Sept. 2020 at 09:50)

# Women in the French Revolution: From the Salons to the Streets

(The following is a post by Erika Hope Spencer, French Reference Specialist, European Division.)

When the French Revolution began in 1789, French women were largely confined to the private sphere. Domestic duty and family obligation dictated their behavior, and the public life was a man's domain. However, the ideas of equality and comradery that sparked the French Revolution captivated women from all backgrounds. Women were eager to voice their political opinions and grievances. While the intellectuals of the upper classes debated property rights and universal suffrage, the working classes took to the streets with their own frustrations such as finding affordable bread.

The French Revolution was born out of the ideas of the Enlightenment. Eighteenth-century philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire challenged the thinking of French society. New ideas about education, class, and individual rights were being discussed at the evening gatherings of Paris high society known as salons. These gatherings were established before the Revolution, and they were often hosted, not by a distinguished man, but by his fashionable (and hopefully, witty) wife. Known as *salonnières*, these ladies wielded a significant amount of indirect influence in the world of politics and diplomacy. They were the daughters of French ministers or the wives of aristocrats and had grown up with the privilege of an expansive education. Though they did not enjoy legal rights, in many instances they were regarded as intellectual equals to the men in their lives. Historians still debate the true character of the salon and its role in history, but there is no doubt that they provided a platform for their hosts to exert influence outside of the domestic realm.



**French Girl in Phrygian cap.** This modern-era French war bonds poster depicts a young French girl wearing the red Phrygian cap or “bonnet rouge” of the French Revolution.



**Marie Antoinette** in the earlier years as queen. Her extravagant tastes and Austrian origin fueled the distrust and resentment of the French people.



In this image of Marie Antoinette, she is intentionally depicted as unadorned and somber; a prisoner facing her execution.



Triumphant Parisian army reunites with the people on its return from Versailles to Paris, October 6, 1789. The French army meets up with the Women's March.

In the early and optimistic days of the Revolution, the notion of equality (*égalité*) was applied in theory to both women and to the enslaved people in French colonial territories. However, as the struggle between the three main classes of nobility, clergy and bourgeoisie dragged on, many of the initial proposals aiming at universal liberation fell short. This understandably angered the disenfranchised groups. In the French territory of Saint-Domingue, today's Haiti, Toussaint L'Ouverture led a successful independence movement by enslaved and free people of color. Back in France, the Revolutionary movement began to fracture on all fronts. Members of the moderate Girondins argued for a constitutional monarchy, while members of the radical Jacobins fought against aristocratic privileges. Societies that formed during the Revolution were known as clubs, and they directed the course of politics, particularly in Paris. As the Revolution progressed, another radical split from the Jacobins formed the *enragés* (madmen). The more radicalized leaders eventually turned on one another beginning in late 1793 during what is known as the Terror (*la Terreur*).



Charlotte Corday, acted independently, but she was personally sympathetic to the moderate Girondin faction and felt compelled to assassinate the radical Jacobin leader, Marat, as he took his daily bath. Somewhat ironically, Corday believed she was saving the Revolution from becoming too radicalized, but many women felt Corday's act reflected poorly on other women revolutionaries.

The women of Paris were highly engaged in these events and their convictions spanned the political spectrum, depending on their positions in society. The wealthy women of the aristocratic and bourgeois classes often acted as *salonnières*, or worked in tandem with their husbands. That is not to say that many did not also take part in street demonstrations, nor is it to suggest that working class women were one unvaried force. There were divisions at all levels, and many Parisian women were concerned with economic conditions and high grain prices, while their neighbor might be demanding institutional reforms such as the right for women to establish their own political clubs.

Because the *salonnières* had the opportunity and leisure time to write, historians have tended to focus on these "*femme célèbres*" rather than the less documented radical female "*sans-culotterie*." The *salonnières* also had the funds to commission portraits, which was not an option for the lower classes. Many of the *salonnière* writings have been digitized for remote use. Radical revolutionary women, on the other hand, are known only through the narratives of others. Fortunately, this is changing as historians delve deeper into the archives of French history.

One of the most influential women of the Revolution was Sophie de Condorcet. She worked with her husband, the Marquis de Condorcet, to argue for full women's suffrage in a July 1790 document entitled "*Sur l'admission des femmes auroit de cite*" (On the Admission of Women to Civil Rights), available in full from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Madame de Condorcet was a true feminist of the time. She was also a professional translator and scholar and very likely translated some writing of Thomas Paine while he was in Paris, and wrote Letters on Sympathy as a response to Adam Smith's "*Theory of Moral Sentiments*."

