CHAPTER 1

The Legacy of the Past: Patriarchy and Resistance

Throughout the nineteenth century, the majority of French men and women accepted the centuries-old patriarchal system that regulated sexual roles and rights. This system, with roots extending into the distant past, had survived centuries of social, economic, and religious change. The seemingly constant nature of the subjugation of the female sex was the most powerful argument that nineteenth-century patriarchalists could muster in its defense.

Nineteenth-century feminists, however, believed that the unchanging patriarchal system was simply background to a drama rich with historical change. They were inspired by their belief that civilization had progressed to a point where further change would transform the patriarchal system itself. They were strengthened by their awareness that the challenge to patriarchy was not their invention. Feminism had a prior history, much of which was familiar to nineteenth-century French feminists and shaped their efforts to fashion an ideology suitable to the particular needs of their time and place. The dual legacy of patriarchy and resistance sets the stage for the development of nineteenth-century French feminism.

The Roots of Patriarchy

Historically, French social patterns are a fusion of three main traditions: the Greco-Latin, the Judaic, and the Germanic. Patriarchal family life is common to all three traditions.1 The major characteristics of the patriarchal family in Western cultures are the insistence on legitimacy, since descent

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is through the male line and paternity must be certain; the requirement that the wife be economically dependent on the male head of the family; and the exclusion of women from civil or political participation. Adultery—if committed by the wife—was seen as a threat to the male-centered social structure, as evidenced by harsh punishments meted out for female adultery: in Judaic society the adulterous wife was stoned; in Greek society she was forced to dress in such a manner that others would not fail to recognize her transgression; and in the old Germanic tribes, the adulterous wife was either put to death or mutilated.2

In traditional patriarchal societies, women were prohibited from either ownership or disposition of property.3 Moreover, women were generally considered legal nonpersons, or, as stated in Roman law, *infirmus imbecillus sexus*. In Greece they had no more public rights than slaves, minors, or foreigners. Although they were permitted to defend themselves in court and serve as witnesses in trials, in Rome these rights were withdrawn by Justinian. In Jewish law, this deprivation of civic rights extended to the majority of religious observances, from which women were also excluded.

The Christian social revolution did not alter the ancient patterns of patriarchy. In church, women were forbidden to preach and were ordered to keep silent.4 In their homes, they were instructed to obey their husbands: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church.”5 While there was “neither Jew nor Greek,” neither “bond nor free,” neither “male nor female” in the Kingdom of God,6 “man was the image and glory of God! [Woman, however, was] the glory of man. For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but woman for the man.”7

During the Middle Ages, the position of woman was somewhat ambiguous as a result of the confusion of sovereignty with personal property (the fief). When in control of a fief, women could—and often did—exercise power by administering justice, signing treaties, and decreeing laws. Women sometimes even played a military role, Joan of Arc being a notable example.8 In some European countries, women ruled as queens, with the kingdom still viewed as a patrimony. In France, however, and also within the Holy Roman Empire, the Salic Law prohibited women or descendants through the female line from ruling. Nevertheless, some upper-class women wielded considerable political power as regents, abbesses of convents with extensive lands,9 or through their personal influence over ruling males. And the cult of the Virgin Mary, with its secular parallel, the chivalric idealization of women, likely affected the position of ruling-class women in a positive way.10 Most women, though, remained restricted to their
homes and dependent upon their fathers, who either sent them into convents or put them under the control of other males, their husbands.

Historians have generally assumed that the more enlightened image of womanhood in the Renaissance signifies the beginning of a period of improving conditions for women, at least of the upper class. Such was not the case, however. Among the peasantry, to be sure, inequalities based on sex were less important: a blanket of poverty spread itself equally over both men and women, and a lack of property made the idea of protection of the patrimony meaningless. But from the time of the Renaissance, among the aristocracy and the emerging middle class (both of whom had political and economic rights to preserve), inequality weighed heavily on women.

