

Women in french revolution: acceptance and denial



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In this research paper we will analyze womens involvement in French Revolution; especially we will be focused on their contribution to the revolution and their demand for political and legal rights. The argumentation of this topic will be based on the evidence taken from both primary and secondary sources. As primary sources we used two pamphlets written by Olympe De Gouges and Marquise de Condorcet. Both pamphlets, Olympe De Gouges Declaration of the rights of women and the Female Citizenship (1791) and Condorcet On Giving Women the Right of Citizenship (1790), allow us understand women s deep desire to gain rights and to be considered equal to men. Furthermore, as e second source we used J. McMillan s book France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics , which was published in 1999; Women in French Revolution 1789-1796 . All these documents will help us understand women s constant attempts, prior and during the revolution to gain political and legal equality between sexes, and understand the reason they finally didn t achieve their goals.

Women have always played a significance role during crises. Almost all the times they were devaluated and history didn t dedicate them many pages to point out their contribution and its positive or negative effects. Women were responsible for putting bread on the table, caring about their children s welfare. During times of famine, they had marched to the civic center and tried a lot to ameliorate their misery. A distractive example constituted women s contribution in French Revolution. Their involvement in French Revolution was a turning point . For the first time, women started demanding political rights. They wanted to change their conditions and they believed that French Revolution would bring changes and would be the right time for

them to achieve what they wanted. They knew that they had to face a lot of difficulties in order to gain their rights and to ameliorate their social status. Although they contributed a great deal in French Revolution, their involvement always proved controversial. The unfair truth is that men, who believed in the revolution, didn't believe in women's rights. As a result, during French Revolution, women were in the middle of acceptance and denial.

Research Questions

In our research paper we are going to give answers to such questions: What was the role and status of women prior and during the revolution? What affected women to take participation in this revolution? In which classes belonged the women that took part in the revolution? What was their contribution to the French Revolution? What were their hopes? Which was men's reaction to the situation? Why finally women didn't achieve their initial goal?

Literature Review

Before giving a literature review it is important to emphasize that the primary sources we have do not give us many information about women's situation before, during and after the French Revolution. Based on the primary sources we have, which are the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizenship (1791) and the On giving Woman the Rights of Citizenship (1790), the only information we take are women's desire to be given the same rights with men and their attempt to prove that they deserve them because they were equal to men.

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On the other hand the book, *France and Women, 1789 1914: Gender, Society and Politics*, which was a secondary source gave us a wide range of information. The book introduces us to the women's position before French Revolution and how they were treated by men. Additionally, the book offers us information about women's contribution in French Revolution and which was their position after the revolution. The other secondary source *Women in French Revolution 1789-1796* represent the women efforts in economy and her role in the French Revolution.

Role and Status of Women prior French Revolution

In the eighteenth century, in France, women's role was to be inferior to man and to have very few rights. When a female child was born it wasn't greeted as good news. As Gancourts say, the family considered the new arrival as a blessing which they accept as a disappointment. In other words, parents weren't happy when a girl was born even if she was born healthy. Most times. In rich families, mother considering that taking care of her girl was a waste of time she sent it away to a wet nurse. When she grew up her family would choose a husband for her and she would get married as soon as possible. Women were considered as the second sex. Many opinions were expressed on this issue either by authors or by Church authorities. For example medieval and classical authors claimed that women were the dangerous sex, driven by more powerful sexual urges than men. On the other hand both Catholic and Protestant supported that women are inferior and should be subjects to their husbands. In addition, they should spend most of their time praying.

The doctors of the 18th century tried to find the similarities between men's and women's bodies. They found the sexual of men and women to be entirely different. They believed that women's only characteristic was their productive function. This characteristic gave women their sexual and social identity. Because of the fact that in the case of multiplication she needs the conjunction of man she as a result, according to Viséy's logic, is only a being naturally subordinated to man to man of account of her needs, her duties, and above all because of her physical constitution¹. Furthermore, Diderot stated that woman was at the button in thrall to her uterus, an organ subject to terrible spasms, which rules her and rouses up in her phantoms of every sort². In other words, women were weak, sensitive and not intellectual because they were governed by their reproductive organs.

