

# **How far were enlightenment ideas responsible for the improvement of women rights?**

Hannah Seo Yr 12 Halla East

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## Section A – Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation explores the role of women from the Enlightenment to the French Revolution with the focus on the years 1789 to 1799, asking:

**How far were enlightenment ideas responsible for the improvement of women rights?**

*The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*<sup>1</sup>

The origin of this source is valuable because the author, Olympe de Gouges, was an early feminist who was in the Society of the Friends of Truth, an association of equal political and legal rights for women, writing political pamphlets including this source to challenge practice male

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<sup>1</sup> Fmyv.es. (2018). [online] Available at: <http://www.fmyv.es/ci/in/women/3.pdf> [Accessed 18 Aug. 2018].

authority and male-female inequality. Furthermore, the date of the publication in 1791 highlights its value as it indicates the inequality of women that lasted for centuries and their inquiries about women participants in the society. However, the origin is limited as it might be a social biased document with a subjective view of the French politics related to unequal women's right in the perspective of women.

The purpose is to addresses the limitation of current rights for women and the need for equal rights. It is valuable, for it explores women's basic need for French society what they expected to be changed about previous unequal rights. However, the purpose is limited as it does not explain the detailed explanation of women's experiences with their social oppression over the past centuries.

The content is valuable of outlining the basic rights which should be extended to women including the rights of liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression. However, it does not address any further improvements in women rights after this declaration implemented.

*The French Revolution and Human Rights A Brief Documentary History*<sup>2</sup>

The origin of this source is valuable because Lynn Hunt, the author, is a professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles, specializing in the French revolution. Also, she is well known for work on European cultural history such as gender. Furthermore, the date of the publication, 1996, strengthens its value, as it overviews the change of women right by analyzing a wide range of sources including primary and secondary sources. However, the origin is limited as it still might be a biased document as she wrote about controversies over citizenship and rights in Enlightenment to Revolutionary France.

The purpose is to address the issue of rights and citizenship which dominated in Revolutionary France. This is valuable because for it explains the social changes about gaining rights and citizenship for certain social groups including women. Also, it provides new factors to consider women's right which resist the audience to think in narrowed sight. The source is, however, limited its purpose of having been written to convince readers to Hunt's point of view, it omits that this source might be aiming for encouraging readers.

Content is valuable because this source offers insight into Hunt's view, containing evaluations of women's participation in the revolution which has been studied after the event based on historical fact. However, it covers human rights broadly, therefore there might be not enough resources, focusing on only women rights.

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<sup>2</sup> Socialstudies.madison.k12.wi.us. (2018). [online] Available at: [https://socialstudies.madison.k12.wi.us/files/socialstudies/French\\_Revolution.pdf](https://socialstudies.madison.k12.wi.us/files/socialstudies/French_Revolution.pdf) [Accessed 18 Aug. 2018].

## **Section B – How far were enlightenment ideas responsible for the improvement of women rights?**

The French revolution challenged the absolute regime which led to the French republic. France was influenced by the Enlightenment with the acknowledgment of equality and rights, the new idea of the social ideal of the French Revolution, “liberty, fraternity, equality.”<sup>3</sup> During the revolution from 1789 to 1799, the need and signal of improvement of women rights emerged based on the Enlightenment ideas, women’s political involvement, and French economic crisis.

The enlightenment ideas were most responsible for the improvement of women by motivating women to change old-fashioned thoughts about gender roles. Europe in the late 18th Century had the Enlightenment; a philosophical movement to ‘light’ to gain happiness by reforming and improving the advancement of knowledge and education. The French revolutionists had challenged natural rights. Particularly, it questioned the role of gender which has been considered as the social order. Before the French revolution, women were considered as “a persecuted group in the same way as slaves, Calvinist or Jews.”<sup>4</sup> Although this source is valuable in term of indicating that women were treated unequally to men, however, it is limited this can be subjective as it mentioned by Lynn Hunt, a historian who wrote about the controversies of human rights during the revolution and it is a secondary source. Women had many prejudices before the French Revolution. The limitation of origin with this source is that it provided a biased view of the need for rights for women based on Hunt’s personal ideology. However, the Enlightenment did challenge women away from their traditional role and provided a chance to gain various access to society by having equal rights to male.

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<sup>3</sup> France in the United States / Embassy of France in Washington, D.C. (2018). *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. [online] Available at: <https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article620> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2018].

<sup>4</sup> France in the United States / Embassy of France in Washington, D.C. (2018). *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. [online] Available at: <https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article620> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2018].

