Olympe de Gouges, born 1748
Feminism and the French Revolution

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In the midst of the French Revolution, French feminist Olympe de Gouges made this cry to fellow women: “Wake up; the tocsin of reason sounds throughout the universe; recognize your rights. The powerful empire of nature is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition, and lies … Women, when will you cease to be blind?”¹ This declaration came during a war for the freedom and rights of French people. As the battle for equality of men exploded throughout France, the women found that the majority of men did not want to extend the rights they fought for to women.² Louis-Marie Prudhomme, a journalist who disliked the idea of French feminism wrote in his newspaper, “Citizensesses of all ages and all stations! Leave your homes all at the same time;

rally from door to door and march toward city hall ... We will see you return to your dwellings to take up once again the accustomed yoke of domestic duties."³

These two conflicting viewpoints about French feminism developed before the French Revolution began in 1789, as each side voiced its opinions through a myriad of writings. When the conflict that led to revolution became prominent, “A more militant feminist theory ... emerged in a spate of pamphlets ... their brochures began to appear in 1787 and quickly multiplied.”⁴ People in favor of the feminist movement included both men such as Condorcet and Guyomar, as well as women such as Etta Palm D’Aelders and Olympe de Gouges. They took advantage of the change in governmental structure by calling for equality between men and women. The feminists believed this equality would be achieved by giving women the right of citizenship. These rights included the freedom to vote, the freedom to participate in government, and the freedom to form political clubs. Men such as Louis-Marie Prudhomme and Jean-Baptiste Amar argued against giving women those rights, insisting that the rights belonged solely to men. While the French Revolution provided a platform for articulate men and women to request the right of citizenship for all women, the dissenting voice of men who claimed that women belong in the home as wives


and mothers, as well as the lack of support from most women, led to the failure of the feminist movement to achieve the right of citizenship, demonstrating the conservatism of French society even in a time of political revolution.

The Marquis de Condorcet became famous because of his backing of the movement. As a famous French Enlightenment thinker, “he was equally known as a mathematician (notably in probability theory), social philosopher, and politician.” Condorcet was one of the first men to support women’s rights during the French Revolution, a fact that has made him popular among modern scholars. In July 1790, he wrote in his newspaper about the political rights women deserve. His article, “On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship” stated his argument simply: if the rights men deserve are universal, women also deserve the same rights. Condorcet claimed, “It would be difficult to prove that women are incapable of exercising the rights of citizenship.” As a philosopher, his logic led him to this question: “Why should women be excluded rather than those men who are inferior to a great number of women?” In his final statement, Condorcet called for someone to tell him a “natural difference” that would give a legitimate reason for Condorcet to agree that women did not

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6 Abray, 45.
8 Ibid., 119-121.
He claimed that women did not deserve the unequal treatment they received throughout past centuries. Instead, he believed that women originally possessed equality to men, and centuries of time had created an inequality. He insisted that women deserved the right to vote, a radical idea unpopular with every person who wanted more equality for men, but not women. His bold statements ignited the French feminist movement.

Three years after Condorcet wrote his article, a man named Pierre Guyomar joined the fight for equality through his pamphlet, “The Partisan of Political Equality between Individuals.” Labeling himself as an advocate of women’s rights, he made a strong case for women’s right to participate in government. He pointed out “half of the individuals of a society do not have the right to deprive the other half of the imprescriptible right of giving their opinion.” He argued that the Declaration of the Rights of Man should also apply to women. His argument extended specifically to the right to vote and the right to participate in government. Guyomar’s pamphlet added to the

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9 Marquis de Condorcet, 119-121.
10 Ibid., 45.
11 Ibid., 45-46.
14 Ibid.
arguments already set forth by Condorcet.

While the men argued more logically, the female feminists such as Olympe de Gouges and Etta Palm D’Aelders called for their gender to take a radical step forward. One woman remained anonymous, signing her name as Madame B*** B***, though her complaint against men has made her cahier a part of the history of the French feminist movement. Her reflection on her conversion to feminism demonstrated that the movement’s ability to gain supporters.\(^\text{15}\) Madame B*** B*** pointed out that women should be inclined to ask for rights during the Revolution. “It is in this moment of general revolution that a woman who is astonished by the silence of her sex, which should have so many things to say, so many abuses to combat, so many grievances to present, dares to raise her voice in defense of the common cause.”\(^\text{16}\) According to Madame B*** B***, the 18\(^{th}\) century marked a time of “enlightenment and reason” that called for a change from the traditional ways of women to a more interactive role within society, including the right to vote.\(^\text{17}\)