Although, some Enlightenment thinkers tried to change the ancient and medieval definition of women as other and being subordinate and render them distinctive as human beings. They believe that women were more spiritual than sexual and weren't as dangerous as they were considered. They didn't believe that women's only destiny was to be wives and mothers. This actually means that all philosophers believed in women's equality to men. A distinctive example is the great Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to him women shouldn't participate in other affairs of the world except from the home. Their position was at home taking care of their children and obeying their husbands. As he says women were too stupid to make political decisions.

Under the Ancient Regime women had a remarkable power on their hands. Of course , women coming from female elite as the Goncourt brothers suggested in classical work , never before , perhaps , had women appeared to be so powerful or so sexually liberated³ . This gave the opportunity to aristocratic hostesses such as Sophie de Condorcet and Suzanne Necker to open intellectual saloons where the fashionable philosophers had the chance to talk.

Women during French Revolution

The French Revolution gave women the opportunity not only to contribute in the revolution demanding their own freedom. They also played an important role from the beginning of the conflict. Being concerned about their children s welfare, they wouldn t hesitate to riot when food was becoming more and more expensive. They were involved in the army and took advantage of the situation to call for the same rights as men. They demanded for universal suffrage and common-law marriages. The women that participated in the revolution were from both aristocratic and labor classes. They tried to contribute in all aspects of revolution.

Aristocratic women being affected by the Enlightenment founded clubs. The first one was Etta d Palme s Friends of Truth. In these clubs women met together expressed and discussed revolutionary ideas, they learned the way to become citizens rather than subjects to a king. According to Levy , et al , Revolutionary era women wanted equality of rights within marriage , the right to divorce , extended rights of widows over property and of widowed mothers over their minor children , publicly guaranteed educational

opportunities for girls (including vocational training for poor girls) public training , licensing , and support for midwives in all provinces , guaranteed right to employment and the exclusion of men from specific traditionally female professions , like dress-making . The actress Claire Lacombe and chocolate-maker Pauline Leon headed the most radical of these clubs, the Revolutionary Republic Women (the RRW).

Nevertheless, from the start of the conflict also urban women played a significance role in the upholding of the revolution. During this time of hardship, when bread was too expensive and famine was growing up because of the fact that they had mouths to feed at home, they marched to the royal palace of Versailles demanding for their bread. On October 5th, 1789, discontent Parisian women marched to the royal palace and sent their petitions directly to the king. They demanded to see the Baker , the Baker s wife and Baker s boy referring to the king, his wife and their son. The large crowd gathered in the palace of Versailles was demanding the queen to come to the balcony. Meanwhile, the king Louis XVI was spending his free time hunting at woods. Marie Antoinette showed a stoic behavior by standing minutes on the balcony in danger, bowing her head and calming the crowd. On October 6th, the royal family was brought to Paris by a mob of fishwives. The mob was led by the ex-courtesan Anne Theroigne de Mericourt.

Women tried to get involved also in army. An important contribution was given by a woman s group called the Amazons . They begged the National Assembly to join the militia but their petitions were unsuccessful. They claimed that they could fight with weapons other than a needle and spindle. Although France was in need of soldiers, in late 1792 women were officially

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banned from joining the army. An interesting example is the Rameau sisters who joined the war wearing men's clothing. It is important to point out their bravery and competence in battle.

In addition to the clubs that were found we have pamphlets written in order to encourage women to continue demanding for their rights. Distinctive examples are the two pamphlets Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen (1791) and On Giving Women the Right of Citizenship (1790). In 1791 Olympe de Gouges wrote the Declaration des droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne (Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen) in response to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

ACCEPTANCE AND DENIAL

First, we found it important to explain the role of the working women class in the family economy. In general, a family needed the contribution of each member. In the case when the man of the family couldn't provide the wants of his family, the woman looked for an alternative source of income. In towns, women worked as seamstresses, milliners, corset-makers, embroiderers, ribbon makers, glove-makers; poor women performed the heavy and distasteful tasks such as load carrying. In the large cities, they were employed as rag sorters, cinder sifters, refuse collectors, assistants to masons. A contemporary feminist, Madame de Coicy emphasized the contribution of these women in the family economy considering them as the mother heroine. No matter all these efforts women were still denied by the French society of the mid-eighteenth century.