Behind the success of improvement of women rights, the Enlightenment and women's political involvement are closely linked together. For instance, few women who were influenced by the Enlightenment started to emerge with the new theories about the subordinate position of women in French society. Olympe de Gouges, a French political activist, wrote about the women rights, *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the female Citizens* in 1789, wishing for "full legal equality of the sexes, wide job opportunities for women, a state alternative to the primary dowry system, and schooling for girls."<sup>5</sup> It was to show how women have been excluded from the society for centuries. For example, an article I stated that "woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights."<sup>6</sup> This exposed the failures of the recognition of sexual equality and the issue of women rights during the French revolution. It explained that women must be guaranteed the sacred right, asking for the creation of National Assembly for Women based on a standard of justice and freedom of speech for women. Gouges requested equal property right are the only way for an equal society. Her work was influential as the first official document which listed inequalities that they have been experienced in history and hoped that revolution will change for their equal status. Therefore, the Enlightenment ideas were the most responsible for the improvement of women rights.

Increasing women's political involvement during the revolution was also responsible for the improvement of women rights. Women involved actively in their political clubs, particularly from the middle and upper classes. In the past, most of the club participants were middle-class women. However, since Etta Palm d' Aelders founded the first women exclusive club called, *Les la Verite* in 1791, it engaged upper-class women who could manage for an expensive charge. The feminist movement proceeded with several aims; more job opportunities, better education, divorce laws, political equality and greater freedom for women. The *Society of Revolutionary Republican Woman* was a well-known political club with the points about women's economic, political and sexual equality. It involved mainly with the *sans-culottes* who highlighted the need for basic improvement for women. This helped to widen the women's perspective to challenge their unequal position within French society by asking for rights and responsibilities as the citizen like the male. Among lots of politicians, Marquise de Condorcet was the most active supporter of women rights during the French Revolution. He published a newspaper article about women's political rights in July 1790, arguing "either no individual in mankind has true rights, or all have the same ones."<sup>7</sup> This struck the traditional perspectives with women's educational and social status based on gender discrimination. Thus, women's political involvement was also responsible for the improvement of women rights.

If the French economy was stabled, then the impact of Enlightenment might not be enormous like the French revolution. The unstable and unequal economy was also responsible for the improvement of women rights by triggered national anger towards the monarchy. French society during Louis XVI's regime faced a serious economic crisis due to the old problem of the three estates. The First Estate with clergy and Second Estate with the French nobility had huge privilege in terms of their property and taxes. Marie Antoinette, the Queen of Louis XVI, referred her benefits as nobility

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<sup>5</sup> Kisworldhistory.wikispaces.com. (2018). *KISWorldHistory - Women and the Revolution*. [online] Available at: <https://kisworldhistory.wikispaces.com/Women+and+the+Revolution> [Accessed 27 Apr. 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Mousset, S. (2014). *Women's Rights and the French Revolution*. Somerset, United States: Taylor & Francis Inc.

<sup>7</sup> Chnm.gmu.edu. (2018). *Condorcet, "On the Admission of Women to the Rights Of Citizenship" (1790)*. [online] Available at: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/475/> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2018].

as “the tenderness and earnestness of the poor people, who in spite of the taxes with which they are overwhelmed, were transported with joy at seeing us.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the French monarch was struggling with huge debt, primarily because of the participation in the American war of independence war and the Seven Years War which eventually ended up with 1.3 billion livres.<sup>9</sup> John Shovin states “it is a truism that the French Revolution was touched off by the near bankruptcy of the state” which led to a long period of financial crisis of the French government.<sup>10</sup> Although he suggested that economic crisis is the most significant factor to trigger the emergence of women during the revolution, however, he does not suggest a clear link between economic crisis and women’s movement later revolution. However, the tax was still persisted and only Third Estate had to pay high taxes, excluding the clergy and nobility from paying taxes. At the same time, they struggled with physical labour and food shortages.

Eventually, the hunger and despair of Parisian women naturally led to the Women’s march on Versailles on 5th October 1789, caused by the exceeding prices of bread due to the shortage of bread and grain. Madelaine Glain who was participated in the march testified that “a woman demanded four pounds of bread at eight sous and meat at the same price.”<sup>11</sup> Since this source is a primary source of testimony from a participant, it directly shows a clear reason why she participated, but it might be social biased, applying her story. The significance of this march is not only addressing both anger and power of French citizen, especially the third estate by moving Louis XVI to Paris but also it was the first example of feminist military activism. It transformed the role of women in the revolution as they showed their demand for gender equality. Hence, the economic crisis in France was also responsible for the improvement of women rights.