First, by defining sovereignty in public rather than personal terms, the codification of laws during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries increasingly excluded women from power. With the simultaneous growth of the modern bureaucratic state and the capitalist economy came the need for well-trained secular personnel. Education came to be highly valued, and the centuries-old exclusion of women from the universities took on a new, more powerful significance. Family life was similarly undergoing a transformation, which further widened the gulf between boys and girls and men and women of the nobility and upper bourgeoisie. An increased number of years was deemed necessary to prepare boys for the expanded responsibilities of male adulthood. The same, however, was not true of girls.

This new emphasis on "boyhood" contributed to a new domestic role for adult women. Again, this role was limited to the more well-to-do. Among the popular classes, according to Olwen Hufton, the "married woman . . . was not in any modern sense a homemaker. Cleaning, washing . . . cooking and childrearing were fairly marginal aspects of her existence in the demands they made upon her time." But among the upper classes, especially in the cities, the chasm separating female from male roles widened, with female accomplishments being subordinated to the needs of preparing the next generation of the male elite.

That changing definitions of manhood and womanhood were straining the relationship between the sexes is evident in the outpouring of writings over the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries that were collectively labeled "la querelle des femmes." These were usually constructed as pro or con positions, defenses of or attacks upon the moral worth of women. Some of women's defenders also asked for increased opportunities for women to participate in some of the new activities, particularly the intellectual activities, that were engaging Renaissance men.
During the seventeenth century, the writings on the woman question focused especially on women's visible role in the new salons that had proliferated in Paris and some of the other major cities of France. The salons were one institution that seemed to bridge the gap increasingly separating the lives of upper-class men and women. According to historian Carolyn Lougee, "The distinguishing feature of the salons, which set them apart from other cultural institutions such as the all-male literary circles and the society of the cabarets and coffee houses, was the dominance of women in them. Salons were always run by a woman." Because of their dominant role in the institution that became responsible for integrating the new nobility with the old, some women, Lougee contends, achieved a new and higher level of social influence and political power. Evelyn Bodek notes that during the eighteenth century, when salons "served as newspaper, journal, literary society, and university" for the intelligentsia, they became an ingenious way for women to obtain learning at a time when higher education was denied to them.  

Yet, the salonière learned to provide a comfortable environment in which others, not she, would display their talents. She was the chef d'orchestre, perhaps, but never the star of the show. Further, she was isolated by competitiveness from other salonières and thus lacking the encouragement which bluestockings across the channel received from their close-knit female circles; here the salonière feared to step out from the background. As Bodek explains, "She wrote, but rarely for [publication] . . . ; she spoke, but carefully modulated her voice; she questioned, but hardly ever pursued the unquestionable."  

In spite of the limitations of the power of the salonière, Jean-Jacques Rousseau thought her a threat to the "natural" dominance of men. Rousseau saw salons as "prisons" that subjugated men to the rule of women. He preferred the sexual segregation of Genevan social life, where men were "exempted from having to lower their ideas to the range of women." During the seventeenth century, those who had opposed an increased public role for women were the same individuals who had objected to enlarging the ruling elite. A century later, however, Rousseau coupled his attack on women's public role with arguments favoring democracy among men. The consequence was a theoretical widening of the chasm separating the sexes.  

One is struck by the juxtaposition of new and old elements in Rousseau's writings about women. Unlike writers of the earlier querelle des femmes, Rousseau was depicting a middle-class rather than an upper-class existence, specifically, a middle-class life that was unknown in earlier centuries when workplace and home had overlapped. He glorified the separation of private
and public spheres and exalted bourgeois women’s newly time-consuming maternal preoccupations as well as their role as men’s companions. Women were indispensable to men’s happiness and, in recognition, Rousseau’s men loved and respected them. Women’s innate aptitude for love and selfless devotion thus assured them dignity, respect, and happiness. In some ways, Rousseau reads more like women’s defenders in the earlier querelle des femmes than their detractors.

But Rousseau’s appreciation of women’s familial role was central to arguments that actually strengthened older patriarchal values by reformulating them in terms that were relevant to eighteenth-century society. Women’s maternal responsibilities now required their exclusion from the civil, political, and economic activities that Rousseau championed for all men and even demanded their exclusion from the intellectual activities that several centuries of practice had seemingly legitimated:

What makes you think more highly of [a woman] . . . —to see her busy with feminine occupations, with her household duties, with her children’s clothes about her, or to find her writing verses at her dressing table surrounded with pamphlets of every kind . . . ?

