

Beauvoir encapsulates the established view on the revolution when she states that “It might have been expected that the Revolution would change a lot for women. It did nothing of the sort”¹. Historians such as Landes and Gutwirth have further argued that women’s political activism ultimately futile due to the masculinist framework of the Revolution and the Republic.² Others, such as Rose, have questioned the supposed rigidity of such a framework, arguing the clash between ancien regime ideas of the family unit and revolutionary priorities for a happy, patriotic family caused a notable, albeit limited, state of flux in the strict dichotomy between the male and female sphere.³ Scott, Hunt, Levy and Applewhite have also argued to varying extents that the involvement of revolutionary feminists in the public space established the woman as a political being and bound women as citizens to the questions of democracy, equality, and autonomy.⁴ Grappling with the impact of the women’s revolution and women’s involvement in the revolution requires a multifaceted approach, addressing the conflicting interest groups in both the cities and the countryside. I will examine the revolution through the lens of the women’s revolutionary clubs in the cities, and their achievements of legislation and citizenship. There is also a distinction between these women and the women of the Parisian crowds who were more concerned with fair prices and secure inflation, who were monumental in the 1790s, effectively lobbying the Convention. Lastly, women of the countryside experienced a different reality, as Hufton argues, outside the nucleus of the revolution.⁵ Although their efforts were toward achieving a ‘counter-revolution’ particularly against the new religion, rural women served at the forefront of resistance and carved out a new role for women in the public sphere. Collectively,

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (Paris, 1949), p.182

² Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988). Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses* (Brunswick, 1999)

³ R. B. Rose, ‘Women and the French Revolution’, *Historical Reflections*, vol.21 (1995), pp. 187-205

⁴ Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, 1996). Lynn Hunt, ‘Forgetting and Remembering: The French Revolution Then and Now’, *American Historical Review* (1995) pp.1119-1135. Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, ‘A Political Revolution for Women? The Case of Paris’, in Renate Bridenthal, S.M. Stuard, M.E. Wiesner (eds), *Becoming Visible* (Boston, 1998)

⁵ Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1992)

the trend that emerges across regions in the 1790s is one where the political character of the woman is enduringly changed from the one of the ancien regime.

The women's revolutionary clubs were increasingly influential at the turn of the decade. Two rulings arising from the campaigning of women's club members like Etta Palm d'Aelders concerned inheritance and divorce. In 1793, the Constituent Assembly abolished primogeniture for all properties, enabling any heir, regardless of gender or age, to inherit. The law was also made retroactive to 1789, legally forcing male heirs to return any owed shares to their sisters. Secondly, marriage was recognized as a civil contract in 1791 resulting in the issue of divorce, as civil contracts could be dissolved. This was compounded by a loosening of divorce restrictions in September 1792 in favour of the woman, making divorce legal on grounds such as lunacy, desertion, injuries, and most importantly, mutual consent. The law of 20 September 1792 also lowered the age of parental consent for marriage to 21. Both laws were made use of greatly by women.⁶ Women petitioned for 71 percent of unilateral divorces and was the initiating party in most divorces on the grounds of mutual consent. In 1793, the Convention also planned the provision of public maternity homes, orphanage networks, and supporting apprenticeships in every district of France.⁷ These examples not only indicate a betterment in women's conditions as the laws were employed but point to an improvement in attitudes surrounding women's rights. Rose further argues that although not all measures by the Convention were executed, their intention indicates a marked effort to cater the revolution toward women, a distinct departure from the ancien regime values⁸. Landes and Abrey have argued the period an "almost total failure of revolutionary feminism"⁹, citing any improvement as transient and discountable. However, results of revolutionary feminism survived both the Napoleonic regime and the Restoration evidenced by the survival of the right of female heirs to inherit property. Abrey's

⁶ Jacques Godechot, *Les institutions de la France sous la Révolution et l'Empire* (Paris, 1951) pp. 375-377

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-211

⁸ Rose, 'Women and the French Revolution', p.199

⁹ Jane Abrey, 'Feminism in the French Revolution', *The American Historical Review*, vol.80, no.1(Feb, 1975) p.59

view also fails to account for the revolutionary feminism that enforced a climate where such laws were both passed and actively put forward. As Rose argues, such a reading recognises the Napoleon regime as an extension of the Revolution and not as the reaction and reversal that it was.

