

A Woman's Cahier

1789

This grievance was signed by a certain Madame B*** B*** whose identity is unknown. According to contextual evidence, this document followed the convocation of the Estates-General and the call for the collection and presentation of grievances, and its opening in early May 1789. In the royal edict of late January 1789, stipulating the conditions for elections, women of the First and Second Estates (clergy and nobility) were allowed to vote for representatives by proxy; but property-holding women of the Third Estate, widows or adult unmarried daughters, were not. Here Madame B***B*** addresses men, at once praising their potential for vision and justice, but at the same time blaming them for their historical subordination and misuse of women. Her appeal for representation of women by women in the Estates-General is followed by a sharply worded protest against the double standard of sexual morality. For this writer, the personal is highly political.

The dawn breaks, the shadows dissipate; the morning star brightens, the sky lightens . . . its luster is a happy omen.

O supreme being! May this symbol enflame every heart, revive our hope and crown our wishes. How much confidence we have since the monarch manifested his paternal feelings to the people, since he permitted all individuals to bring to him their complaints, to communicate their ideas, to consider and discuss by means of the press every political subject that will soon be considered by the august assembly that is now being organized.

It is in this moment of general revolution that a woman who is astonished by the silence of her sex, which should have so many things to say, so many abuses to combat, so many grievances to present, dares to raise her voice in defense of the common cause. She will plead her case before the tribunal of the nation, whose justice already assures her of success.

Pardon me, o my sex! if I once considered legitimate the yoke under which we have all lived for so many centuries. I was persuaded of your lack of capability and your weaknesses. I did not think those of you in the lower and indigent classes were capable of much else than to weave, sew, and look after the economic needs of the household; among the upper ranks, singing, dancing, music and gambling seemed to be your essential occupations. I did not yet have enough experience to recognize that all these exercises are, on the contrary, only obstacles to the development of genius.

but my eyes have been opened since I have seen, with much surprise and admiration, in this class where—whether due to reason or necessity—men allow women to share their tasks, some hoeing the soil, some guiding the plow, some driving the mail wagon [?]. Others have undertaken long and difficult journeys, for business reasons, in the worst weather.

I will add that in spite of our lack of education, one can nevertheless point to a number of women who have offered the public useful and illuminating productions. (Note: one can read with pleasure the works of Madame Dacier, Madame des Houlières, Madame du Bocage; Madame la marquise du Chatelet, mademoiselle de Lussan, etc.) Finally, have we not seen women hold the reins of government with as much wisdom and care as majesty? (Note: of this number we can mention Elizabeth, queen of England; Catherine, wife of Peter the Great; Tsarina Catherine II, presently reigning; and Marie, queen of Portugal.)

What else is needed to prove that we have a right to complain about the education we are given, about the prejudices that make us slaves, and about the injustice with which we are plucked at birth (at least in some provinces) of the goods that nature and equity should assure us.

They say that the Negroes will be freed. The people, who are enslaved nearly as much as they are, will enter into their rights. We owe these benefits to philosophy, which has enlightened the nation. Could it be possible that philosophy would be mute with regard to our situation, or rather that men, deaf to its voice and insensitive to its light, would persist in rendering us victims of their pride and injustice?

O deputies of the nation, I invoke your aid! May you be penetrated by the same feelings that animate me and by the necessity to insure, by the influence of your enlightenment and the wisdom of your deliberations, the success of my rightful grievances.

You will surely not disappoint me; I have as my guarantee the support of a great number of enlightened citizens who have placed their future in your hands, as well as the obligation you have contracted to reform the abuses and absurd and atrocious prejudices that dishonor the French monarchy.

It is in this confidence that I dare to take up the defense of my sex, and that I timidly take up my pen for the first time, encouraged by the importance of my cause.

My claims may at first seem ill-considered; *the admission of women to the Estates-General* is, one may think, *inconceivably and ridiculously pretentious*. Never have women been admitted to the councils of kings and republics. Moreover, even sovereign queens who since Semiramus have governed states have only admitted man to their councils. The motto of women must be *work, obey, and shut up*.

This is certainly a system worthy of such centuries of ignorance, when the strongest have made the laws, subordinating the weakest. But today, enlightenment and reason have demonstrated the absurdity of all this.

We do not aspire to the honors of government, or to the advantages of being initiated to the secrets of ministries. But we believe that it is entirely equitable to allow women, widows or girls who possess land or other properties, to bring their grievances to the foot of the throne, and that it is also just to collect their votes, because they are obligated, just as are men, to pay the royal taxes and to fulfill the engagements of commerce.

It may be alleged that all that would be possible to accord them, is to permit them to be represented by proxy, at the Estates-Generals.

We reply that inasmuch as it has been demonstrated that a noble cannot be represented by a commoner [*roturier*], nor a commoner by a noble, by the same token a man cannot represent a woman. The representatives should have absolutely the same interests as those represented: therefore women should be represented only by women.

But if they [women] do not succeed in making themselves heard, if the government's politics prevails over justice, if all access to the depositories of their destiny is prohibited, oh virtuous and sensitive citizens, at least take account of the iniquity that follows from the prejudices which render women victims and, moreover, the blame for the disorderly conduct of your own sex, which by their efforts, their ruses, their black perversity have managed to take advantage of women, to abuse their credulity by promises, to subjugate them by vows, to triumph over their weaknesses, their inexperience, and their virtue.

Prejudice stamps on women's foreheads an ineffaceable mark of ignominy, while the infamous conqueror is applauded for his success, is glorified by the tears he has made her shed, the traps he has laid for innocence, and by the shame and unhappiness of his unfortunate victim.

Perverse and unjust men! Why do you require more firmness from us than you yourselves are capable? Why do you impose on us the law of dishonor, when by your maneuvering you have managed to arouse our feelings and obtain our consent? What right do you have to pretend that we must resist your pressing desires, when you have not even the courage to control your own disorderly passions?

Ah! there is no doubt that such a prejudice is unworthy of a good constitution; it would revolt any nation less frivolous and more systematically devoted to principles.

But what means can one employ to establish an equilibrium between two sexes formed of the same clay, experiencing the same sensations, that the hand of the creator has made for one another, who worship the same god, and who obey the same sovereign? And why is it that the law is not the same for both? Why does one sex have everything and the other one nothing?

Taken from: <http://www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/Readings-Open/Reading-FrRevol-WomansCahier-1789.htm>

SOURCE: *Cahiers des doléances et réclamations des femmes, par madame B*** B***, Pays de Caux, 1789*, reprinted in *Cahiers de doléances des femmes en 1759 et autres textes*, translated by Karen Offen (Paris, 1981), 47–51.