The National Convention declares the abolition of Negro slavery in all the colonies; in consequence it decrees that all men, without distinction of color, residing in the colonies, are French citizens and will enjoy all the rights assured by the constitution.

It asks the Committee of Public Safety to make a report as soon as possible on the measures that should be taken to assure the execution of the present decree.

# Women

## 32

## CONDORCET

## *"On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship"*

*July 1790*

*Condorcet took the question of political rights to all of its logical conclusions. He argued that if rights were indeed universal, as the doctrine of natural rights and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen both seemed to imply, then they must apply to all adults. Condorcet consequently argued in favor of granting political rights to Protestants and Jews and advocated the abolition of the slave trade and slavery itself. He went further than any other leading revolutionary spokesman, however, when he insisted that women, too, should gain political rights. His newspaper article to that effect caused a sensation and stimulated those of like mind to publish articles of their own. But the campaign was relatively shortlived and ultimately unsuccessful; the prejudice against granting political rights to women would prove the most difficult to uproot.*

"Sur l'Admission des femmes au droit de cité," *Journal de la Société de 1789*, no. 5 (July 3, 1790): 1–4, 6–9, 11–12.

Habit can familiarize men with the violation of their natural rights to the point that among those who have lost them no one dreams of reclaiming them or believes that he has suffered an injustice.

Some of these violations even escaped the philosophers and legislators when with the greatest zeal they turned their attention to establishing the common rights of the individuals of the human race and to making those rights the sole foundation of political institutions. For example, have they not all violated the principle of equality of rights by quietly depriving half of mankind of the right to participate in the formation of the laws, by excluding women from the rights of citizenship? Is there a stronger proof of the power of habit even among enlightened men than seeing the principle of equality of rights invoked in favor of three or four hundred men deprived of their rights by an absurd prejudice [perhaps he is thinking of actors here] and at the same time forgetting those rights when it comes to twelve million women?

For this exclusion not to be an act of tyranny one would have to prove that the natural rights of women are not absolutely the same as those of men or show that they are not capable of exercising them. Now the rights of men follow only from the fact that they are feeling beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning about these ideas. Since women have the same qualities, they necessarily have equal rights. Either no individual in mankind has true rights, or all have the same ones; and whoever votes against the right of another, whatever be his religion, his color, or his sex, has from that moment abjured his own rights.

It would be difficult to prove that women are incapable of exercising the rights of citizenship. Why should beings exposed to pregnancies and to passing indispositions not be able to exercise rights that no one ever imagined taking away from people who have gout every winter or who easily catch colds? Even granting a superiority of mind in men that is not the necessary consequence of the difference in education (which is far from being proved and which ought to be if women are to be deprived of a natural right without injustice), this superiority can consist in only two points. It is said that no woman has made an important discovery in the sciences or given proof of genius in the arts, letters, etc. But certainly no one would presume to limit the rights of citizenship exclusively to men of genius. Some add that no woman has the same extent of knowledge or the same power of reasoning as certain men do; but what does this prove except that the class of very enlightened men is small? There is complete equality between women and the rest of men; if this little class of men were set aside, inferiority and superiority would be equally

shared between the two sexes. Now since it would be completely absurd to limit the rights of citizenship and the eligibility for public offices to this superior class, why should women be excluded rather than those men who are inferior to a great number of women?

. . . It is said that women have never been guided by what is called reason despite much intelligence, wisdom, and a faculty for reasoning developed to the same degree as in subtle dialecticians. This observation is false: they have not conducted themselves, it is true, according to the reason of men but rather according to their own. Their interests not being the same due to the defects of the laws, the same things not having for them at all the same importance as for us, they can, without being unreasonable, determine their course of action according to other principles and work toward a different goal. It is as reasonable for a woman to occupy herself with the embellishment of her person as it was for Demosthenes [a Greek orator] to cultivate his voice and gestures.