Equally influential in the upper echelons was *salonnière* Germaine de Staël. As the daughter of the famous and beloved finance minister, Jacques Necker, de Staël enjoyed an especially privileged place in society and she used her position to lobby for the rights of others. She was appreciated by the great thinkers of the day for her charisma and brilliance. She captivated a wide array of foreign dignitaries, and her salon routinely brought together liberals, nobles, wives, and mistresses. The small dinners at her "*hôtel*" (townhome) on the *Rive Gauche* (left bank of Paris as separated by the Seine River) included Thomas Jefferson, Lafayette, Thomas Paine, and Gouverneur Morris, the American envoy to Paris, as well as other well-known personages of the time. Some of the correspondence is housed in the Library's Manuscript Division in Gouverneur Morris Papers, and Morris's book, *A Diary of the French Revolution* has interesting observations from this time period including his time spent at the salons.



Salonnière and author Germaine de Staël gathered a wide variety of great thinkers to meet and converse in her lively soirées on the rue de Bac in Paris.

The conversations at these soirées on the fashionable *rue de Bac* influenced popular sentiment and shifted political opinion. De Staël herself was a centrist politically. However, having grown up listening to such luminaries as Diderot and Voltaire verbally spar in her mother's salons, she had developed an ability to challenge, and at times confound men of any political persuasion. Traditionalists felt these salons set a dangerous precedent by encouraging women to leave their "*natural domain*" of the home to engage with the outside world of politics and public debate. Although de Staël had grown up in a conservative home, her intellectual curiosity drew her to question these conventions. By age 22 she had already published a well-received book on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "*Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J. J. Rousseau...*" (Letters on the works and character of J. J. Rousseau). Although women were not permitted to vote or hold office, she attended the debates at the National Assembly (France's first Constitutional Government) on a regular basis and was on friendly terms with many of the deputies. In her later years she even met with the young Napoleon Bonaparte, though they disagreed and he ignored her advice.



Républicaine Manon Roland "*My spirit and my heart find everywhere the obstacles of opinion and the shackles of prejudice and all my force is spent in vainly rattling my chains.*" "*Private Memoires of Madame Roland.*"

Another player in Revolutionary politics was the outsider, Madame Roland, who relocated from Lyon with her husband. She was a woman of moderate political views but she was surprisingly effective with her steady and subtle provocations of the conventional men around her. She was admittedly alarmed by the radical *sans-culottes* (without breeches), the commoners who did not wear the fancy breeches of the upper class. As with many from the French provinces, she felt out of step with Parisian politics. However, she was an astute woman who truly believed that the revolutionaries were correct in many of their views, if not always in their conduct. Roland helped write parliamentary bills and speeches but did not feel comfortable in public debate. She was a habitual writer, however, and volumes of her letters are preserved in her “*Correspondance politique: 1790-1793*” and “*Etude sur Madame Roland et son temps*” at the Library of Congress. Her personal memoirs are available in translation. As a *salonnière*, she hosted the Jacobin leader Maximilien Robespierre many times, but her measured ways eventually led to her arrest and execution as an enemy of the Revolution.

While not every woman active in the Revolution would have viewed herself as a feminist, there were a number of bold feminist manifestos written around this time by both men and women. When the “*Declaration of the Rights of Man*” became the preamble of the French Constitution in 1789, playwright Olympe de Gouges wrote her own version that same year. It was virtually identical other than its inclusion of women as *citoyennes* (citizens). A year later, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote “*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.” Other contributors to the movement included the Italian poet and revolutionary leader, Marquise Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel, and the German author and poet, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel who wrote the visionary work, “*On Improving the Status of Women*” (“*Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber*”). Even as these ideas circulated, popular opinion overall became less sympathetic to women’s rights. Indeed, by 1793, sentiment in the National Assembly had largely turned against women’s involvement in the Revolution. The objections were varied in their wording but reflected a fear and hostility not only against the *salonnières*, but increasingly toward republican revolutionaries. These women had very little in common with the wealthy hostesses, but their vocal demands provoked many, including the men in the National Assembly, who viewed their behavior as “*unseemly*” in a woman.

As the Revolution became more radical and the views more extreme, the influence of the *salonnières* waned and the early enthusiasts of the Revolution became fearful that they themselves would come under the guillotine. Many of them did. Olympe de Gouges was sent to the guillotine by Robespierre. To highlight the confusing politics of the French Revolution, de Gouges was hated on all sides. She was perceived as too radical by the moderates, and as a Royalist by the extreme left, probably because she dedicated the “*Declaration of the Rights of Woman*” to Queen Marie Antoinette. In reality she was an idealist who fought fiercely not only for women’s rights but against the institution of slavery in the French colonies. In 1788 she wrote a forceful abolitionist essay entitled, “*Réflexions sur les hommes nègres*” (Reflections on Black Men). In this piece she joined many other revolutionary thinkers in condemning slavery in French territories. Translations of many of these works can be found in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief History with Documents*. As the tensions grew, the voices of the popular masses became more strident.