The genuine mother of a family is no woman of the world; she is almost as much of a recluse as the nun in her convent.\(^{22}\)

The ancient fear of uncertain paternity now threatened property rights: “[Pity] the poor father who, when he clasps his child to his breast, is haunted by the suspicion that this is the child of another, the badge of his dishonor, a thief who is robbing his own children of their inheritance.” Therefore, adultery—if committed by the wife—threatened the entire bourgeois social structure:

No doubt every breach of faith is wrong and every faithless husband, who robs his wife of the sole reward of the stern duties of her sex, is cruel and unjust; but the faithless wife is worse; she destroys the family and breaks the bonds of nature; when she gives her husband children who are not his own, she is false both to him and them; her crime is not infidelity but treason. To my mind, it is the source of dissension and of crime of every kind.

However appreciative, even respectful of his ideal woman—Julie, for example—Rousseau nonetheless reaffirmed the inequality of the sexes and men’s dominion over women: “Woman is made . . . to be in subjection to a man. . . . [A] man should be strong and active; [a] woman should
be weak and passive; the one must have both the power and the will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance.” 23

That France was severed into two ideological camps by the French Revolution, a Right and a Left, is hardly true in the case of the ideology of womanhood.24 In 1793, the republican Left, inspired by Rousseauist ideas, blamed the public role of women for the current internal disorders and recommended the closing of all political clubs that had female members. A report of the Committee of General Security posed the question, “Should women meet in political associations?” and responded: “No, because they would be required to sacrifice to them [the associations] the more important cares to which Nature calls them. Private functions to which women are destined by Nature are necessary to the general order of society; social order results from the difference between men and women.” The most radical phase of the Revolution could offer only the following advice to women: “Women! Do you want to be republicans? Love, follow, and teach the laws which recall your husbands and sons to the exercise of their rights.” Women were further enjoined to dress simply, work hard in their homes, go to meetings, not to speak out themselves, but perhaps to encourage their male children to do so.25

The royalist Right, restored to power in 1815, would not disagree with this particular republican dictum. Although Rousseau’s attack on women’s role in the salons had been one aspect of a thoroughgoing attack on aristocratic France, the aristocracy had come to accept his judgment—on women, at least. Their major thinkers, Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre, insisted that aristocrats had only themselves to blame for their defeats during the revolutionary years of 1789–1815. Their sinful ways, exemplified by the visible role of women in aristocratic institutions, had undermined their virtue, sapped their strength, and caused their downfall. The subjugation of wives to husbands and the confinement of wives to the domestic sphere were deemed to be as necessary to the restoration of the primacy of royalty and church as Rousseau had earlier considered patriarchy necessary to the Republic. The strength of the aristocratic state depended on “the authority of the husband, the subordination of the wife, and the dependency of the children,” according to Bonald. Maistre argued against the need to educate girls in publicly funded schools since they were destined for “a life of retreat and shall be solely concerned with familial needs.” 26

Across the full spectrum of otherwise varying political beliefs there was widespread agreement on women’s place in society. Nineteenth-century French feminists thus faced an uncommonly unified opposition.
The First Feminists Challenge the System

Feminism is an ideology shaped by historical phenomena. It varies, at least in detail, in different times and places. There is nonetheless a common unifying bond across time and place—a shared comprehension of the world and a shared impulse for change that define the core of feminism. It is necessary to define this common unifying bond in order to identify feminists, and, particularly, to distinguish them from the many other reformers who wrote about women with concern and sympathy, but who were not, in spite of their compassion, feminists. The feminist ideology is based on the recognition that women constitute a group that is wrongfully oppressed by male-defined values and male-controlled institutions of social, political, cultural, and familial power. The ultimate vision of feminists is revolutionary. It demands the end of patriarchy, that is, the end of a political relationship of the sexes characterized by masculine dominance and female subordination.

