

Olympe de gouges: hero or liability for the french revolution?

[Sociology](#), [Human Rights](#)



Olympe De Gouges: Hero or Liability for the French Revolution? "Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights". Prior to 1789, the year the French Revolution began, women including Olympe De Gouges, were thought to have had few purposes. One being to "please" their husbands and two they were responsible for the upbringing of their children. However, because of women like Olympe De Gouges this was about to change. During the last decades of the eighteenth century, two parts of French society, women and the Third Estate (France's middle-class and poor) fought to gain all of these rights: political, economic, and social all of which had been largely withheld from them. To Olympe De Gouges the French Revolution had a very different meaning than most, equal rights for ALL women and she wasn't going to give up until she achieved that goal, which she was executed still trying to fight for her rights as a woman. Olympe De Gouges was the daughter of a butcher and the wife of a restaurant owner, and a proud member of the middle class Bourgeoisie. She herself was a playwright and occasional actress. Women did not have the same rights as men, they could not have an education, they could not divorce, and they could not own property. Since De Gouges did not have an education and many women were illiterate this frightened her and made her very weary of writing her plays, so instead she said them aloud for someone to write down. She states, "I was obsessed with the desire to write, and also to publish" but she struggled to do so. She was however, not afraid to publish her name on her plays, like most women were. She "flaunted herself in all her texts" On August 26, 1789 The Declaration of the rights of Man and Citizen were written. Olympe then created her own document, "The Declaration of the

Rights of Woman" in September of 1791. She writes these rights exactly the same as the one for man was written, except with the thoughts of both men and women. This pamphlet she says the "deputies forgot about women" in their document. The pamphlet of rights contains the exact same number of rights the Men and Citizen Declaration, 17. The Declaration of Men blamed women for the "sole causes of public misfortunes and government corruption". Olympe was an enlightenment thinker and was familiar with what they had thought. She used this to her advantage to try and gain the Enlightenment thinkers to believe in what she had written about. Not all women agreed with what she had stated in her Declaration for Woman because not all women were educated and not all women had the drive and the courage to speak up like Olympe had done. The enlightenment thinkers used "reason" to get their way so Olympe thought she would have all the Enlightenment thinkers on her side. In reality not many were on her side, Robespierre thought the same way she did, not about how all women should own property but that they deserved education. Yet he still voted in favor for her execution. Women didn't have the courage to speak up for their rights. What women did have the courage to do was to demand the price of bread be changed because they and their families were starving and this was one of the causes for the French Revolution. The march at Versailles occurred of October 5-6, 1789. The women decided to bring the King and Queen to their land and demand that they have the price of bread changed. This was a major turning point for Olympe because this proved to her women were able to fight for something that they believed in. However, it did not mean they would fight for all that they believed in. Another turning point during the

French Revolution was the Storming of the Bastille which happened on July 14, 1789. This was a major turning point in the French's history. The "San Culottes" decided to have their voices be heard and storm the Bastille, which was a prison known for tortuous deaths. This was a major turning point because the San Culottes were known to be "without breeches" and not be important. They were all opposed to King Louis XVI and his lack of freedom. The people wanted a more representative government and as Olympe states in her document, "The law should be the expression of the general will. All citizens should take part, in person or by their representatives, in its formation. It must be the same for everyone. All citizens, being equal in its eyes, should be equally admissible to all public dignities offices, and employments, according to their ability, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents". Olympe believed everyone should be equal in rights to run for office and not many agreed with her. She dedicated her Declaration to the Queen thinking that she was a woman herself and that maybe she would trust in her words but this was not the case. Lastly the third turning point in the French Revolution was the achievement that Olympe should have been very proud of was the right women had to divorce and the right to own property, which happened around 1792-1793. Olympe had fought for this at the end of her Declaration in a social contract for the marriage between man and women. This was a major accomplishment for women because fathers were fighting for women to have the right to property because they wanted their daughters to get their land when they died and not their son-in-laws. "Olympe de Gouge was the only woman actively participating in the Revolution who accepted the challenge of

operating under such public scrutiny". Olympe died fighting for what she believed in by the guillotine in 1793. Olympe thought of the French Revolution as a way to gain equality for all women, and she saw that happen partially in 1792 with women gaining the right to divorce and to own land. Unfortunately, she wouldn't live to see Robespierre, who voted for her execution, be executed, to see slavery abolished, and many other big steps for women. Olympe would have been proud to have lived to see in Hillary Clinton, a woman, run for presidential election in 2008. But Olympe's name is studied today as either a hero or a liability? Hunt, Lynn *The French Revolution and Human Rights*. Boston, MA: Bedford Books. 1996. Slaughter, Jane and Bokovoy, Melissa K. "Olympes de Gougues and Robespierre," in *Sharing the Stage: Biography and Gender in Western Civilization*, Vol. II (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2003) Vanpee, Janie. "Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe De Gougues." Vol. 50, no. 1 (1999)