In conclusion, there are many factors that contributed to the improvement of women rights. Indeed, the enlightenment ideas were the most responsible because it motivates women, particularly from the middle and upper class. It encouraged women to physically participate in Women’s march in 1789 or in writing such as the Declaration of the Rights of Women or female citizens. This naturally leads to more involvement in the politics to change the actual women rights which have been suppressed by a male-dominated French society. However, the long period of economic crisis acts as a driving force for more active movement by women based on their satisfaction towards their monarchy and shortage of bread. These combinations of factors devoted to the improvement of women rights which influenced not only France but also in all of Europe.

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<sup>8</sup> Sourcebooks.fordham.edu. (2018). *Internet History Sourcebooks*. [online] Available at: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1773marieantonette.asp> [Accessed 18 Jun. 2018].

<sup>9</sup> Schiff, S. (2018). *A Great Improvisation*. [online] Google Books. Available at: [https://books.google.co.kr/books?id=1vhpYe99Tn4C&pg=PT18&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.kr/books?id=1vhpYe99Tn4C&pg=PT18&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false) [Accessed 18 Jun. 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Shovlin, J. (2018). *The Political Economy of Virtue*. [online] Google Books. Available at: [https://books.google.co.kr/books?id=FhL3TaoDqEUC&pg=PA9&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.kr/books?id=FhL3TaoDqEUC&pg=PA9&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false) [Accessed 18 Jun. 2018].

<sup>11</sup> French Revolution. (2018). *A participant in the October march on Versailles (1789)*. [online] Available at: <http://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/participant-october-march-versailles-1789/> [Accessed 25 Apr. 2018].

## Section C - Reflection

Throughout the investigation, I found out that historians face a challenge to make a judgment on historical sources. It was a challenge to decide which factors to include and which to omit, especially with the French Revolution which many factors put into consideration. “To present the past historians must also answer the why and how, requiring them to fill multiple roles as chronicler, researcher, analyst, interpreter and narrator” as Jeffrey Joyner said.<sup>12</sup> In this investigation, I realized the number of various factors which contributed to the improvement of women rights during revolutionary France but had to clarify which factor was directly responsible. For example, the impact of the economic crisis was also considering however, I decided that it was the less pivotal factor with its relative importance behind the Enlightenment and political involvement.

Moreover, historians face difficulties whether they should aim to inform or persuade readers. Especially, the secondary resources are at the boundary between informing historical facts or explaining the author’s idea. As Richard Blakemore motioned, “Most historians would find it difficult to write on the *longue durée* without relying on ‘Short Past’ work written by others.”<sup>13</sup> I could not easily find the second sources just to inform readers because there was counterargument about the

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<sup>12</sup> Work.chron.com. (2018). *Roles of a Historian*. [online] Available at: <https://work.chron.com/roles-historian-12036.html> [Accessed 18 Aug. 2018].

<sup>13</sup> Blakemore, R. (2018). *Some Thoughts on the History Manifesto*. [online] historywomble. Available at: <https://historywomble.wordpress.com/2014/10/14/some-thoughts-on-the-history-manifesto/> [Accessed 18 Aug. 2018].

time when the feminist movement with improvements of women rights started in France historically. Therefore, I had to find the most unbiased document, aiming to “inform” about women rights.

Another difficulty historian was that it was hard to distinguish the reliability of resources when it comes to using as an evidence. The French Revolution and Human Rights a Brief Documentary History, for example, is an evidence which shows the general change of women rights over revolution, but maybe a biased in criticizing the controversies of change with a human during the revolution. Furthermore, there is a room for biased interpretation as the improvement with women right revert to the past after Emperor Napoleon confirmed and perpetuated women’s second-class status in 1804. I totally agree with the quote “History is written by the victors” by Winston Churchill.<sup>14</sup> The period when the fall of Ancient Régime in 1789 to the French first republic in 1792 and rise of the First French Empire in 1804 could heighten the limitation about the change of women rights, although, it contains beneficial information. From this investigation, I knew the importance of neutrality of historians, which impacts their reliability, is hard to accomplish.

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<sup>14</sup> BrainyQuote. (2018). *Winston Churchill Quotes*. [online] Available at: [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/winston\\_churchill\\_380864](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/winston_churchill_380864) [Accessed 19 Aug. 2018].