Despite the strength of the patriarchal system, some had spoken out against it in earlier centuries. Traces of feminist thought have been pointed to in the legend, based on reality, of Sappho; in Aristophanes’s Lysistrata and The Assembly of Women; and in Plato’s Republic. In the Middle Ages, a few religious sects, particularly the Waldensians and the Catharists, espoused some feminist ideas. It is now assumed, too, that many of the millions of women burned as witches between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries were punished for their implicit or explicit challenge to the patriarchal order.27

It was, however, the Renaissance querelle des femmes that created a transmittable literature about women’s place in society. The seeds of modern feminist criticism were planted at this time. Early in the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan formulated what would be the primary demand of feminists for centuries to come: that women be permitted to obtain a serious education.28 She defended her sex against the misogynist attacks of Jean de Meung (Le Roman de la rose) and set the precedent for an outpouring of writings, the net effect of which was to create an opinion in intellectual circles more favorable for women than the medieval view. It is ironic but certainly not unrelated that this increasingly more positive view of women emerged at a time when the disparities in male and female opportunities were increasing.

One must be careful, however, not to exaggerate the Renaissance defense of women. Although these writers had named a problem and thereby created a new social issue, few moved beyond the demand for increased opportunities. Most failed to question the patriarchal understanding that
the "correct" relationship of the sexes required the dominance of men over women.

Marie le Jars de Gournay, who in 1622 wrote *Égalité des hommes et des femmes*, went further than most. The mental and intellectual abilities of women, she wrote, would equal the degree of excellence attained by men if only women could be freed from their handicapped status, which was the result of faulty instruction and social limitation.29 And writing fifty years later, François Poullain de la Barre went even further.30 Christine de Pizan had defended the female sex by compiling lists of the achievements of women, culled from history and mythology, to prove that women were at least equal, if not superior, to men. Marie de Gournay had based her arguments on the authority of God, the church fathers, and the great thinkers of all times. In contrast, Poullain applied the Cartesian method of rational examination—"to accept nothing as true which I do not evidently know to be such" 31—to question sexual inequality. His method yielded a doctrine far more revolutionary in its implications than those of any of his predecessors: Poullain became the first writer in the French language to link women's oppression to patriarchy.

Poullain argued that no field of intellectual endeavor, nor any profession, should be closed to women. He specifically mentioned teaching, the ministry, law, and monarchy or state governance. Acknowledging that it might at first seem surprising, even shocking, to see a woman occupy a chair at a university, march at the head of a police force, argue a legal case, preside over a court, lead an army, or act as an ambassador, he held that it would be strange merely because of the novelty. If women had from the beginning been admitted to the various professions, it would not cause any more astonishment to see them in government positions than in shops. The insistence that women's education be considered in relation to their needs as individuals, not just in respect to their duties as wives or mothers, places Poullain's work in an entirely different category from that of his predecessors or his illustrious contemporaries, Fénelon and Madame de Maintenon.32 He was not only the first writer in the French language to link women's handicaps to patriarchy but also the first to state approvingly that the purpose of an improved education for women was to overturn male domination.

During the eighteenth century, interest in women's issues continued unabated,33 although no Enlightenment writer developed as far-reaching a feminist position as had Poullain or even the less daring Marie de Gournay.34 Nonetheless, the basic liberalism of the writers of that era guaranteed that women's plight would be treated with some sympathy. Furthermore, the willingness of the Enlightenment philosophers to question the basic im-

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mutability of apparently natural characteristics had revolutionary implications for the status of women. Voltaire wrote that women’s inferiority was contingent upon circumstance, not upon natural necessity.35 Montesquieu symbolized human tyranny in the person of a young Persian girl falsely presumed to be happy in her place in the king’s harem.36 In De l’esprit des lois, he advocated equality of treatment of men and women in divorce.37 In the Encyclopédie, women were judged equal to men in intellectual capacity; their limited education was the reason they had not realized their full potential.38 Diderot, in his treatise on public education, pointed out that improved education for boys would be in vain if effective reforms were not also carried out for the training of girls.39 D’Alembert defended women’s right to an education equal to men’s in a direct challenge to Rousseau, Réponse à la lettre de Jean-Jacques Rousseau sur les spectacles.40