Another prominent issue women's clubs were concerned with was the demand for citizenship. Greater discourse on civic parity between men and women was furthered through the writings of individuals such as Méricourt, de Gouges, and Condorcet. However, some historians have sidelined these achievements stating that while such writing was forward-thinking and pioneering, they "fell on stony ground"¹⁰. They failed to address issues in a way that interested the majority of Parisian women, who were more concerned with poverty and the price of bread than enlightenment ideals and citizenship. Olympe de Gouges had little influence on her contemporaries, being brushed off as "just Olympe de Gouges!"¹¹. Méricourt was perceived as pretentious and ludicrous¹². Condorcet was an anomaly.¹³ Although the basis on which Abray dismisses these figures is arguably tenuous, the following example combines popular support and the struggle for civic parity to prove a successful attempt at achieving active citizenship. In March 1792, a party led by Pauline Léon presented the Legislative Assembly with a petition, with more than 300 signatures, demanding a woman's right to bear arms based on the natural right to self-defense¹⁴. The Paris Commune and the mayor Pétion honored the petition publicly, with Pétion instating it as a model of women's citizenship, and the Council of the commune presenting a decorative sword.¹⁵ The armed procession of June 1792, after the king's vetoing of two decrees and dismissal of two liberal ministers, composed of armed men and women carrying

¹⁰ Hufton, *Women and Citizenship* p.24

¹¹ Latour-Lamontagne, *Paris pendant la Terreur*, (Caron, September 21, 1793), 1: 155

¹² Abray, *Feminism in the French Revolution*, p.46, p. 61

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.60

¹⁴ 'Petition to the National Assembly on Women's Rights to Bear Arms', in D.G. Levy, H.B. Applewhite, M.D. Johnson (eds.) (trans.), *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795* (Chicago, 1980), p. 72

¹⁵ *Extrait du registre des délibérations du Conseil général de la Commune de Paris, Vendredi, 5 avril 1792, (Paris 1792)*

pikes, guns, axes, sabers, and blades, signaling clearly to the nation that “the people is the only sovereign”.¹⁶ Pétion, although under fire for his failure to prevent the march, called special attention to the role of women in the procession. He states there was no force capable of stopping the torrent, “confronting women – their sisters, their wives, their mothers...the very idea of this carnage makes one shiver”.¹⁷ However, the officials of the Department of Paris responsible for dismissing Pétion also agreed that the presence of women and children rendered them immobile¹⁸. Then, the women’s right to self-defence combined with her civic duty results in an emergence of a female citizenship different from the Rousseau’s ideal of the passive citizen limited to the private sphere. The new female citizen is active and armed. In contrast to the powerless unarmed families gunned down by Lafayette’s troops in July 1791, there is an invention of a national family in arms as a serious political and military force.

Although the threat of militancy of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women led to the banning of women’s clubs, the debate around the decision marks a change in tone around women’s involvement in the public sphere. While legislators like Amar argued that women’s incapacity for political action was rooted in misogynist theories of biology, psychology and morality, his argument was not the consensus. The deputy Bazire dismisses Amar’s arguments in favour of the more concrete concern of public safety and order. After the ban, women continued to vote and partake in politics via mixed-sex societies successfully in the short-term, with the Fraternal Society of the Section Pathéon-Français voting to exclude members who argued that women “ought not to have been admitted”¹⁹.

