

Woman, Wake Up! Know your Rights

The French Revolution, the Declaration, and Olympe de Gouges's Rights of Woman

By Emily Sosolik

Homme, es-tu capable d'être juste ? C'est une femme qui t'en fait la question ; tu ne lui ôteras pas moins ce droit. Dis-moi ? Qui t'a donné le souverain empire d'opprimer mon sexe ? Ta force ? Tes talents ?

Man, are you capable of being just? It's a woman who is asking this question; you will, at least, not take this right from her. Tell me: Who gave you the sovereignty to oppress my sex? Your strength? Your talents?

Olympe de Gouges, introduction to her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, September 1791. English translations of the title: Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen; or simply, Declaration of the Rights of Women.

In 1791, two years after France's National Assembly had passed the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen), the female writer Olympe de Gouges offered a searing criticism of the Declaration and the men who penned it in her pamphlet *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*¹:

L'homme seul s'est fagoté un principe de cette exception. Bizarre, aveugle, boursoufflé de sciences et dégénéré, . . .

Man alone has made a foolish principle of his exceptionalism. Bizarre, blind, bloated with learning, and degenerated into the crassest ignorance in this century of enlightenment and wisdom, he wants to rule as a despot over a sex that has also been given every intellectual faculty. He claims to enjoy the

¹ Olympe de Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791). This French text has modernized spelling and includes de Gouges's letter to Marie-Antoinette and de Gouges's introduction to the Declaration, which introduction includes the sentences found in the epigraph to the present piece. An English translation, just of the Declaration itself: *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. The online text is taken from *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Lynn Hunt (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 124-29.

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revolution [for himself alone] and reasserts his rights to equality, so as to say no more about it.²

Although Gouges (1748-1793) was known for being bold and for having with a flair for the dramatic, her observation was not an exaggeration. When the National Assembly passed the Declaration during the French Revolution, it appeared to be the ultimate culmination of the Enlightenment-inspired ideal of universal rights—until the National Assembly was faced with the issue of how universal rights applied to women. During the Revolution, women and other male reformers lamented about how women’s exclusion and lack of equality blatantly violated the concept of natural liberty and the essence of the Declaration, but their pleas by and large fell upon deaf ears. Through written protest and demonstrations, women during the Revolution fought to be included in the Declaration's universal rights, but society often silenced the women, sometimes violently. No one embodied the concerns of women more fully than Gouges in *The Rights of Woman*. When situated in the context of the Declaration and its relationship to women, Gouges’s *Rights of Woman* provides an unadulterated look into women’s lack of equality during the Revolution and the limits of the Declaration’s universal rights.

Olympe de Gouges was the penname of Marie Gouze, an aspiring playwright who moved to Paris after she was widowed at a young age. After years of writing plays and finding little success, she began to wonder if her gender, not the quality of her content, was to blame, and she gradually became involved in political pamphleteering.³ Gouges wrote about issues such as divorce, the rights of orphaned children, and maternity hospitals, but one issue in particular that enraged Gouges was the non-universality of the natural rights of the Declaration. The concept of natural rights and the Declaration itself arose out of a distinct intellectual climate that was fueled by the ideas of the Enlightenment. Natural rights, or civil rights, were not necessarily revolutionary, but they were reformist, building on Christian theology and ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and augmented by the concepts of inalienability and universality.⁴ Discussion about rights frequently could be found in the literature produced in eighteenth-century France. A definition of “natural law,” along with “general will,” was provided in the 1755 French *Encyclopedia*.⁵ Voltaire wrote in his 1763 *Traité sur la tolérance* (Treatise on Toleration) about religious freedom, which was guaranteed by natural law and “indicated to men by nature,” and argued that human law “must in every case be based on natural law.”⁶ Abbé Raynal, a French priest, described

2 From de Gouges’s introduction to her *Déclaration*, as translated in John Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby: Olympe de Gouges’s Rights of Woman* (Montreal, CA: MQUP, 2011), 30.

3 Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, 12.

4 Anthony Grafton, “The Power of Ideas” in *A Concise Comparison to History*, edited by Ulikna Rublack (Oxford University Press, 2011), 376.

5 Denis Diderot, “Natural laws as Defined by the Encyclopedia, 1755” in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, *op cit.*, 35.

