

DECLARATION OF WOMEN'S AND FEMALE CITIZENS' RIGHTS

September 1791



THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Man; are you able to be fair? It is a woman who asks you the question; you cannot take this right from her.

Tell me? Who gave you the absolute right to oppress my sex? Your strength? Your talents? Observe the creator in his wisdom; look at nature in its grandeur, which you don't seem to wish to approach, and give me, if you dare, an example of this tyrannical empire. Refer back to the animals, consult the elements, study the vegetables, glance at all the changes in organised matter; and come to the realisation when I offer you the possibility. Search, dig and distinguish, if you can, the sexes in the administration of nature. Everywhere, you will find them mixed, everywhere they co-operate in a harmonious combination to form this immortal masterpiece.

Only man has made a principle of this exception. Bizarre, blind, inflated with science and degenerate, in a century of enlightenment and wisdom, in the crassest ignorance, he wants to exercise despotic control over a sex which has received all the intellectual faculties; he wants to benefit from the Revolution and claim his rights to equality, and to limit himself to that.

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To be ordered by the National Assembly in its last sitting or in the next legislature

INTRODUCTION

The mothers, the daughters, the sisters, representing the Nation, demand to be formed into a National assembly; considering that the ignorance, oblivion or contempt of the rights of women are the only causes of public distress and the corruption of governments, have resolved to expose in a solemn declaration, the natural unalienable and sacred rights of women, so that this declaration, constantly presented to all members of the social order, reminds them of their rights and their duties, so that the manifestations of the power of women and those of the power of men being at all times able to be compared to the purpose of every political institution, should be more respected, so that the claims of female Citizens, henceforth founded on simple and undeniable principles, should always be directed towards the maintenance of the Constitution, of good ethics and the happiness of all. Consequently, the sex that is superior in beauty, as in courage during maternal suffering, recognises and declares, in the presence of all the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights for women and female citizens:

I

Women are born and remain free and equal in rights.
Social distinctions can be founded only on the common good.

II

The goal of any political association is the conservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of Women and Men. These rights are liberty, property, safety and resistance against oppression.

III

The principle of any sovereignty resides essentially in the Nation, which is an association of men and women. No body and no individual can exert authority which does not emanate expressly from it.

IV

Liberty and Justice consist of rendering to every person that which belongs to him or her; hence the exercise of the natural rights of women is only limited by the borders that men's tyranny places in their way. These borders need to be reformed by the laws of nature and of reason.

V

The laws of nature and reason forbid all actions harmful to society.
Anything which is not forbidden by these wise and divine laws cannot be impeded, and no one can be constrained to do what they do not order.

VI

The Law should be the expression of the general will. All the male and female citizens must contribute personally or through their representatives to its formation.

It must be the same for all; as all male and female citizens are equal in their eyes, they should all be equally admissible to all public dignities, places and employments, according to their capacity and without distinction other than that of their virtues and of their talents.

VII

Exception is made for no woman; she can be accused, arrested and detained in the cases determined by the law. Women and men obey this strict Law without distinction.

VIII

The law should establish only penalties that are strictly and evidently necessary, and no one can be punished but under a law established and promulgated before the offense, and legally applied to women.

IX

Any woman being declared culpable is subject to the full rigour of the Law.

X

No one may be disturbed for their opinions, even fundamental ones; women have the right to go to the scaffold; they should also have the right to go to the tribune: provided that their manifestation does not trouble the public order established by the Law.

XI

The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of women, because this liberty ensures the legitimacy of fathers in relation to their children. Consequently, any female citizen may freely say: "I am the mother of a child fathered by you"

without any barbaric prejudice forcing her to hide the truth; except to respond to the abuse of this liberty, in the cases determined by the Law.

XII

The guarantee of the rights of women and female citizens necessitates a public force: this guarantee must be instituted for the advantage of all and not for the particular utility of those in whom it is trusted.

XIII

For the maintenance of the public force and for the expenditures of administration, contributions by men and women are equal; women participate in all unpleasant tasks; consequently they must also have their share in the distribution of appointments, jobs, responsibilities, high positions and dignities.

XIV

All male and female citizens have the right to ascertain, by themselves or through their representatives, the need for a public tax. Female citizens can only consent to it by the acceptance of equal sharing, not only in fortune, but also in public administration, and of determining the proportion, basis, collection, and duration.

XV

Women, united with men in the contribution, have the right to request account from any public agent of the administration of taxes.

XVI

Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured, nor the separation of powers determined, has no Constitution; the Constitution is null and void if the majority of the individuals comprising the Nation have not cooperated in its writing.

XVII

Property being an inviolable and sacred right to all sexes, whether combined or separate, no one can be deprived of it, as a true heritage of nature, if it is not when the public necessity, legally noted, evidently requires it, and under the condition of a just and prior indemnity.