¹⁶ Dumont, commissaire de police, Section de la Rue Montreuil, to the Directory of the Department of Paris, June 21, 1792, in “Journée de 20 juin 1792,” *Revue Rétrospective, ou Bibliothèque historique*, 2nd series, vol 1. (1835). p. 180

¹⁷ Jérôme Pétion, Conduit tenue par M. le Maire de Paris à l’occasion des événements di 20 juin 1792, in “Journée de 20 juin 1792,” *Revue Rétrospective, ou Bibliothèque historique*, 2nd series, vol 1. (1835). p. 180

¹⁸ *Extrait des Registres*, 6 juillet 1792, (Paris, 1792)

¹⁹ Levy and Applewhite, *A Political Revolution*, p. 285

Outside of the women's clubs, women remained at the fore of popular action. In February 1793, women were at the forefront of grocery riots over the increasing costs of bread and the shortages in supplies. A group of women also marched to the Convention and denounced free trade. In mid-February, a party of washerwomen called for the death penalty for hoarders of soap, and women led a series of riots on the 25-26th of February pillaging stalls and shops they could not afford. In May 1793, women from the Faubourg Saint Antoine, where previously the price of bread was fixed at 3 sous a pound, demanded measures to reform the army and enforce a price cap on bread. The women continued their occupation until a maximum on grain and flour was implemented on the 4th of May.

After the dissolution of the women's clubs, the sans-culottes women grew more militant, armed with the belief that the law was designed to protect the working-class consumer interests, and would be firmly enforced by the guillotine. The nadir of the cold winter of 1794-5 was preceded by a progressive worsening of the economic situation. There were daily protests and pillaging by women outside of bakeries. The 27th of March marked the start of women's protests to the Convention, with some totaling several hundreds.²⁰ The revolt of the 1 April 1795 was orchestrated by women, with police reports containing grievances of "les hommes traînent... les hommes sont des lâches".²¹ The last occupation of the Convention was almost completely by women; women rounded up anyone they could: their neighbours, women in the popular districts, on the streets, on the staircases.²² Therefore, the protests were not only carried out by women, but had a distinctive female character. The popular working-class woman was transformed. She is pushed to confront authority unarmed, forced from her private sphere, and was a force to be contended with, with real results.

In contrast to her counterparts in the city, the women of the countryside experienced a different Revolution and sought a reversal of the status quo, resisting the dechristianising campaigns and

²⁰ Hufton, *Women and Citizenship*, p.43

²¹ *Ibid.*, cited from Archives Nationales F7 2499

²² *Ibid.*, p.44

suffering from the loss of the luxury trade. While her aims were different to the women in the city, she too sought change and succeeded in her counterrevolution, arguably making “a significant contribution to the reversal of the national record”²³. Hufton notes rural women effecting organised methods of resistance to the Revolution and the Dechristianising campaign such as collective obstinacy and using explicit or sexual ridicule.²⁴ For example, at the Temple of Reason in Saint Vincent near Lavoûte-sur-Loire in June 1794, upon the reading of the paean to the Supreme Being, an older woman signed at the crowd which prompted the whole of the female audience to rise and expose their naked buttocks to the celebrant. This produced similar acts in both the neighbouring villages of Lavoûte and further away in Saint Paulien.²⁵ Another technique the women of the villages used was collective obstinacy. In a small town Montpigié, a *représentants en mission* Albitte, known for his success as a dechristianiser, assembled the women of the town to take an oath of loyalty. In the first instance, the women announced they would rather die by the guillotine than to profess loyalty to a pagan regime. Albitte reattempted in a different section of the town with a few guards. Before he even entered the tribune, he was approached by a woman who stated she was ready for the guillotine and was supported by the women of the village. In response, Albitte’s men rounded up and imprisoned about a hundred women. Pressure from within and outside the prison prompted the release of a few who then mobilised other women who attacked the prison, leading to the liberation of the imprisoned women and the incarceration of Albitte and the mayor. In 1791 Sommières, in line with traditional forms of women’s protest, old and pregnant women were placed at the front of the masses and filled their aprons with ashes and stones to hurl at anyone who tried to force an oath. Women were staged around the main church door on the lookout for officials, to give warnings, and to rally more women²⁶. Regardless of the reality, there was a character of ‘united women’ to

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 96

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.115

²⁵ Olwen Hufton, ‘Women in Revolution’, *French Politics and Society*, Vol.7, (Summer 1989), p. 77

²⁶ Timothy Tackett, ‘Women and Men in Counterrevolution: The Sommières Riot of 1791’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 59, (Dec 1987), pp. 684.

the efforts with cries such as “We the women will go to the door of the church”.²⁷ Out of these examples emerge a female resistance to the dechristianising movement and the regime. In Montpigié, Albitte protested that the women were acting contrary to their husbands wishes, and it was the husbands facing the chores of the ‘private sphere’ in their wives’ absence that demanded their wives’ release. In Saint Vincent, women spearheaded the religious resistance and utilised their position as women to embarrass the celebrant. Protests being in the fashion of traditional female resistance also points to a distinctly female movement for change.

