

The French Revolution's Influence on Women's Rights

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When looking back on the French Revolution, many think of the natural human rights men gained with the adoption of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* in August of 1798. However, most people disregard the progress in women's rights that also occurred during the revolution. As Shirley Elson Roessler, author of the book *Out of the Shadows*, says, "The topic of women's participation in the French Revolution has generally received little attention from historians, who have displayed a tendency to minimize the role of women in the major events of those years, or else to ignore it all together."¹ While it is true that women did not gain explicit rights during this time, the women of the French Revolution and the activities they participated in did influence feminism and women's rights from that point forward. The French women's March on Versailles, their political clubs and pamphlets, and their prominent women political figures all contributed to changing the way women were viewed in society. Although these views and rights were taken away again during Napoleon's rule, they set the precedent for women's rights in the future.

During the Ancien Régime, the political and social system in France before the revolution occurred,² both single and married women had few rights. Until they were married, women were controlled by their fathers and after marriage this control shifted to the husband. Women had no power over their property or even over their own person. Economically, their situation was also unfavorable. They were not paid well, and the law "confined women to domestic service, heavy labor, and ill-paid labor-intensive industries like the lace trade."³ They did have a few small political rights; for example, women in religious orders and noble women were allowed to send representatives to the Estates General.⁴ However, these rights were insignificant compared to

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those of men. For the most part, people thought women should stay at home and raise children, and that sexual equality was a bad idea. These ideas were age old “truths” of Western Civilization and they were also more recently influenced by the French Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who strongly believed that women should not engage in politics.

During the late 1780s, women felt as if they were losing the few traditional rights they originally possessed and that their “roles were gradually being eroded by state intervention.”⁵ Brochures started to appear in 1787 arguing for higher education, access to higher paying jobs, and equality in marriage for women.⁶ All of these ideas about economic and sexual equality that were first brought up during the French Revolution have continued to recur in society through present day. But unlike today, only a few men during the 18th century agreed that gender equality should become reality. One of them, the Marquis de Condorcet, thought women should be able to vote. Even though many disagreed with Condorcet and his feminist friends, it was a big breakthrough that there were both men and women who agreed women should have equal rights, a view that is commonplace today.

The March on Versailles on October 5, 1789, was the first major event that helped set the tone for women in politics. Because of a series of bad harvests, and the country’s debt from their support of the American Revolution and bankrolling Marie Antoinette’s expensive tastes, bread prices were skyrocketing in the summer and fall of 1789. Wages were so low that poor, working class women were having trouble feeding their families. Some began to participate in riots, such as the Reveillon Riot in Paris against low wages, and even the Bastille Riot on July 13, 1789. By October, Paris was starving, and despite many riots, there was still no food. In the March on Versailles, women put bread on pikes and marched from Paris to Versailles. Men followed the women, and, together, they captured the king and brought him and his family back to Paris to see the living conditions. This was a turning point in the Revolution for women because it showed that they could help the cause, and thus were not politically irrelevant as previously thought. Also, even though the men that marched served as escorts or came separately from the women, the march still showed that men and women were

able to work side-by-side as equals to accomplish a goal, in this case humiliating the out-of-touch monarchs.

Starting in the 1790s, women were again seen in a new way politically. After a representative government started in France, women “changed their tactic”⁷ from writing political pamphlets to participating in political clubs. Political clubs—emerging in the last quarter of the eighteenth century—had originally been all men, but women began to come as spectators to clubs such as the Jacobins and Cordeliers in Paris. Their experience of political awakening led to over thirty women’s clubs being created in French cities such as Dijon, Lyon, and Bordeaux, in addition to Paris.⁸ The multiple locations of these clubs prove how the idea of women’s rights was already beginning to spread its influence nationwide. Both men and women representatives from the clubs began to petition the National Assembly about higher education for women and marital laws, as well as ideas for the revolution. One woman, Theroigne de Mericourt, founded *Amis de a Loi*, a short-lived co-ed society meant to “enlighten the populace in political matters and to dispel fear and ignorance.”⁹ Despite being a woman, she decided to propose the idea for a new building for the National Assembly. Although her proposal was denied, “the action [was] noteworthy that a woman made such an address at that time.”¹⁰ This concept of women taking noteworthy political actions proves that political clubs were helping women to overcome boundaries and possess more confidence in addressing men. They were trying to contribute to the revolution and to their own well-being, a big step up from sitting at home with the children as they were so relegated in the Ancien Régime and before.