CONCLUSION

Women, wake up! The wake-up call of reason is sounding throughout the universe; recognise your rights. The powerful empire of nature is no longer walled in by prejudices, fanaticism, superstition and lies. The flame of truth has dissipated all clouds of stupidity and usurpation. Men who were slaves have multiplied their strengths, and have needed to make use of yours as well, to break the chains. Now that they have become free, they have become unfair to their partners.

O women! Women, when will you open your eyes? What advantages have you gained from the Revolution? More strongly marked contempt, more visible disdain. It is said that over centuries of corruption. You have only reigned because of the weakness of men. Your empire is destroyed; so what is left to you? Conviction of the injustice of men; a claim for your birthright, founded in the wise decrees of nature. What can you dread in such a noble enterprise? The good words of the legislator in the marriage of Canaan? Do you fear that our French legislators, correctors of this principle that has long been hanging on the branches of politics, but which is no longer in fashion, repeats to you:

"Women, what is there in common between you and us?" — "Everything", is the reply you must make. If they continue, in their weakness, to put this absurdity in contradiction with their principles, courageously oppose the force of reason against their vain claims of superiority; come together under the standards of philosophy; deploy all the energy of your character, and you will soon see these vain people, not servile subjects crawling at your feet, but proud to share with you the treasures of the supreme being. Whatever barriers men place before you, you have the power to overcome them; you simply need to want to. Let us now pass onto the terrible picture of what you have been in society; and as the subject of creating a new education system is currently in debate, let us see if our wise legislators think sensibly about the education of women.

Women have done more harm than good. Blackmail and dissimulation have been their share. Where strength was wanting, ruse served their cause; they made use of all the resources of their charms, and the most upright could not resist them. Poison and the sword were their slaves; ordered crime and virtue.

The government of France, especially, was controlled for centuries by their nocturnal administration; the cabinet had no secrets for their indiscretion: diplomacy, command, ministry, presidency, pontificate, cardinalship, everything that characterises the stupidity of men, both profane and holy, everything was subject to the cupidity and ambition of this sex previously contemptible and respected, and since the Revolution, respectable and despised.

In this sort of antithesis, what a lot of comments I have to make! I only have a minute to make them, but they will draw attention from our remotest descendants. Under the "ancien regime" everything was vicious, everything was culpable; a woman was couldn't be perceived as an improvement in the very substance of these vices? A woman but not obliged to be beautiful or pleasant; when she had these two advantages, she saw a hundred fortunes at her feet. If she didn't take advantage of them, she had's strange personality, or an unusual philosophy that made her disdain riches; she was then simply considered as obstinate. The most indecent obtained respect by riches, the commerce of women was an industry that was received in the first class; henceforth it will have no more standing, no more credit. If there was another one, the Revolution would be lost, and we would still be swindled, for other reasons. However can reason hide that every other path to fortune is closed to women, whom men buy just as they would buy slaves on the African coast? The difference is great, we know. The slave orders the master; but if the master grants the slave freedom without recompense, and at an age when the slave has lost all her charms, what does this unfortunate creature become? The plaything of the master; even the doors of charity are closed to her; "She is poor and old, they say, why wasn't she successful?" "Other even more touching examples come to mind. A young inexperienced person attracted by a man whom she loves, abandons her parents to follow him; the ungrateful wretch deserts her after a few years, and the more she has aged with him, more his fickleness is inhuman; if she has children, he will abandon her just the same. If he is rich he will not consider himself obliged to share his fortune with his noble victims. If some other engagement binds him to his duties, it he will try to circumvent its powers hoping to turn the law to his advantage. If he is married, any other engagement loses its rights. What other laws need to be passed to eradicate evil at its roots? That of the sharing of fortunes between men and women, and of public administration. We can easily understand that a woman born of a rich family obtains a lot by the equality of sharing. But she who is born of a poor family, with merit and virtue, what is her lot? Poverty and stigma. If she does not excel in music or painting, she cannot be admitted to any public office, even though she has the ability. I am only giving an overview of the situation, I will go into it more deeply in the new edition of my political works that I intend to present to the public in a few days, with explanatory notes.

To return to my text dealing with ethics. Marriage is the tombstone of confidence and love. A married woman can give illegitimate children to her husband with impunity, together with the fortune that does not belong to them. The woman who is not married has only feeble rights: the previous inhuman laws refused her the rights to their father's name and fortune for her children, and no new laws have been made in this matter. If trying to give my sex an honourable and just status is considered at present as a paradox on my part, and like attempting the impossible, I leave to future generations the glory of dealing with this matter; but, in the meantime we can prepare for it by national education, by the restoration of ethics and by marriage contracts.