

Women in the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution

Question: How enlightened were the philosophes?

Source: Excerpt from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, 1762

“When I consider the special purpose of woman, when I observe her inclinations or reckon up her duties, everything combines to indicate the mode of education she requires. Men and women are made for each other, but their mutual dependence differs in degree; man is dependent on woman through his desires; woman is dependent on man through her desires and also through her needs; he could do without her better than she can do without him. She cannot fulfill her purpose in life without his aid, without his goodwill, without his respect; she is dependent on our feelings, on the price we put upon her virtue, and the opinion we have of her charms and her deserts. Nature herself has decreed that woman, both for herself and her children, should be at the mercy of man’s judgment.

The children’s health depends in the first place on the mother’s and the early education of man is also in a woman’s hands; his morals, his passions, his tastes, his pleasures, his happiness itself, depend on her. A woman’s education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young. The further we depart from this principle, the further we shall be from our goal, and all our precepts will fail to secure her happiness or our own.

When the Greek women married, they disappeared from public life; within the four walls of their home they devoted themselves to the care of their household and family. This is the mode of life prescribed for women alike by nature and reason. These women gave birth to the healthiest, strongest, and best proportioned men who ever lived, and except in certain islands of ill repute, no women in the whole world, not even the Roman matrons, were ever at once so wise and so charming, so beautiful and so virtuous, as the women of ancient Greece.

Boys and girls have many games in common, and this is as it should be; do they not play together when they are grown up? They have also special tastes of their own. Boys want movement and noise, drums, tops, toy-carts; girls prefer things which appeal to the eye, and can be used for dressing-up-mirrors, jewelry, finery, and especially dolls. The doll is the girl’s special plaything; this shows her instinctive bent towards her life’s work. The art of pleasing finds its physical basis in personal adornment, and this physical side of the art is the only one which the child can cultivate.

Here is a little girl busy all day with her doll; she is always changing its clothes, dressing and undressing it, trying new combinations of trimmings well or ill matched; her fingers are clumsy, her taste is crude, but there is no mistaking her bent; in this endless occupation time flies unheeded, the hours slip away unnoticed, even meals are forgotten. She is more eager for adornment than for food. ‘But she is dressing her doll, not herself,’ you will say. Just so; she sees her doll, she cannot see herself; she cannot do anything for herself, she has neither the training, nor the talent, nor the strength; as yet she herself is nothing, she is engrossed in her doll and all her coquetry is devoted to it. This will not always be so; in due time she will be her own doll.”

Question: When did the modern women's rights movement start? What did women seek?

Source 1: Excerpts from Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, Ch. II-IV

1. "...Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile [childish] kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man, and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives."
2. "Youth is the season for love in both sexes, but in those days of thoughtless enjoyment provision should be made for the more important years of life, when reflection takes the place of sensation. ... The woman who has been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is passed and gone. Will she then have sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort, and cultivate her dormant faculties?"
3. "... though moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that man is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, they constantly concur in advising woman only to provide for the present. Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are constantly recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex, and ... one writer has declared that it is masculine for a woman to be melancholy. She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused."
4. "I love man as my fellow, but his scepter, real or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, not to man."
5. "I lament that women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions, which men think it manly to pay to the sex, when, in fact, they are insultingly supporting their own superiority. It is not condescension to bow to an inferior. So ludicrous, in fact, do these ceremonies appear to me, that I scarcely am able to govern my muscles, when I see a man start with anger, and serious solicitude, to lift a handkerchief, or shut a door, when the lady could have done it herself, had she moved a pace or two."

Source 2: Excerpt from Olympe de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*, 1791

“Man, are you capable of being just? ... Tell me, what gives you sovereign empire to oppress my sex? Your strength? Your talents? Observe the Creator in his wisdom ... and give me, if you dare, an example of this tyrannical empire. Go back to animals, consult the elements, study plants ... and distinguish, if you can, the sexes in the administration of nature. Everywhere you will find them mingled; everywhere they cooperate in harmonious togetherness in this immortal masterpiece.

Man alone has raised his exceptional circumstances to a principle. ... he wants to command as a despot a sex which is in full possession of its intellectual faculties; he pretends to enjoy the Revolution and to claim his rights to equality in order to say nothing more about it.

Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen

Mothers, daughters, sisters and representatives of the nation demand to be constituted into a national assembly. Believing that ignorance, omission, or scorn for the rights of woman are the only causes of public misfortunes and of the corruption of governments, [the women] have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman ...

Consequently, the sex that is as superior in beauty as it is in courage during the suffering of maternity recognized and declares in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following Rights of Woman and of Female Citizens.

- I. Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights. Social distinctions can be based only on the common utility.
- II. The purpose of any political association is the conservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of woman and man; these rights are liberty, property, security, and especially resistance to oppression.
- III. The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially with the nation, which is nothing but the union of woman and man ...
- IV. Liberty and justice ... consist of restoring all that belongs to others; thus, the only limits on the exercise of the natural rights of woman are perpetual male tyranny; these limits are to be reformed by the laws of nature and reason.
- V. Laws of nature and reason proscribe all acts harmful to society; everything which is not prohibited by these wise and divine laws cannot be prevented, and no one can be constrained to do what they do not command.
- VI. The laws must be the expression of the general will; all female and male citizens must contribute either personally or through their representatives to its formation; it must be the same for all: male and female citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, must be equally admitted to all honors, positions, and public employment according to their capacity and without other distinctions besides those of their virtues and talents.
- VII. No woman is an exception: she is accused, arrested, and detained in cases determined by law. Women, like men, obey this rigorous law.
- VIII. The law must establish only those penalties that are strictly and obviously necessary, and no one can be punished except by virtue of a law established and promulgated prior to the crime and legally applicable to women.
- IX. Once any woman is declared guilty, complete rigor is [to be] exercised by the law.

- X. No one is to be disquieted for his very basic opinions; woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum, provided that her demonstrations do not disturb the legally established public order.
- XI. The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of woman, since the liberty assures the recognition of children by their fathers. Any female citizen thus may say freely, I am the mother of a child which belongs to you, without being forced by a barbarous prejudice to hide the truth ...
- XII. The guarantee of the rights of woman and the female citizen implies a major benefit; this guarantee must be instituted for the advantage of all, and not for the particular benefit of those to whom it is entrusted.
- XIII. For the support of the public force and the expenses of administration, the contributions of woman and man are equal; she share all the duties ... and all the painful tasks; therefore, she must have the same share in the distribution of positions, employments, offices, honors and jobs ...
- XIV. Female and male citizens have the right to verify, either by themselves or through their representatives, the necessity of the public contribution. This can only apply to women if they are granted an equal share, not only of wealth, but also of public administration ...
- XV. The collectivity of women, joined for tax purposed to the aggregate of men, has the right to demand an accounting of his administration from any public agent.
- XVI. No society has a constitution without the guarantee of the rights and the separation of powers; the constitution is null if the majority of individuals comprising the nation have not cooperated in drafting it.
- XVII. Property belongs to both sexes whether united or separate; for each it is an inviolable and sacred right ...

Postscript

Woman, wake up ... discover your rights. The powerful empire of nature is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition, and lies. The flame of truth has dispersed all the clouds of folly and usurpation. Enslaved man has multiplied his strength and needs recourse to yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust to his companion. Oh, women, women! When will you cease to be blind? What advantage have you received from the Revolution? A more pronounced scorn, a more marked disdain. In the centuries of corruption you ruled only over the weakness of men. The reclamation of your patrimony, based on the wise decrees of nature - what have you to dread from such a fine undertaking? ... Do you fear that our French legislators, correctors of that morality, long ensnared by political practices now out of date, will only say again to you: women, what is there in common between you and us? Everything, you will have to answer. If they persist in their weakness in putting this non sequitur in contradiction to their principles, courageously oppose the force of reason to the empty pretensions of superiority; unite yourselves beneath the standards of philosophy; deploy all the energy of your character, and you will soon see these haughty men, not groveling at your feet as servile adorers, but proud to share with you the treasures of the Supreme Being. Regardless of what barriers confront you, it is in your power to free yourselves; you have only to want to. Let us pass not to the shocking tableau of what you have been in society; and since national education is in question at this moment, let us see whether our wise legislators will think judiciously about the education of women.