6 Voltaire, *Treatise on Toleration* (1763) in *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 38.

“natural liberty” in his 1770 *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies): “Liberty is the property of one’s self. . . . Natural liberty is the right granted by nature to every man to dispose of himself at pleasure.”⁷ This ideological chatter set the stage for not only the Revolution but also the formation of the Declaration.

When the National Assembly instituted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789 after a heated debate, it appeared to be the manifestation of the rights, especially the right of universal equality, envisioned by such thinkers. In its preamble, the Declaration stated that its goal was “d’exposer, dans une Déclaration solennelle, les droits naturels, inaliénables et sacrés de l’Homme” (to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man). This led the powerful first article: “Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits.” (Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.)⁸ The Declaration then articulated other rights, including freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, no taxation without representation, and the elimination of excessive punishments.⁹

Even when condensed, the influence of France’s intellectual climate could be seen in the Declaration. However, while the rights set forth in the Declaration seemed straightforward, the National Assembly quickly became divided over how “universal” its application should be. For instance, to vote, one needed property, which was an indirect way of saying the poor could not vote, and groups not protected by the Declaration included religious minorities, such as Jews, and those of “questionable profession,” such as actors and executioners.¹⁰ Controversy surrounded whether the Declaration’s rights should be extended to freedmen of color and slaves in France, an issue that was compounded by the fact that France’s economy heavily depended on slavery and the crops produced through slave labor in its colonies like Saint-Domingue.¹¹ While each of these groups made small strides toward equality during the Revolution (the poor became active citizens in 1793, rights were extended to all Jews in 1791, full rights were given to freedmen of color in 1792, and slaves were freed in 1794), the Declaration consistently overlooked one historically oppressed group: women.¹² And this was where Gouges stepped in.

7 Abbé Raynal, *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies* (1770) in *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 52.

8 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, 1789, as translated in *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 77.

9 Hunt, introduction to *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 77.

10 Count de Clermont Tonnerre, *December 23, 1789* in *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 87.

11 Robert Forster, “The French Revolution, people of color, and slavery” in *The Global Ramifications of the French Revolution*, eds. Joseph Klaitz and Michael H. Haltzel (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994), 89-93.

12 Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, 3-4.

Gouges, like many other women during the Revolution, felt the first flush of promise after the passing of the Declaration rapidly give way to the sting of continued exclusion. The role that working-class French women played in overthrowing the king and the nobility has been much celebrated in accounts of *La marche des femmes* on October 5, 1789—the Women’s March on Versailles. As many as 8,000 women participated, and the march and related events resulted in Louis XVI agreeing to ratify the Declaration of the Rights of Man and to be taken back to Paris (ultimately, to his death).¹³ Thomas Carlyle’s 1837 account captures the heady fervor of the march. A few lines here:

How many wearisome bloody Battles does History strive to represent; or even, in a husky way, to sing:—and she would omit or carelessly slur-over this one Insurrection of Women? A thought, or dim raw-material of a thought, was fermenting all night, universally in the female head, and might explode. In squalid garret, on Monday morning, Maternity awakes, to hear children weeping for bread. Maternity must forth to the streets, to the herb-markets and Bakers’—queues; meets there with hunger-stricken Maternity, sympathetic, exasperative. O we unhappy women! But, instead of Bakers’-queues, why not to Aristocrats’ palaces, the root of the matter? . . .

In one of the Guardhouses of the Quartier Saint-Eustache, ‘a young woman’ seizes a drum,—for how shall National Guards give fire on women, on a young woman? The young woman seizes the drum; sets forth, beating it, ‘uttering cries relative to the dearth of grains.’ Descend, O mothers; descend, ye Judiths, to food and revenge!—All women gather and go; crowds storm all stairs, force out all women: the female Insurrectionary Force, . . . Robust Dames of the Halle, slim Mantua-makers, assiduous, risen with the dawn; ancient Virginitiy tripping to matins; the Housemaid, with early broom; all must go. Rouse ye, O women; the laggard men will not act; they say, we ourselves may act!¹⁴

Nevertheless, French women were not only excluded from the rights of the Declaration, but also from participating in many other parts of the general revolt. When the Estates-General met in 1789, for instance, all women of the Third Estate could do was send along a petition to the king begging him to make the male deputies of the Estates-General address their complaints since they had been “[e]xcluded from the national assemblies by laws so well consolidated that they allow no hope of infringement.”¹⁵ Although women were not necessarily persecuted during this time, they certainly were expected to stay within the

¹³ The population of Paris at the time has been estimated at 630,000. So 8,000 might be about 5 percent of the adult female population.