It is said that women, though better than men in that they are gentler, more sensitive, and less subject to the vices that follow from egotism and hard hearts, do not really possess a sense of justice; that they obey their feelings rather than their consciences. This observation is truer but it proves nothing. It is not nature but rather education and social conditions that cause this difference. Neither the one nor the other has accustomed women to the idea of what is just, only to the idea of what is becoming or proper. Removed from public affairs, from everything that is decided according to the most rigorous idea of justice, or according to positive laws, they concern themselves with and act upon precisely those things which are regulated by natural propriety and by feeling. It is therefore unjust to advance as grounds for continuing to refuse women the enjoyment of their natural rights those reasons that only have some kind of reality because women do not enjoy these rights in the first place.

If one admits such arguments against women, it would also be necessary to take away the rights of citizenship from that portion of the people who, having to work without respite, can neither acquire enlightenment nor exercise its reason, and soon little by little the only men who would be permitted to be citizens would be those who had followed a course in public law.

. . . It is natural for a woman to nurse her children, to care for them in their infancy; attached to her home by these cares, weaker than a man, it is also natural that she lead a more retiring, more domestic life. Women would therefore be in the same class with men who are obliged by their station or profession to work several hours a day. This may be a reason

for not preferring them in elections, but it cannot be the grounds for their legal exclusion.

. . . I demand now that these arguments be refuted by other means than pleasantries or ranting; above all that someone show me a natural difference between men and women that can legitimately found [women's] exclusion from a right. . . .

## 33

## ETTA PALM D'AELDERS

## *Discourse on the Injustice of the Laws in Favor of Men, at the Expense of Women*

*December 30, 1790*

*Born Etta Lubina Derista Aelders in the Dutch Republic in 1743, she married Ferdinand Palm at age nineteen. After he disappeared in the Dutch East Indies, she eventually made her way to Paris in the early 1770s. During the early years of the French Revolution, she actively participated in the deliberations of the* Cercle Social *(Social Circle), a group of reformers that included Condorcet. She gave this address at the meeting of an affiliated political club, the Confederation of the Friends of Truth, the first political club to admit women as members. In her speech, d'Aelders puts forth very general demands but stops short of making specific requests for changes in the laws. The Confederation of the Friends of Truth agitated for legislation legalizing divorce and equality of inheritance between girls and boys, and eventually set up a women's section of the club to further the rights of women. D'Aelders returned to the Dutch Republic in 1795 and took part in the revolution imported by French soldiers (her date of death is not known).*

Etta Palm d'Aelders, "Discours sur l'injustice des loix en faveur des hommes, au dépend des femmes, lu à l'Assemblée Fédérative des Amis de la Vérité, le 30 décembre 1790, par Madame Etta-Palm d'Aelders," in *Appel aux françoises sur la régénération des moeurs et la nécéssité de l'influence des femmes dans un gouvernment libre* (Paris: De l'Imprimerie du Cercle Social, 1791), 2–6.

## 34

## OLYMPE DE GOUGES

# *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman*

*September 1791*

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*Marie Gouze (1748–1793) was a self-educated butcher's daughter from the south of France who, under the name Olympe de Gouges, wrote pamphlets and plays on a variety of issues, including slavery, which she attacked as based on greed and blind prejudice. In this pamphlet she provides a declaration of the rights of women to parallel the one for men, thus criticizing the deputies for having forgotten women. She addressed the pamphlet to the queen, Marie Antoinette, although she also warned the queen that she must work for the Revolution or risk destroying the monarchy altogether. In her postscript she denounced the customary treatment of women as objects easily abandoned. She appended to the declaration a sample form for a marriage contract that called for communal sharing of property. De Gouges went to the guillotine in 1793, condemned as a counterrevolutionary and denounced as an "unnatural" woman.*

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To be decreed by the National Assembly in its last sessions or by the next legislature.

### Preamble

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: so that by being constantly present to all the members of the social body this declaration may always remind them of their rights and duties; so that by being liable at every moment to comparison with the aim of any and all political institutions the acts of women's and men's powers may be the more fully respected; and so that by being founded

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Olympe de Gouges, *Les Droits de la femme. A la Reine* (Paris, 1791).

henceforward on simple and incontestable principles the demands of the citizenesses may always tend toward maintaining the constitution, good morals, and the general welfare.