Etta Palm D’Aelders, a Dutch immigrant who moved to France in 1774, added her voice to the movement.\(^\text{18}\) Her choice to join the other feminists

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{18}\) Abray, 50.
reflected her dedication to advancing her new country. In her “Discourse on the Injustice of the Laws in Favor of Men, at the Expense of Women,” Etta Palm pointed out that men were only “just by halves” and that “everywhere power is in [men’s] hands.” She chose to be fearless in her radical writing. In her discourse, she said, “Gentlemen, if you wish us to be enthusiastic about the happy constitution that gives back men their rights, then begin by being just toward us.” Palm practiced what she preached. She attempted to start a female national federation in 1791, as well as presenting her case for equality in employment, education, and politics to the National Assembly when her organization failed.

The most famous female advocate of women’s rights during the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges supported a radical change in the political equality of men and women. A playwright and essayist, de Gouges wrote The Declaration of the Rights of Woman to parallel The Declaration of the Rights of Man in order to state that women should have equal rights. She called for

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20 Cole and de Gouges, 228.

21 Palm, 122-123.

22 Abray, 51.

women to form a national assembly.\textsuperscript{24} In \textit{The Declaration of the Rights of Woman}, she paralleled \textit{The Declaration of the Rights of Man} by using the same laws, but inserting the word “woman.”\textsuperscript{25} Olympe de Gouges strongly advocated that women join in the battle for feminist freedom. In the postscript of her \textit{Declaration}, she asserted that “Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights.”\textsuperscript{26} Unfortunately, the general populace did not take Olympe de Gouges’ \textit{Rights of Woman} seriously.

While these men and women fought for the right of citizenship for women, other men attacked the feminists’ arguments, insisting that the idea of women’s rights was absurd. In October of 1793, a gathering of women presented a complaint to the National Convention about women forcing other women to dress in a way that supported women’s rights. André Amar, the representative of the Committee of General Security, took this opportunity to give a speech about the rights of women.\textsuperscript{27} He disliked the idea of women’s rights for two reasons. His main argument said that women should not be allowed to form “political associations.”\textsuperscript{28} He said if they had that right, “they will be obliged to sacrifice to them more important cares to which nature calls them. The private

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{24} Gouges, 124-129.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Scott, 3.
\end{footnotesize}
functions to which women are destined by nature itself follow from the general order of society.”

Because of his position in the police force during the Reign of Terror, Amar’s influence suggested the idea of banning the formation of women’s political clubs to the National Assembly. According to his second argument, “In general, women are hardly capable of lofty conceptions and serious cogitations.” Regardless of the truth of his opinion, the entire National Convention heard his statement.

In addition to Amar, other men disapproved of giving women rights. Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette, a radical who legally represented the Paris commune, insistently refused to allow women to be an active part of the political society. His strong feelings against female political clubs led him to reject entertaining “a delegation of red-capped women;” instead he insisted on “chastising the women.” According to Chaumette’s view, “It is shocking, it is contrary to all the laws of nature for a woman to want to make herself a man.” His strong words prefaced the abolition of women’s clubs in 1793.

Criticism also came from the journalist Louis-Marie Prudhomme. During

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29 Amar, 136-138.
30 Ibid.
31 Scott, 3.
32 Offen, 65.
34 Offen, 65.
the revolution, Prudhomme attacked women’s requests for rights.\textsuperscript{35} Throughout the revolution, he ran a radical newspaper called \textit{Révolutions of Paris}. In February of 1791, he published an article entitled “On the Influence of the Revolution on Women” that described the role of women. He believed that women were

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Destined to pass all their lives confined under the paternal roof or in the house of their marriage; born to a perpetual dependence from the first moment of their existence until that of their decease, they have only been endowed with private virtues ... To keep her mother company, soften the worries of a spouse, nourish and care for her children, these are the only occupations and true duties of a woman. A woman is only comfortable, is only in her place in her family or in her household. She need only know what her parents or her husband judge appropriate to teach her about everything that takes place outside her home.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Many Frenchmen and women read this powerful statement because of the extreme popularity of Prudhomme’s newspaper. Prudhomme’s influence had a strong effect on the failure of the French feminist movement, in that the acceptance of his argument embodied the main reason that the French feminist movement failed. Women belonged in the home as housewives and mothers, not in public as political activists.