¹⁴ Thomas Carlyle, [The Insurrection of Women](#), Book 1, Chapter VII of *The French Revolution*, originally published by Chapman & Hall, London, 1837.

¹⁵ “Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King” in *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 60-63.

confines of the domestic sphere and to understand that when the Declaration declared that *men* were born and remained free and equal in rights, it was not alluding to the brotherhood of humankind but instead was referring literally to the male sex. This was evidenced in the Declaration's choice of words.

Note that in a recent edition of *Le Petit Robert*, a highly authoritative French dictionary, the primary definition of the word "homme" was "Être appartenant à l'espèce animale la plus évoluée de la Terre"—Being belonging to the most evolved animal species on Earth. It is in the second definition that the dictionary offers "Être humain mâle"—Male human being.¹⁶ Thus one might, for example, translate the first line of the first article, "Human beings are born and remain free and equal in rights," but this would not accord with the sentiments of the Declaration's promulgators. It might be said that they were not, from their perspective, being hypocritical; with the use of the word "homme" they were proposing equal rights for all the most superior beings, by which they meant, simply and clearly, all well-to-do white men.

The Declaration's central incongruity—a universal declaration of natural rights that only included one gender—and what it meant for the future of the Revolution caught the attention of women and some men. For instance, Louis-Marie Prudhomme, founder of a radical newspaper during the Revolution, commented in 1791, "Many women have complained to us about the Revolution. In numerous letters they report to us that for two years now it seems there is but one sex in France."¹⁷ Similarly, the progressive writer and mathematician Nicolas de Condorcet pointed out in 1790 that by excluding women from the rights of citizenship, the French philosophers and legislators had "violated the principle of equality of rights by quietly depriving half of mankind of the right to participate in the formation of the laws."¹⁸ This problem vexed Gouges, and as John R. Cole, one of her biographers, has put it, the Declaration "both inspired her by its nominal universals and provoked her by its exclusion of women."¹⁹ Her response came in the form of *The Rights of Woman*.

Modeling her pamphlet after the Declaration, Gouges addressed the non-universality of the Declaration's rights head on, and the central assertion of her publication was that women should be entitled to the same rights as men. In the pamphlet, Gouges begins with a letter to Marie-Antoinette, imploring her to use her position of power to fight for equal rights for women because the Revolution "will be achieved only when all women are convinced of their deplorable lot and of the rights that they had lost in society." Gouges

¹⁶ *Le Petit Robert 1 : Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Montréal, Canada: Les Dictionnaires Robert-Canada, 1991), 934.

¹⁷ Louis Marie Prudhomme, "On the Influence of the Revolution on Women" (February 12, 1791) in *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 129.

¹⁸ Condorcet, "On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship" (July 1790), in *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 119.

¹⁹ Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, 91.

then launches into her own version of the Declaration, which she named *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of Citizen*. Her preamble opens with a remark that embodies the frustration women experienced during the Revolution:

Les mères, les filles, les sœurs, représentantes de la Nation, demandent d'être constituées en Assemblée nationale

Mothers, daughters, sisters, female representatives of the nation ask to be constituted as a national assembly. Considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt for the rights of woman are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption, they have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman . . .²⁰

Gouges then proceeds to outline these natural, inalienable, and sacred rights in seventeen articles, mimicking the format of the Declaration. For instance, Article I is transformed from, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights,” into, “La Femme naît libre et demeure égale à l'homme.” La Femme—capital F and singular—Woman is born free and remains equal to the man. (It must be noted that, as ever, Gouges defines women's rights in relation to men's rights; whereas the French men of the Assembly had simply been claiming rights for themselves.) Article II of Gouge's pamphlet promises that the goal of every political association is the perseveration of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man *and* of woman, including “liberty, property, security, and especially resistance to oppression.” Other articles cover the right to participate in the government, the right to legally acknowledge children born out of wedlock, and the right to own property. Gouges ends with a postamble that urges women to take action and fight for equal rights.