The resistance was not only distinctly female but successful. To restore the devotional patterns of the past, communities needed to execute certain steps: the restoration of the traditional use of the church, gaining the means to summon the faithful to mass, and the restitution of Sunday as the day of rest instead of the *décadi*. In 1795, the policy of the Thermidoreans prohibited the use of the parish church for community worship. Within these constraints, women led efforts to reestablish community worship. Wealthy widows hired churches as individuals and handed it over to the community. Women rioted and forced the doors of the church when officials refused them. The seizure of the church bells was seen as a signal of victory and of safety in gathering for mass.²⁸ The rural populace also abstained from voting on the issue of the *décadi* replacing Sunday as the day of rest, seeing the *décadi* as a restriction on their leisure. This was led by women giving their servants time off on Sundays. Women also actively worked to maintain Sunday mass, finding a non-juror or a layman informed on liturgy to give service every Sunday.²⁹

Before the revolution, enlightenment views idealized Rousseau’s Sophie as the ideal woman – belonging exclusively to the private sphere and an afterthought to the natural Man, the progenitor of new generations of citizens and the lifeblood of the state.³⁰ However, by the end of 1790s, it

²⁷ Depositions of Marie Guillet, *Archives Départementales du Gard*, Nîmes L 2731 p.4

²⁸ J. Duval Jouve, *Montpellier pendant la Révolution* (Montpellier, 1879) p.327

²⁹ Hufton, *Women and Citizenship*, p.127

³⁰ Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*, p.70

was clear that the links forged between women's political practices in the public sphere and the issues of citizenship, political legitimacy, and popular sovereignty secured women at the forefront of the political sphere. The 'woman question' was placed permanently on the agenda of French political tradition and culture.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Latour-Lamontagne, *Paris pendant la Terreur*, (Caron, September 21 1793)

Extrait du register des délibérations du Conseil général de la Commune de Paris (Paris 1792)

“Journée de 20 juin 1792,” *Revue Rétrospective, ou Bibliothèque historique*, 2nd series, vol 1. (1835).

Depositions of Marie Guillet, *Archives Départementales du Gard*, Nîmes L 2731 p.4

Petition to the National Assembly on Women’s Rights to Bear Arms’, in D.G. Levy, H.B. Applewhite, M.D. Johnson (eds.) (trans.), *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795* (Chicago, 1980)

Secondary Sources

Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (Paris, 1949)

Jane Abray, ‘Feminism in the French Revolution’, *The American Historical Review*, vol.80, no.1(Feb 1975) pp. 43-65

Olwen Hufton, ‘Women in Revolution’, *French Politics and Society*, Vol.7, (Summer 1989), pp. 65-81

Timothy Tackett, ‘Women and Men in Counterrevolution: The Sommières Riot of 1791’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 59, (Dec 1987), pp. 680-704

Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988)

Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses* (Brunswick, 1999)

R. B. Rose, ‘Women and the French Revolution’, *Historical Reflections*, vol.21 (1995), pp. 187-205

Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, 1996)

Lynn Hunt, ‘Forgetting and Remembering: The French Revolution Then and Now’, *American Historical Review* (1995) pp.1119-1135

Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, ‘A Political Revolution for Women? The Case of Paris’, in Renate Bridenthal, S.M. Stuard, M.E. Wiesner (eds), *Becoming Visible* (Boston, 1998)

Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1992)

Jacques Godechot, *Les institutions de la France sous la Révolution et l’Empire* (Paris, 1951) pp. 375-377

J. Duval Jouve, *Montpellier pendant la Révolution* (Montpellier, 1879)