

The french revolution: olympie de gouges and mary wollstonecraft role in feminism

[History](#), [French Revolution](#)



Revolutionary French Feminism

Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft pioneered a peculiar brand of french feminism during the tumultuous French Revolution (1789-1793) that advanced female equality for inheritance, suffrage and employment rights. Olympe de Gouges " Declaration of the Rights of Woman" (1791) declares her stand for the equality of the rights of women, their equality to men, their sameness before the law and before the Republic. With the drastic societal upheavals and change, some women determined that gender roles should be liberalised and more freedoms granted to women. De Gouges drafts a social contract very similar to that of Rousseau where women are incorporated in the constitutional body of the Nation and play active parts and responsible roles in society. In the day of De Gouges, men were held to be superior to women, therefore women were denied rights to equality in education, the rights, privileges and duties of the citizenry of the State. A social contract between man and woman is drafted in which both sexes agree to terms and conditions where certain injustices against women are represented in the public domain, where she may secure rights to property, estate, freedom of expression being owed as much as is due to man because of many contributions, and labours; moreover, in the private sphere, the questions of conjugal and maternal rights of the woman and rights of her offspring to be heirs of property are expressed. The enlightenment of women, she argues, would not only be beneficial to women but to the general society and state. Through arguments of rationalism and deism, she affirms that the laws of nature and reason forbid inequality between the sexes and separation.

Mary Wollstonecraft's classic work, "Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792) militates for women's rights. She declares the woman's sameness with respect to education, mental capacities, moral virtue, and excellence. Because women are commonly referred to as the weaker sex, they were exploited, held in contempt by men as inferior, baser, non-rational, incompetent and powerless. Women in Wollstonecraft's day contended the rights of woman basing her arguments on Rationalism and Deism where reason and the laws of Nature are used as basis to justify arguments. She also asserts that Rousseau's social contract would be invalid if its conditions are not extended to address and qualify women to participate in civil life. The woman is legally a part of the society and must be acknowledged as a full member. Through the improvement of the woman's social condition in civil life, her mind and character would be ennobled, uplifted, and bettered. This identifies Wollstonecraft as a believer in progressivism where public policies are the catalysts for positive social change. However, she opposes violently the stance of Rousseau on one point of the social contract where the only attitude of the female ought to be that of obedience, dependency and submission. She goes a step further by arguing the Independence of woman, and her virtues. The female's intellectual genius, capabilities and strength/fortitude go unchallenged therefore she cannot attain to a high degree of distinction in education, manners and thought. Wollstonecraft is convinced of the positive potential of woman and the benefits which would redound to the larger society.