While men such as Amar and Prudhomme rejected the arguments of the feminists, other people reacted differently. Instead of supporting or

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\textsuperscript{35} Offen, 58.
\textsuperscript{36} Prudhomme, 129-131.
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condemning the cause, many people reacted with amusement. In one case, an onlooker named Roussel noted the reaction of the crowd in his “Account of a Session of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women.” He claimed that during the session, the crowd had to make an effort not to “burst out laughing” because the ideas proposed by Sister Monic sounded utterly ridiculous. After Sister Monic’s speech, Olympe de Gouges addressed the assembly; however, her ideas also received laughter. The reaction of the crowd to de Gouges’ speech demonstrated that even a radical feminist who spoke eloquently and provided strong arguments could easily be ignored. Roussel’s account showed that although the feminists exposed their ideas to many of the French people, the rights of women was still a laughable idea in the 18th century.

Although women such as Etta Palm and Olympe de Gouges championed women’s rights, the feminist movement paled in comparison to the duty women had to take care of their families. In January of 1789, women drafted a petition to the king, but they did not ask for equal rights. The “Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King” respectfully requested for the king to provide opportunities to women to earn more money in order to take care of their family. In the petition, the women specifically stated that they did not

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38 Ibid.
want “to usurp men’s authority.” Instead, they simply requested that certain low class jobs be reserved specifically for women so that they could be safe and able to provide for their children. They also added the request for a better education. The petition said, “We ask to take leave of ignorance, to give our children a sound and reasonable education so as to make of them subjects worthy of serving you.” If giving the women jobs and a better education satisfied the women of the Third Estate, those women could not be labeled as feminists. Those women focused on their education instead of the political movement of the French feminists.

Because the majority of women still lived under the mindset that women belong in the home as a wife and a mother, many of them did not care about the French feminist movement. Earlier in the century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about social order. He believed that women had an important role within the family, but he claimed that women learned in order to better assist men. When Condorcet argued that women deserved equal rights, the women reacted in accordance with Rousseau. Condorcet got “little support from women, as they were all too enamored of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to listen to him... Most

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40 Offen, 38.
women ignored the feminists." For centuries, women had played the role of housewife and mother; the feminist movement was a revolutionary idea to most women. In the midst of the larger French Revolution, many women chose to keep their distance from the feminist revolution.

By the end of the French Revolution, women had not gained the right of citizenship. In the early years, the circle of feminists failed to gain traction. Instead, “Feminism was and remained a minority interest.” The prominent feminists either died or fled France during the reign of terror. Olympe de Gouges shone as the example for opponents of French feminism. Although people saw her as a strong advocate for feminism, she eventually faced the guillotine. Her loyalties to the royal family as well as her case against Robespierre led to her execution. According to the trial, she “admits that monarchy seems to her to be the government most suited to the French spirit.” She purposed to gain rights for women, not gain freedom for everyone from the royal family. After her death, Chaumette used her as an example for the other feminists.

Fortunately, Etta Palm left France before the French radicals with guillotines

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41 Abray, 46.
42 Ibid., 59.
43 Ibid., 50.
45 Chaumette, 138-139.
beheaded her.\textsuperscript{46}

The final result of the French feminist movement can be seen through the different drafts of \textit{The Declaration of the Rights of Man}. In August of 1789, the National Assembly published the first draft of \textit{The Declaration of the Rights of Man}. The first right listed said “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.”\textsuperscript{47} This statement left uncertainty, because women did not know if the word men referred to both men and women, or only to males. Between 1789 and 1793, feminists presented their cases for the rights of women through speeches and pamphlets. Despite the effort of the movement, the 1793 draft of \textit{The Rights of Man} did not include a specific definition of a citizen. After more arguments, the National Assembly drafted a version of \textit{The Declaration of the Rights of Man} in 1795. This declaration included a statement that defined a citizen. It said, “No one is a good citizen unless he is a good son, good father, good brother, good friend, good husband.”\textsuperscript{48} This statement excluded women, which brought an end to the French feminist movement of the French Revolution. Although people such as Condorcet and de Gouges supported the

\textsuperscript{46} Abray, 51.


feminist cause, their efforts ultimately resulted in the failure of their attempt to gain the right of citizenship for all women.

The feminist movement in its attempt to gain the right of citizenship for women made many mistakes that caused the movement to fail. According to Abray, “Revolutionary feminism began in a burst of enthusiasm. Its unpopularity and the blissful incomprehension and dogmatism of its opponents combined to obliterate it.” While people such as Olympe de Gouges and Condorcet called for the rights of women, their voices could not overcome the strong sense of family and the traditional role of women over the centuries. Although the French feminist movement during the French Revolution did not succeed in its ultimate goals, “It illustrates...the changing seasons of the Revolutionary calendar and stands as striking proof of the essential social conservatism of this political upheaval.” Even though women in the French Revolution did not obtain citizenship, the women did set precedence for the feminist movement throughout the centuries.

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49 Abray, 62.
50 Ibid.