In consequence, the sex that is superior in beauty as in courage, needed in maternal sufferings, recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of woman and the citizeness.

1. Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility.
2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of woman and man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and especially resistance to oppression.
3. The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation, which is but the reuniting of woman and man. No body and no individual may exercise authority which does not emanate expressly from the nation.
4. Liberty and justice consist in restoring all that belongs to another; hence the exercise of the natural rights of woman has no other limits than those that the perpetual tyranny of man opposes to them; these limits must be reformed according to the laws of nature and reason.
5. The laws of nature and reason prohibit all actions which are injurious to society. No hindrance should be put in the way of anything not prohibited by these wise and divine laws, nor may anyone be forced to do what they do not require.
6. The law should be the expression of the general will. All citizenesses and citizens should take part, in person or by their representatives, in its formation. It must be the same for everyone. All citizenesses and citizens, being equal in its eyes, should be equally admissible to all public dignities, offices, and employments, according to their ability, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents.
7. No woman is exempted; she is indicted, arrested, and detained in the cases determined by the law. Women like men obey this rigorous law.
8. Only strictly and obviously necessary punishments should be established by the law, and no one may be punished except by

virtue of a law established and promulgated before the time of the offense, and legally applied to women.

9. Any woman being declared guilty, all rigor is exercised by the law.

10. No one should be disturbed for his fundamental opinions; woman has the right to mount the scaffold, so she should have the right equally to mount the tribune, provided that these manifestations do not trouble public order as established by law.

11. The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of woman, since this liberty assures the recognition of children by their fathers. Every citizeness may therefore say freely, I am the mother of your child; a barbarous prejudice [against unmarried women having children] should not force her to hide the truth, so long as responsibility is accepted for any abuse of this liberty in cases determined by the law [women are not allowed to lie about the paternity of their children].

12. The safeguard of the rights of woman and citizeness requires public powers. These powers are instituted for the advantage of all and not for the private benefit of those to whom they are entrusted.

13. For maintenance of public authority and for expenses of administration, taxation of women and men is equal; she takes part in all forced labor service, in all painful tasks; she must therefore have the same proportion in the distribution of places, employments, offices, dignities, and in industry.

14. The citizenesses and citizens have the right, by themselves or through their representatives, to have demonstrated to them the necessity of public taxes. The citizenesses can only agree to them upon admission of an equal division, not only in wealth, but also in the public administration, and to determine the means of apportionment, assessment, and collection, and the duration of the taxes.

15. The mass of women, joining with men in paying taxes, have the right to hold accountable every public agent of the administration.

16. Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured or the separation of powers not settled has no constitution. The constitution is null and void if the majority of individuals composing the nation has not cooperated in its drafting.

17. Property belongs to both sexes whether united or separated; it is for each of them an inviolable and sacred right, and no one may be deprived of it as a true patrimony of nature, except when public necessity, certified by law, obviously requires it, and then on condition of a just compensation in advance.

## Postscript

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. The torch of truth has dispersed all the clouds of folly and usurpation. Enslaved man has multiplied his force and needs yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust toward his companion. Oh women! Women, when will you cease to be blind? What advantages have you gathered in the revolution? A scorn more marked, a disdain more conspicuous. During the centuries of corruption you only reigned over the weakness of men. Your empire is destroyed; what is left to you then? Firm belief in the injustices of men. The reclaiming of your patrimony founded on the wise decrees of nature; why should you fear such a beautiful enterprise? . . . Whatever the barriers set up against you, it is in your power to overcome them; you only have to want it. Let us pass now to the appalling account of what you have been in society; and since national education is an issue at this moment, let us see if our wise legislators will think sanely about the education of women.