It is not surprising, then, that a feminist perspective on the women’s issue reemerged with the Revolution. The years immediately preceding the storming of the Bastille witnessed a stepped-up circulation of pamphlets and brochures on a host of social and political issues. The woman question was not neglected among them. Madame de Coicy published Les Femmes comme il convient de les voir (1787); Madame Gaçon-Dufour issued her Mémoire pour le sexe feminin contre le sexe masculin (1787). Historian Evelyne Sullerot has discovered other brochures in a Bibliothèque Nationale collection: La Très humble remontrance des femmes françaises (1788); La Requête des femmes à Messieurs composants l’Assemblée des Notables pour leur admission aux Etats-Generaux (undated but probably 1788); and the Lettre au peuple of Olympe de Gouges.41 A document of January 1, 1789, addressed to the king—Pétition des femmes du Tiers Etat au roi—demanded improved educational opportunities for women and insisted that certain occupations be reserved for them “so that we can be able to live, protected from misfortune.”42 The Cahier des doléances et réclamation des femmes, signed Madame B——B——, went further, to demand political rights for those who had fiscal responsibilities: “We believe that it is equally just to collect their grievances, at the foot of the throne; that it is equally just to collect their votes, since they are required, like men, to pay royal taxes and to pay commercial fees.” She demanded not only a better education (“do not raise us as if we were destined for the pleasures of the harem”), but also that the Estates General recognize women’s right to marry according to their individual desires.43

According to the French historian Paule-Marie Duhet, there is clear evidence that these brochures circulated throughout France, passed along by friends and relatives gathering in provincial salons. She notes that their ideas were frequently reproduced.44 The cabiers de doléances, prepared in
1789 by the primary electoral assemblies to inform their representatives to the Estates General of their concerns, reveal that the demand for improved female education was widespread. According to one study of the several hundred edited cabiers, thirty-three recommended a program for girls, although the particular structure and content of this training was not specified. Further, the third estate of Chatellerault sought equality for both sexes. Clearly some women were beginning to protest their imposed silence in public affairs, and their voices were being heard. In the 1789 primary election for the third estate representative from Chevanceaux, women voted, and no one dared prevent them.

The most important feminist publicists of the early years of the Revolution were Condorcet, Olympe de Gouges, Etta Palm d'Aëliders, and Théroigne de Méricourt. Condorcet's "Essai sur l'admission des femmes au droit de cité" appeared in July 1790 and demanded full political equality of the sexes. He did not propose universal suffrage, however, contenting himself with an electorate based on property ownership.

In September 1791, Olympe de Gouges presented her Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne, which she dedicated to the queen. The formulation of both the preamble and the seventeen articles was based on the Declaration of the Rights of Man, to which she demanded the inclusion of the word "woman."

All women are born free and equal to men in rights. Social distinctions must be based solely on the common good ["l'utilité commune"]. . . . The principle of sovereignty resides essentially in the nation, which is the union of women and men. . . . Laws must be the expression of the general will. All female citizens, like all male citizens, must participate personally or through their representatives in their formulation. . . . All female citizens and all male citizens, being equal in the law, must be equally eligible for all dignities, positions, and public offices, according to their abilities, and without any other distinction than that of their virtue and their talents.

To the demands for equal political rights and freedom of opinion and expression, Olympe de Gouges added the demand for greater sexual freedom. She called for a "social contract between a man and a women" to replace the then-current marriage laws. And she was the first to propose a law to permit the establishment of paternity in the case of illegitimate births. "Women have the right to mount the scaffold: they must have the same right to mount the tribune," she concluded. Unfortunately, Olympe de Gouges was to have only the first "right."
Also in 1791, Madame Etta Palm d'Aëliders issued an "Appel aux Françaises," which proposed the establishment of a cohesive federation of women's clubs, one to be located in each of the eighty-three departments. These clubs would take charge of many public welfare concerns, including charity schools, public assistance, and nursing. The following year, Palm and a number of her followers presented a petition to the National Assembly calling for public education for girls, legal majority for girls at age twenty-one, the legalization of divorce, and political and legal equality for the two sexes.

Théroigne de Méricourt had been the first to grasp the significance of female participation in club activities. She had founded the Club des Amis de la Loi in 1790, but this group was short-lived. Next she attempted to organize women to ferret out suspected counterrevolutionaries. She also demanded the right of women to bear arms.

