

Women's Petition to the National Assembly

1789

This petition was addressed to the National Assembly sometime after the October 1789 march of women on Versailles. The authors were clearly well acquainted with the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, as well as with the many prior publications about the historical accomplishments of celebrated women. They were also conversant with the concept of "genre" (gender), understood as society's construction of sexual difference.

Nosseigneurs,

It is altogether astonishing that, having gone so far along the path of reforms, and having cut down (as the illustrious d'Alembert once put it), a very large part of the forest of prejudices, you would leave standing the oldest and most general of all abuses, the one which excludes the most beautiful and most lovable half of the inhabitants of this vast kingdom from positions, dignities, honors, and especially from the right to sit amongst you.

What! you have generously decreed equality of rights for all individuals; you have made the humble inhabitant of the hovel march alongside the princes and lords of the earth. Thanks to your paternal solicitude the poor villager is no longer obliged to grovel before the proud seigneur of his parish; the unfortunate vassal can halt in his tracks the impetuous boar that piteously ravaged his crops; the timid soldier dares to complain when he is run down by the splendid coach of the superb publican; the modest priest can sit down in ease at the table of his most illustrious and most reverend superior; . . . the black African will no longer find himself compared to a stupid animal which, goaded by the prod of a fierce driver, irrigates our furrows with his sweat and blood. Talent, disengaged from the sorrowful confines of ignoble birth, can be developed with confidence, and he who possesses it will no longer be forced to bow and scrape to get the support of an imbecile protector, to burn incense to an ignorant Creseus and to "monseigneur" a goat. At last, thanks to your good influence, a serene day will break above our heads, a new people, a people of citizens, wise and happy, will raise itself on the ruins of a barbarous people, and the stupified earth will witness the birth upon its very bosom of this golden age, this time of good fortune that until now only existed in the fabulous descriptions of the poets.

Ah! our masters! will we then be the only ones for whom the iron age will forever exist . . . ? Will we be the only ones who will not participate in this astonishing regeneration that will renew the face of France and revive its youthfulness like that of the eagle?

You have broken the scepter of despotism, you have pronounced the beautiful axiom [that] . . . the French are a free people. Yet still you allow thirteen million slaves shamefully to wear the irons of thirteen million despots! You have devined the true equality of rights—and you still unjustly withhold them from the sweetest and most interesting half among you! . . .

Finally, you have decreed that the path to dignities and honors should be open without prejudice to all talents; yet you continue to throw up insurmountable barriers to our own! Can you think, then, that nature, this mother who is so generous to all her children, has been stingy to us, and that she only grants her graces and favors to our pitiless tyrants? Open the great book of the past and see what illustrious women have done in all ages, the honor of their provinces, the glory of our sex, and judge what we would be capable of, if your blind presumption, your masculine aristocracy, did not incessantly chain down our courage, our wisdom, and our talents. [Here follows six pages on women's contributions: Ed.]

Ah! our masters; do not henceforth leave in ignominious darkness these qualities, which are so glorious for us and of such great interest to the nation. Dare this very day to alter in our favor the old injustices of your sex; give us the possibility to work like you and with you for the glory and happiness of the French people, and if, as we hope, you consent to share your empire with us, we will no longer owe this precious advantage to our attractiveness; and your own susceptibility to it, but solely to your justice, to our talents, and to the sacredness of your laws.

Wherefore, we depose the following proposal for a decree that we believe has bearing on the subject:

Proposal for a Decree

The National Assembly, wishing to reform the greatest and most universal of abuses, and to repair the wrongs of a six-thousand-year long injustice, has decreed and decrees as follows:

- 1) All the privileges of the male sex are entirely and irrevocably abolished throughout France;
- 2) The feminine sex will always enjoy the same liberty, advantages, rights, and honors as does the masculine sex;
- 3) The masculine gender (*genre*) will no longer be regarded, even grammatically, as the more noble *genre*, given that all genders, all sexes, and all beings should be and are equally noble;

- 4) That no one will henceforth insert in acts, contracts, obligations, etc., this clause, so common but so insulting for women: *That the wife is authorized by her husband before those present*, because in the household both parties should enjoy the same power and authority;
- 5) That wearing breeches will no longer be the exclusive prerogative of the male sex, but each sex will have the right to wear them in turn;
- 6) When a soldier has, out of cowardice, compromised French honor, he will no longer be degraded as is the present custom, by making him wear women's clothing; but as the two sexes are and must be equally honorable in the eyes of humanity, he will henceforth be punished by declaring his gender to be neuter.
- 7) All persons of the feminine sex must be admitted without exception to the district and departmental assemblies, elevated to municipal responsibilities and even as deputies to the National Assembly, when they fulfill the requirements set forth in the electoral laws. They will have both consultative and deliberative voices . . . ;
- 8) They can also be appointed as Magistrates. There is no better way to reconcile the public with the courts of justice than to seat beauty and to see the graces presiding there;
- 9) The same applies to all positions, compensations, and military dignities. In this way the French will be truly invincible, when their courage is inspired by the joint themes of glory and love; we do not even make exception for the staff of a marshal of France; so that justice can be rendered equally, we order this instrument to be passed alternatively between men and women;
- 10) Nor do we hesitate to open the sanctuary to the feminine sex, which has so long rightly been referred to as the devoted sex. But since the piety of the faithful has noticeably diminished, said sex promises and obligates itself, when it mounts the chair of truth, to moderate its zeal and not make excessive demands on the attention of the audience.

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