Women have done more harm than good. Constraint and dissimulation have been their lot. What force has taken from them, ruse returned to them; they have had recourse to all the resources of their charms, and the most irreproachable man has not resisted them. Poison, the sword, women controlled everything; they ordered up crimes as much as virtues. For centuries, the French government, especially, depended on the nocturnal administration of women; officials kept no secrets from their indiscretion; ambassadorial posts, military commands, the ministry, the presidency [of a court], the papacy, the college of cardinals, in short everything that characterizes the folly of men, profane and sacred, has been submitted to the cupidity and ambition of this sex formerly considered despicable and respected, and since the revolution, respectable and despised. . . .

Under the former regime, everyone was vicious, everyone guilty. . . . A woman only had to be beautiful and amiable; when she possessed these two advantages, she saw a hundred fortunes at her feet. . . . The most indecent woman could make herself respectable with gold; the

commerce in women was a kind of industry amongst the highest classes, which henceforth will enjoy no more credit. If it still did, the revolution would be lost, and in the new situation we would still be corrupted. Can reason hide the fact that every other road to fortune is closed to a woman bought by a man, bought like a slave from the coasts of Africa? The difference between them is great; this is known. The slave [that is, the woman] commands her master, but if the master gives her her freedom without compensation and at an age when the slave has lost all her charms, what does this unfortunate woman become? The plaything of disdain; even the doors of charity are closed to her; she is poor and old, they say; why did she not know how to make her fortune?

Other examples even more touching can be provided to reason. A young woman without experience, seduced by the man she loves, abandons her parents to follow him; the ingrate leaves her after a few years and the older she will have grown with him, the more his inconstancy will be inhuman. If she has children, he will still abandon her. If he is rich, he will believe himself excused from sharing his fortune with his noble victims. If some engagement ties him to his duties, he will violate it while counting on support from the law. If he is married, every other obligation loses its force. What laws then remain to be passed that would eradicate vice down to its roots? That of equally dividing [family] fortunes between men and women and of public administration of their goods. It is easy to imagine that a woman born of a rich family would gain much from the equal division of property [between children]. But what about the woman born in a poor family with merit and virtues; what is her lot? Poverty and opprobrium. If she does not excel in music or painting, she cannot be admitted to any public function, even if she is fully qualified. . . .

Marriage is the tomb of confidence and love. A married woman can give bastards to her husband with impunity, and even the family fortune which does not belong to them. An unmarried woman has only a feeble right: ancient and inhuman laws refuse her the right to the name and goods of her children's father; no new laws have been made in this matter. If giving my sex an honorable and just consistency is considered to be at this time paradoxical on my part and an attempt at the impossible, I leave to future men the glory of dealing with this matter; but while waiting, we can prepare the way with national education, with the restoration of morals and with conjugal agreements.

### FORM FOR A SOCIAL CONTRACT BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN

We, _____ and _____, moved by our own will, unite for the length of our lives and for the duration of our mutual inclinations under the following

conditions: We intend and wish to make our wealth communal property, while reserving the right to divide it in favor of our children and of those for whom we might have a special inclination, mutually recognizing that our goods belong directly to our children, from whatever bed they come [legitimate or not], and that all of them without distinction have the right to bear the name of the fathers and mothers who have acknowledged them, and we impose on ourselves the obligation of subscribing to the law that punishes any rejection of one's own blood [refusing to acknowledge an illegitimate child]. We likewise obligate ourselves, in the case of a separation, to divide our fortune equally and to set aside the portion the law designates for our children. In the case of a perfect union, the one who dies first will give up half his property in favor of the children; and if there are no children, the survivor will inherit by right, unless the dying person has disposed of his half of the common property in favor of someone he judges appropriate. [She then goes on to defend her contract against the inevitable objections of "hypocrites, prudes, the clergy, and all the hellish gang."]

## 35

## PRUDHOMME

## *"On the Influence of the Revolution on Women"*

### *February 12, 1791*

*Having made his living as a bookseller and publisher of underground pamphlets before the Revolution, Louis Marie Prudhomme (1752–1832) founded* Revolutions of Paris, *one of the best-known radical newspapers of the French Revolution. In this article he responds to women's criticisms of the Revolution by attacking the role of queens and courtiers under the Old Regime and outlining a theory of women's "natural" domesticity for the new regime. Nevertheless, he calls on women to arm themselves to fight the counterrevolution, apparently seeing in the present crisis a powerful reason for quitting, at least for the moment, women's traditional*

*Révolutions de Paris* (February 7–12, 1791), 83:226–35. Notes are by Prudhomme, unless otherwise indicated.

