

The enlightenment and the role of women in society

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



The Enlightenment and the Role of Women in Society The Age of

Enlightenment was a large cultural movement of educated individuals around the 17th and 18th centuries. The purpose of the Enlightenment was to challenge ideas that were rooted in faith and tradition, mold society using reason, and advance knowledge through a new scientific method. Different societies rose during this time period and discussed a wide range of topics. One widely discussed topic was the role of women in society. Societies mainly debated over the role of women in the public sphere. Two documents, specifically, had a great impact on the Enlightenment era. The first of the two, being Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King, was written by a group of working women who addressed the King simply asking for a better education and to be enlightened in order to be better wives and mothers. The next document, from Condorcet, radically insisted that women should gain political rights like men. Although these two documents both had impact during the Enlightenment, they varied in principles and amount of effectiveness during the period of the French Revolution. The French Revolution culminated things such as the middle class and the grievances of women. On January 1, 1789, the King was shown the Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King. These rights demanded by the women included the right to a decent education, and the right to earn a respectable living, avoiding the road to prostitution. These demands were far from radical and the petition made it specifically clear that they were not asking for equality with men. The women explained, " We ask to be enlightened, to have work, not in order to usurp men's authority, but in order to be better esteemed by them. " The Petition of Women depicted a society that accepted social roles,

understands the importance of education and had steadfast faith in their king. This group has accepted the French society's pre-chosen position for women. Women in the Petition seem perfectly aware of France's specific role for them. They speak quite frankly about their role in French society, almost to a point where it feels as if they are happy to be in their current position. They recognize they are " continual objects of the admiration and scorn of men" and they do not attempt to change the status quo. Instead, these women seem willing to comply with society's expectations, as long as there is a form of profit directed toward them. Indeed, they explicitly state, " To prevent social ills, Sire, we ask that men not be allowed, under any pretext, to exercise trades that are the prerogative of women — whether as seamstress, embroiderer, millinery shopkeeper, etc. etc.; if we are left at least the with the needle and spindle, we promise never to handle the compass or the square. " They understand that society is treating them unequally and they believe that accepting society's norms and receiving a form of gratification is better than fighting over something out of reach and receive nothing. The women's argument ended up to be quite successful through their respectful tone to the King and the modest requests. They carefully insisted that they did not want to become equal with men and simply wanted education and enlightenment. They also use a large amount of flattery in order to lighten the King's mood. The women express themselves to the King by saying things like " the love we have for your majesty" and how " we see in you only a tender father, for whom we would give our lives a thousand times. " With these small requests and the women's adulation toward the King, the overall argument seems like it would

be fairly strong during the period of the French Revolution. In the document *On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship*, Condorcet argued for the political rights of women, something no revolutionist had ever dared to do before. He acknowledged that women were equal in humanity through reason and justice. Condorcet rejected the idea that women's physical differences were a good enough reason to reject them of their civil and political rights. Although he did in fact recognize women's limitations, not in gender, but in the lack of education and different circumstances. Many that are opposed of these statements also argue that giving women political rights would disrupt the social order, assuming that women would abandon their domestic affairs. He reassures those by saying, " It is natural for a woman to nurse her children, to care for them in their infancy; attached to her home by these cares, weaker than a man, it is also natural that she lead a more retiring, more domestic life. Women would therefore be in the same class with men who are obliged by their station or profession to work several hours a day. " Although the effectiveness of Condorcet's document seems sound in today's society, back during French Revolution period, this would be considered fairly weak. These types of statements were highly due to the beliefs that women possessed certain characteristics that perfectly matched them to their domestic duties. Women were deemed unqualified for a voice in the political realm because of their much great proneness to feelings, flawed rationality, and weaker sense of justice. Although this campaign ended unsuccessful, women did benefit from many of the changes that happened in matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Women in the Enlightenment were extremely limited due to society's preconceived notions.

Documents like *On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship and Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King* gave society new ideas and philosophies that have never been revealed before. Although much of the document's intentions failed, they opened the eyes of society and society took its first step into gaining the ability to reason about sexual differences and one day grant women the full rights of citizenship.