Perhaps the most intriguing female revolutionary organizer was Théroigne de Méricourt. Her name may look aristocratic, but de Méricourt simply refers to the small town of Marcourt where she was born. A prosperous peasant who was inspired by the ideals of the Revolution, she found herself in Paris right before the fall of the Bastille. Having had numerous lovers and suffered the death of a child, she felt compelled to fight for the downtrodden. Often wearing a blood-red or white riding outfit and carrying a sabre, she deliberately dressed in a masculine manner. Nevertheless she was remembered by journalist Camille Desmoulins as having a “*pretty, thought-filled head*.” She was as comfortable at the tribune (speakers’ podium) in the National Assembly as she was bantering with the *poissardes* (market women, also slang for a vulgar woman) of *Les Halles* food market. She drew applause from her speech at the famous Cordeliers’ Club and charmed many of the liberal deputies she rubbed shoulders with, but her unorthodox approach to life did not fit comfortably in the context of Parisian politics. She was ruthlessly disparaged as a “*patriot’s whore*” by the Royalist press. Théroigne, like de Gouges, was slandered, abused and misrepresented, most likely because she had no family to defend her reputation. She suffered severely while imprisoned in Austria under false charges, and ultimately survived the Revolution only to live the rest of her life institutionalized and misunderstood.

The most ferocious *fille sans-culotte* was Pauline Léon, the founder of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women (*Société des Républicaines-Révolutionnaires*). Married to the *enragés* leader, Théophile Leclerc, she was known for her desire to form a female militia and played a sizable role in turning opinion against Robespierre in the later years of the Revolution. Her *Société* was short lived and controversial. Ultimately, it rankled not only men but also the less politically minded women who resented pressure to wear the tri-color cockade or the *bonnet rouge* (red bonnet, or the Phrygian cap symbolizing freedom) which had such shocking masculine associations. Societies for women were forbidden by decree on October 30, 1793 by the National Convention. Perhaps out of exhaustion, or perhaps out of devotion to her husband, Pauline Léon spent the rest of her life with Leclerc in quiet domestic seclusion.

Women have never operated as one monolithic group, and the French Revolution proved no exception. If the movement had ever been unified, that unity dissolved quickly. There is some fluidity between these groups, but in general the upper class had very little to do with the street worker. And even among the working class women, there were stark ideological differences between the more radical *républicaines révolutionnaires* such as Pauline Léon, and the ordinary market women who did not relate to their political fervor. Needless to say, these women did not always agree on what was important, and the men in power exploited their (sometimes violent) disagreements in order to shut down the more radical protests. These divisions among women were mirrored in the movement at large, and the debate in France over true *liberté* continued to play out in cycles of revolution and counter-revolution.



A cartoon making fun of Edmund Burke, conservative critic of the French Revolution. The print suggests a humorous frontispiece to Burke’s “Reflections on the French Revolution” with Burke worshipping Queen Marie Antoinette.

Source: <https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2020/07/women-in-the-french-revolution-from-the-salons-to-the-streets/> (visited 22 September 2020 at 10:15)

# Recent Historiography on the French Revolution and Gender

This piece reviews recent work on women, gender, and masculinity during the French revolutionary era. The older argument that women were enclosed in a private sphere and excluded from politics has given way to a more nuanced and wide-ranging exploration of diverse groups of women, including prostitutes, Parisian market women, cross-dressed female soldiers, female school-teachers, and enslaved women seeking emancipation through marrying soldiers, to name but a few groups. The latest scholarship recognizes limitations on women's formal political power but focuses attention instead on women's creativity and the malleability of gender identity, both in France and in the colonies. Much of this work arose in dialogue with au courant approaches in fields such as the histories of capitalism, sexuality, or the transatlantic world. Some scholars are taking part in a broader move toward theorizing the category of "*citizenship*" in wider and more nuanced ways. The piece also explores emerging research in the history of revolutionary masculinity. Scholars currently follow two countervailing tendencies that are not always in sync. A strong vein of new work investigates manhood within homosocial worlds, notably within the military, building on new approaches to the cultural history of war. A second, equally exciting strand within the scholarship analyzes manhood within the family—a move that makes sense as scholars have reacted against conceptualizing revolutionary gender dynamics in terms of separate spheres. The essay concludes with reflections on possible directions for future research.

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<b>NOTE:</b> This is just the “Abstract” to this article – click on the link above to read more
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