*peacetime roles. Disturbed by the increasing number of arrests and executions in 1793, he interrupted and then stopped publication of the paper in 1794.*

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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. In the primary assemblies [for voting], in the sections, in the clubs, etc. there is no longer any discussion about women, as if they no longer existed. They are accorded, as if by grace, a few benches for listening to the sessions of the National Assembly. Two or three women have appeared at the bar [spoken to the Assembly], but the audience was short, and the Assembly quickly passed on to the order of the day. Can the French people, some ask, not become free without ceasing to be gallant? Long ago, in the time of the Gauls, our good ancestors, women had a deliberative vote in the Estates of the nation; they voted just like men, and things did not go so badly. . . .

The reign of the courtesans precipitated the ruin of the nation; the empire of queens consummated it. We saw a prince [Louis XV], too quickly loved by the people, degrade his character in the arms of several women[1] [his mistresses] without modesty, and become, following the example of Nebuchadnezzar,[2] a brute who wallowed with a disgusting cynicism in the filth of the dirtiest pleasures. We saw his successor [Louis XVI] share with the public his infatuation with a young, lively, and frivolous princess [Marie Antoinette], who began by shaking off the yoke of etiquette as if practicing for one day shattering that of the laws. Soon following the lessons of her mother [Maria Theresa, empress of Austria], she profited from her ascendancy over little things to interfere in great ones and to influence the destiny of an entire people. . . .

Solemn publicists[3] have seriously proposed taking the road of conciliation; they have maintained that women enjoy the rights of citizenship like men and should have entry to all public assemblies, even to those that constitute or legislate for the nation. They have claimed that women have the right to speak as much as men.

No doubt, and this power has never been denied them. But nature, from which society should not depart except in spite of itself, has prescribed to each sex its respective functions; a household should never

[1] Madame du Barry among others.
[2] Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylonia 605–562 B.C.—ED.
[3] M. Condorcet, among others, in a number of the journal of the club of 1789.

remain deserted for a single instant. When the father of a family leaves to defend or lay claim to the rights of property, security, equality, or liberty in a public assembly, the mother of the family, focused on her domestic duties, must make order and cleanliness, ease and peace reign at home.

Women have never shown this sustained and strongly pronounced taste for civil and political independence, this ardor to which everything cedes, which inspires in men so many great deeds, so many heroic actions. This is because civil and political liberty is in a manner of speaking useless to women and in consequence must be foreign to them. 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. The tumult of camps, the storms of public places, the agitations of the tribunals are not at all suitable for the second sex. 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.

Women! . . . The liberty of a people has for its basis good morals and education, and you are its guardians and first dispensers. . . . Appear in the midst of our national festivals with all the brilliance of your virtues and your charms! When the voice of the public acclaims the heroism and wisdom of a young citizen, then a mother rises and leads her young, beautiful, and modest daughter to the tribunal where crowns are distributed; the young virgin seizes one of them and goes herself to set it on the forehead of the acclaimed citizen. . . .

Citizenesses of all ages and all stations! Leave your homes all at the same time; rally from door to door and march toward city hall. . . . Armed with burning torches, present yourselves at the gates of the palace of your tyrants and demand reparation. . . . If the enemy, victorious thanks to disagreements between patriots, insists upon putting his plan of counterrevolution into action . . . you must avail yourself of every means, bravery and ruses, arms and poison; contaminate the fountains, the foodstuffs; let the atmosphere be charged with the seeds of death. . . . Once the country is purged of all these hired brigands, citizenesses! We will see you return to your dwellings to take up once again the accustomed yoke of domestic duties.

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ISBN 978-1-319-04903-4

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