Beyond starting their own clubs, women were able to assert their sexual equality by founding and participating in dual-gender clubs. A mixed club was created in Paris in 1790, and in 1791 it became known as the *Societe Fraternelle de Patriotes de Deux Sexes*. Women and men participated equally in discussion and elections. For example, there were both male and female secretaries and four men and women helped select new members and introduce them into the society. The club increased rapidly in popularity and members, and led to many similar clubs in Paris such as the *Societe Fraternelle de Halles*, the *Societe Fraternelle de*

Minimes, and *Nomophiles*. In these types of clubs that welcomed women, “the basis was established for the process of [women’s] politicization.”¹¹ One example of this is the club, *Societe de Indigents*. Created by Louis-Marie Prudhomme, a one-time anti-feminist editor and journalist of the newspaper *Revolutions de Paris*, the club not only accepted women, but was run by Prudhomme’s very own wife. This transformation of a male revolutionary from an advocate of sexism into a proponent of his wife’s political equality clearly depicts the evolution of women’s status in the French Revolution.

Although political clubs now played a large role for women’s politics, pamphlets and brochures for women’s rights were still being published in the background. One pamphleteer, Olympe de Gouges, wrote a declaration of women’s equality that rings true even to this day. De Gouges, the daughter of a butcher, was born in 1743 and was self-educated. By the beginning of the revolution she had already written many pamphlets. Despite the success of her previous work, it wasn’t until September 1791 that she wrote her most famous document in response to the discriminatory essence of the new French Constitution.

In August of 1789, the National Assembly had adopted the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, a document spelling out human liberties that was eventually used in France’s Constitution in 1791. Ironically, although the *Declaration* supposedly spelled out human rights, they only applied to free, non-enslaved men. For example, Article First of the *Declaration* states, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good.”¹² This article helps to demonstrate that the basic human rights applied for the first time during the French Revolution were not basic human rights at all—they were solely for men. The Preamble of the *Declaration* also states that the documents purpose is to set forth “the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man,”¹³ further highlighting the complete ignorance of women and the strong roles they had played thus far in the Revolution.

De Gouges based her September 1791 pamphlet on the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, speaking of the “natural, inalienable, and

sacred rights of women”¹⁴ that mirrored those of men. She bravely went further, suggesting that “property belongs to both sexes whether united or separated,”¹⁵ suggesting that she strongly believed that women should be able live life independent of a husband if they chose. De Gouges even encouraged women to “wake up” and “recognize [their] rights”¹⁶ in her writing, awakening a new view that women truly deserved to be given equal rights to men. Rights were something that they, as humans, were entitled to. Although Olympe de Gouges was later executed during the Reign of Terror for her writing, her work was forever preserved as proof of the changing view of women’s rights during the French Revolution. Many inconceivable ideas, such as the freedom of opinion and thought, were suddenly encouraged to the point where women felt like they were entitled to these rights. This entitlement to freedom has influenced women through modern day.

Unfortunately for 19th century women, when Napoleon took over France in 1799, most of the progress they had made in terms of gaining rights and being recognized as politically equal would be reversed. Napoleon has even been quoted as saying “the husband must possess the absolute power and right to say to his wife: Madame, you shall not go out, you shall not go to the theater, you shall not visit such and such a person: for the children you bear, they shall be mine.”¹⁷ However, if the short-term effect on women’s rights had failed, the long-term effect was certainly the opposite. Many of the rights women in North America, Europe, and other parts of the world enjoy today match up perfectly with the rights Olympe de Gouges espoused in her pamphlet—including equality with men, freedom of speech and opinion, and the right to own property. Women in America in the 1920s fought for the right to vote, a right first brought up by the Marquis de Condorcet during the Revolution. And finally, the sense of entitlement that women today feel about the rights we have and the fact that they should be equal to men dates back to the pamphlets spread during the French Revolution. With all the modern day evidence of women’s rights that were first articulated, if not put to action, during the French Revolution, it is clear the Revolution played a major role in influencing women’s rights for centuries to come. ●

Notes

1. Shirley Elson Roessler, *Out of the Shadows: Women and Politics in the French Revolution, 1789-95* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 1.
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Ancien Régime,” accessed November 21, 2011.
3. Jane Abray, “Feminism in the French Revolution,” *History Reference Center*, accessed November 21, 2011, Ebsco.
4. Ibid.
5. Roessler, 7.
6. Abray.
7. Ibid.
8. Roessler, 50.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 51.
11. Ibid., 52.
12. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” accessed November 19, 2011.
13. Ibid.
14. Olympe de Gouges, “Declaration of the Rights of Woman,” in *Western Civilization* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 112-113.
15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Steven Kreis, "Europe and the Superior Being: Napoleon," The History Guide, last modified February 28, 2006, <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture15a.html>.

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