An air of theatricality surrounded these three women feminists. Their social origins were far less lofty than those of the aristocratic Condorcet, and all three created legends to hide their ordinary pasts, just as they all fabricated their noble surnames. Olympe de Gouges was born in Montauban in 1748. Her father was a butcher, although she claimed to be the illegitimate daughter of the poet Le Franc de Pompignan. She married young and was soon widowed. Gouges then moved to Paris and began to write plays, one of which, Zomar et Mirza ou l'heureux naufrage, was performed at the Comédie Française in 1789. Etta Palm was originally from Holland; her life before coming to Paris is unknown, although assuredly not noble. Théroigne de Méricourt was born in Luxembourg and came to Paris as a professional singer. Perhaps partly because of differences of class and style, such luminaries of the "Paris establishment" as Madame Roland and Madame de Staël kept their distance from these outspoken feminists.

At the same time that women like Gouges, Palm, and Méricourt were publicizing feminist demands, a collective female consciousness was developing as a result of women's participation in the Revolution. A few women took part in the disturbances of July 14 and August 4, 1789, but they were notable for their singularity. The "October Days" of that same year, however, were a women's affair, and women participated in important numbers in the Champs de Mars demonstration of 1791. In 1789 the women of the Halles were singing:

A Versail' comme des fanfarons,
N'avions amené nos canons: (bis)
Falloit voir, quoi qu’n’étions qu’des femmes
Un courage qui n’faut pas qu’l’on blâme.⁴⁹

The feminist newspaper *Étrennes nationales des dames* exhibited a similar inspiration, prefacing its demand for representation to the National Assembly with the reminder that “last October 5, Parisian women proved that they were as brave and enterprising as men.” ⁵⁰ A sense of the collective power of women was emerging.

Relatively few women attended the meetings of the predominantly male political clubs which had spread throughout France after 1789. Only the Cordeliers permitted women a public role; but here, too, their participation was limited. When Théroigne de Méricourt asked to be admitted with voting rights, she was refused. The other clubs, including the Jacobins, denied women even the freedom to speak.

Women did participate in politics through the “mixed fraternal societies” which had been created to inform and instruct “passive” citizens—including women—about the actions of the revolutionary government. These societies quickly spread through Paris; in May 1791, they were organized into a single organization under the presidency of François Robert.

In the provinces, however, clubs of entirely female membership were formed, initially to organize the festivals celebrating the federation of formerly autonomous provinces into the new, unified France in the spring of 1790.⁵¹ For the most part, the women in these provincial clubs seemed to have understood their role to be that of auxiliary supporters to the male makers of the Revolution. They organized local festivals and revolutionary celebrations. They instructed themselves and young people—whom they organized into allied youth groups—in civic virtues, for example, by presenting recitations of such important documents as Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Many of the clubs attempted to take charge of education and public assistance, to fill the void left by the dissolution of the convents and monasteries. Following the outbreak of war in 1792, many of the clubs took on the function of workshops, knitting and sewing for the army. Some women in the clubs demanded the right to fight with the armies, and according to Duñet, about thirty women actually did so before this was expressly forbidden in 1793.⁵²

The two elements of female activism of this period—feminist and revolutionary—were joined in the Société des Républicaines-Révolutionnaires, a Parisian women’s club founded in the spring of 1793 by Pauline Léon and Claire Lacombe. At that time, the Republic, still young, was at war and further weakened by internal disension. The more conservative
of the republican legislative parties, the Girondins, were attempting to slow the pace of revolutionary reform in order to pay fuller attention to the war. Jacobins were pushing for controls on prices and supplies of the major commodities and a stepped-up prosecution of the so-called enemies of the Republic. The women of the Société des Républicaines-Révolutionnaires had ties to several groups to the left even of the Jacobins—Enragés in the legislature, Hébertists in the Cordeliers Club, and sans-culottes in the Paris Sections. They supported the Jacobins in the coup ousting the Girondins from power and then kept up a steady pressure on the new government to implement their promises. They pressed for women’s rights, too: on June 2, 1793, Le Moniteur reported that a deputation from the Société des Républicaines-Révolutionnaires demanded the right to deliberate with the Revolutionary Committee; after the Constitution of 1793, which granted universal male suffrage, was passed, the Société protested the exclusion of women.53