Secondly, we would like to take in consideration some women's attempts to change their status. It is a fact that few years before the revolution, the number of divorces was increased. I am overwhelmed, wrote the cure of Bort, near Clermont, with women who come to me not only beseeching bread, but accusing their husbands of threatening them that if they do not let the youngest children perish they will leave them and that alone they can manage but that even working all day they cannot feed their families; while a cure of Tours said Women are not the first to die, but they feel the pangs of hunger first because they deprive themselves to feed husband and children. At the end, he made the meaningful comparison with the pious pelican of the adoro te who gave her blood to feed her young. Not baring any more their inferiority and treatment against them, women sought divorce.

When, in 1789, the Old Regime declared the right of men to freedom, equality and fraternity, women too hoped for a new world. Their demand for political and legal equality between sexes was declared sacrilegious by the defenders of the Rights of Man. After all these denied social, legal, political, economical rights, women would join together on a feminist movement to make their voice to be listened. Finally, on 5-6 October 1789 would be organized a bread riot; in wich revolutionary women seek for a change. It would not be just a bread riot, but something more; wich would be reminded in history. To understand better this feminist movement we would like to present parts of our primary sources.

Declaration of the Rights of Woman, 1791

Written by Olympe De Gouges, 1791

Man, are you capable of being just? It is a woman who poses the question; you will not deprive her of that right at least. Tell me, what gives you sovereign empire to oppress my sex? Your strength? Your talents? Observe the Creator in his wisdom; survey in all her grandeur that nature with whom you seem to want to be in harmony, and give me, if you dare, an example of this tyrannical empire. Go back to animals, consult the elements, study plants, finally glance at all the modifications of organic matter, and surrender to the evidence when I offer you the sexes; search, probe, and distinguish, if you can, the sexes in the administration of nature. Everywhere you will find them mingled; everywhere they cooperate in harmonious togetherness in this immortal masterpiece.

Man alone has raised his exceptional circumstances to a principle. Bizarre, blind, bloated with science and degenerated—in a century of enlightenment and wisdom—into the crassest ignorance, he wants to command as a despot a sex which is in full possession of its intellectual faculties; he pretends to enjoy the Revolution and to claim his rights to equality in order to say nothing more about it.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797).

Chap. II. The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed.

TO account for, and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been brought forward to prove, that the two sexes, in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character: or, to speak

explicitly, women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue. Yet it should seem, allowing them to have souls, that there is but one way appointed by Providence to lead mankind to either virtue or happiness. 1

If then women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence? Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and grovelling vices. Behold, I should answer, the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. 2

Thus Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation. 3

How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes! For instance, the winning softness so warmly, and

frequently, recommended, that governs by obeying. What childish expressions, and how insignificant is the being can it be an immortal one? who will condescend to govern by such sinister methods! 'Certainly, says Lord Bacon, 'man is of kin to the beasts by his body; and if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature!' Men, indeed, appear to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood. Rousseau was more consistent when he wished to stop the progress of reason in both sexes, for if men eat of the tree of knowledge, women will come in for a taste; but, from the imperfect cultivation which their understandings now receive, they only attain a knowledge of evil. 4

Children, I grant, should be innocent; but when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness. For if it be allowed that women were destined by Providence to acquire human virtues, and by the exercise of their understanding, that stability of character which is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes upon, they must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light, and not forced to shape their course by the twinkling of a mere satellite. Milton, I grant, was of a very different opinion; for he only bends to the indefeasible right of beauty, though it would be difficult to render two passages which I now mean to contrast, consistent. But into similar inconsistencies are great men often led by their senses.

'To whom thus Eve with perfect beauty adorn'd,

My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst

Unargued I obey; so God ordains;

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God is thy law, thou mine: to know no more

Is Woman's happiest knowledge and her praise.'

CONCLUSION

After consulting with primary and secondary sources, after reading them many times, after analyzing objectively the topic, we tried to make final conclusions. Prior and during the French Revolution, women made a lot of efforts to change their status in society. During these years their contribution was important and crucial. Although their attempts didn't have the results women wanted, their contribution in the French Revolution and their constant demand for political rights was a turning point in the history.