Femme, réveille-toi ; le tocsin de la raison se fait entendre dans tout l'univers ; reconnais tes droits. (Woman, wake up; the tocsin of reason is heard throughout the universe; know your rights.)

She also appends “Forme du contrat social de l'homme et de la femme,” a text that begins with a one-paragraph model social contract between a man and a woman and then adds commentary. As a whole, the text promotes equal partnership, and it proposes, among other things, a law to protect widows and young ladies who have been “trompées par les fausses promesses d'un homme à qui elles se seroient attachées”—deceived by the false promises of a man to whom they were attached.²¹ Throughout these documents, Gouges does not mince words. Characteristic of her gall, in Article X of the Declaration she states: “la femme a le droit de monter sur l'échafaud; elle doit avoir également celui de monter à la tribune” (if

20 Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 124-29.

21 Copy of [French text of the “Forme”](#), dated September 14, 1791, as posted by Bibliotheca Augustana; consulted November 2016.

women have the right to mount the scaffold, they must also have the right to take the stand in courtrooms).²²

Unfortunately, there proved to be a tragic prophecy in this proposition. While Gouges's Declaration did not significantly impact the direction of the Revolution, it gained notoriety, offended some readers, and caused Gouges to come under scrutiny.²³ Additionally, she supported the Girondins, a Jacobin, anti-monarchal faction that did not, however, support the more radical faction that gained power and was responsible for what is now called the Reign of Terror. In the summer of 1793, after the fall of the Girondins, Gouges was arrested for publishing a pamphlet suggesting that a plebiscite select France's form of government. After a mock trial, she was denounced as an "unnatural" woman and sentenced to the guillotine in November of the same year.²⁴ According to an obituary, she was executed "for sedition and for having forgotten the virtues which befit her sex."²⁵

Gouges's execution was a sign of the long road women had ahead of them in their battle to attain the equality guaranteed by the Declaration. In fact, women in France were forced to wait more than a century to partake equally in the rights of "l'homme" outlined in the Declaration. Most tellingly, women in France were not granted the right to vote until 1944. Gouges was not the only person during the French Revolution to point out these flaws in the Declaration; what made Gouges unique was that in her five-year career of publishing political pamphlets from 1788 to 1793, she publicly questioned the Declaration and vehemently demanded full civil and political rights for women more than any person before her.²⁶ Cole captures her legacy best:

Gouges was neither philosopher nor politician. She did not produce orderly arguments for women's rights or against those who would deny them, and perhaps she could not have. But no one else matched the boldness with which she demanded that the twin ideals of 1789, liberty and equality, be extended to women both in the public sphere and in private relationships.²⁷

Ultimately, Gouges's *Déclaration des droits de la femme* not only gave voice to the struggles of women in the French Revolution but also shed light on the shortcomings of the men's *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme*. These shortcomings have not disappeared—today, more than two hundred years since the Declaration was proclaimed, the non-universality of universal rights continues to be an ever-present theme in global discourse.

22 As regards these texts, see Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, 29-32, 34, 37-38.

23 Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, 8.

24 Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 124.

25 Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, *Dictionary of Women Worldwide: 25,000 Women Through the Ages*, vol. 1 (Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), 767.

26 Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, 6.

27 Cole, *Between the Queen and the Cabby*, 5.

Women, along with other historically overlooked groups such as the poor and religious minorities, continue to fight for their share of the universal rights and continue to feel that same sting of exclusion that compelled Gouges to pick up her pen. Gouges's Declaration, then, gives us pause. By providing a profound, disquieting, and clear-eyed reflection on the actual universality of universal rights, it forces us to confront the endurance of these shortcomings and, most fundamentally, to wake up and know our rights.

Possibilities for further reading

Lynn Hunt. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007.

Micheline Ishay. *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Joan Wallach Scott. *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

[Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution](#); online site that includes essays, images, documents, songs, maps, a timeline, and a glossary; a collaboration of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (George Mason University) and American Social History Project (City University of New York).

Thomas Carlyle, **[The French Revolution](#)**. Text online. Originally published by Chapman & Hall, London, 1837.