By the fall of 1793, however, all the feminist activists found themselves among the political opposition. Thérèse de Mongoncourt, who had ties to the Girondins, was publicly whipped, and her breakdown following this painful humiliation resulted in her incarceration in an insane asylum. Olympe de Gouges, critical of the Terror, was tried and found guilty of treason for publishing a pamphlet calling for a popular referendum on the form of government; she was guillotined on November 1. Finally, the government moved to silence the Société des Républicaines-Révolutionnaires, whose protests against continuing inflation and hoarding had come to appear to be as great a threat from the Left as the Girondins had once seemed to be from the Right.

The prosecution quickly moved from attacking the specific politics of the Société to condemning all women who dared to participate in politics. According to Duhet, the Société “provided a pretext” for the Jacobins: their real aim was to dissolve all women’s organizations.54 Jane Abrahay agrees: “By expanding its target to include all women, of whatever political or apolitical stripe, the Committee of General Security and the Convention made it clear that political questions were merely a pretext. What they wanted to do was to exclude women as a group from public life.” 55 On October 20, 1793, the Société des Républicaines-Révolutionnaires was shut down, along with all other clubs of female membership. According to the French feminist historian and theorist Françoise d’Eaubonne, “If the members of the Convention were worried by the women’s clubs, it was not only because of their affiliation with the Enragés; it was also because women were the most efficient agitators during mass movements due to the inflation in foodstuffs or famine; women, by their position within the
family, were always in the middle of economic problems; housewives could either serve or destroy a revolution." 

Claire Lacombe and Pauline Léon were arrested in the spring of 1794. In May of 1795, when women joined men in the streets to protest the price of bread, the National Assembly responded by excluding women from all aspects of public life: "Be it decreed that all women should retire as formerly it was ordained, into their respective homes; those who, one hour after this decree is promulgated, are found in the streets, gathered in groups of more than five, will be dispersed by armed forces and arrested until public calm is restored in Paris." The violent reaction against feminism, frequently believed to have been inspired by Napoleon, was in fact already in motion by 1793.

With the silencing of the women, feminism ceased to have a significant public outlet. Some isolated instances of feminist writings have been discovered, however. Evelyne Sullerot has found two issues of a feminist journal—L'Athénée des femmes—bearing publication dates of January and February 1806 in the Department of Manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The contents indicate that the editor, Sophie de Senneterre, Madame de Renville, was well aware of a feminist heritage. She wrote, in the centuries-old tradition, that women's inferior education alone condemned them to intellectual inequality. Her express goal was to publish the writings of women and thus provide role models to other women. We do not know, however, whether these two issues were widely circulated. Feminist aspirations were kept alive to a certain extent in the novels of Madame de Staël. Especially in Delphine (1802) and Corinne (1809), de Staël insisted that women, represented by the characters Delphine and Corinna, deserve our sympathy and have a right to seek personal fulfillment. Their plight, according to de Staël, resulted from social restrictions which punish women for manifesting independence—and punish them, what is more, for indiscretions that would be disregarded in a man. But despite these literary expressions of feminist-inspired sentiments, there was no further political expression of feminism nor any organized female collective action for nearly three decades.

Nonetheless, for the long-term development of feminism, these revolutionary years proved extremely important. Before 1789, advocacy of the emancipation of women—or at the least, for greater opportunities for women—had been restricted to the upper classes, and support was usually in the form of approving women's desire for a better education. With the revolutionary upheaval came the rise of a feminism more sweeping in its scope and more inclusive in its following. Feminists not only added new demands to their "program"—the rights of full citizen participation in

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politics and government; the right to work; the right to equality in marriage; and even the right to share the burdens of a nation at war—but they also adopted new methods to obtain their goals. They comprehended that political action was more than a "demand"; it was a means to achieve their demands. They had grasped the potential strength of collective female action. This was an invaluable legacy to the nineteenth century.