

# ***The Awakening and Challenges of Women's Rights: A Comparative Study under the Influence of the American Revolution and the French Revolution***

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**Abstract:** Both the American Revolution and the French Revolution saw the emergence of women's rights in the modern West to a certain extent. Although both the French Revolution and the American Revolution were characterised by the struggle for women's rights, there were notable differences in the specific ways, times, and challenges they faced. This paper compares the emancipatory effects of the two revolutions on women and the independent links between women's emancipation in the local social and political contexts. It reveals that women's emancipation in the modern West was influenced by the unique internal structure of each country's society at the time. It is revealed that during the French Revolution, women's struggle for rights was more centred on the domestic and social level than on direct participation in the political decision-making process due to the development of capitalism in France. Conversely, women in the American Revolution were more concerned with political, legal, and social issues. This essay will examine the chronology of the pre-revolutionary, revolutionary, and post-revolutionary periods, with a focus on the differing national and revolutionary contexts of the two countries, the varying status of women, and the divergent approaches to the fight for women's rights.

**Keywords:** American Revolution, French Revolution, Women's Rights, Gender Equality

## **1. Introduction**

In the United States and France during the 18th century, the status of women was generally low. Prior to the French Revolution, French women were frequently subjected to unequal treatment within the home and faced numerous limitations within society. Similarly, American women were accorded a relatively low status in society, particularly in the political sphere. Although some women did exert influence, as a whole they did not enjoy a high status. Against the backdrop of women's oppression, both countries embarked on a quest for women's emancipation in the 18th century. Although both countries commenced their quest in the 18th century, there were intrinsic differences between them.

Although women in the United States and France both began to awaken and fight for their rights in the 18th century, the women's rights movement in the United States seems to have taken shape earlier and been more active and successful in its subsequent development. In addition, French women gained the right to vote on equal terms with men much later than in the United States. These

differences reflect the differences in historical development, cultural background, and social structure between the two countries.

## **2. Women's activities in both countries and the context in which they take place**

### **2.1. The American**

Before 1789, women's rights had never been included in the history of mankind. Similarly, after the triumph of the French Revolution and the American Revolution, both countries began to call for the 'equality of all men' from social consciousness to legal documents, but women were coincidentally excluded at the same time. The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America emphasized the right of all men to be born equal, including the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness [1]. However, in the social context of that time, women were generally regarded as subordinate to men and their rights and status were restricted. Therefore, this declaration does not explicitly mention gender equality or women's rights.

Despite the absence of legal recognition, women have commenced to assume their civic responsibilities and to take action. On the military front, about 20,000 women served in the Continental Army, and they followed the army to the north and south, making important contributions to the independence of North America. Not only did these women play traditional roles in the barracks, such as nurses, seamstresses, and cooks, but some brave women even fought directly in the battles [2]. In addition, many women stayed at home to look after the farm or the family business, while learning new skills and taking on extra work.

With regard to social and political participation, the American Revolution saw some advancement of women's political rights. Despite women's activities in the political sphere and their decline after the founding of the country and before the Civil War, the beginning of allowing women to vote in New Jersey in 1776 shows an increase in women's participation in the public sphere. But women's rights were not included in the 1787 Constitution or the Bill of Rights, which resulted in the virtual legal exclusion of American women [3].

### **2.2. The French**

Similarly, the Declaration of the Rights of Man in the French Revolution laid the foundations of bourgeois democracy, but this 'human right' actually referred to 'male power' [2]. In fact, at this time, the French rulers paid very little attention to women as individuals, and even defined women only in terms of their relationship with men. Because the Declaration of Human Rights was formed on the basis of the development of the theory of natural law in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, during which time gender inequality prevailed in European society, and women's social status and rights were far inferior to men's. The Declaration of Human Rights was formulated on the foundation of the outcomes of the evolution of the theory of natural law in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this period, gender inequality was a pervasive feature of European society, with the social status and rights of women being considerably inferior to those of men. The Declaration of Human Rights failed to acknowledge the legitimate rights and interests of women as natural human beings. French women are still regarded as subordinate to men [4]. Under such circumstances, women's struggle for their own interests and emancipation became particularly important.

The French Revolution provided the political ground for the feminist movement, and the idea of 'freedom and equality' promoted women's participation in political and social activities. On July 14, 1789, women joined men to take over the Bastille, the first large-scale action by women in the history of France, and then women also participated in the attack on Versailles. The struggle for Versailles. This shows that women played a positive role in the revolution.

Although women were involved in public and political activities as a backbone in the early years of the revolution, their presence and endeavors were also restricted and excluded. For example, there were decrees that regarded women's participation in political activities as a treasonable offence and required all women to return to their homes to await new orders. In addition, the National Assembly issued a decree stipulating that women could participate in social activities only if their husbands and children were present, which led to the closure of the 'Revolutionary Republican Women's Civic Club' on October 30 [5].

In the face of these challenges, women continued to make important contributions during the revolution. Not only did they participate in the uprisings and demonstrations, which were the backbone of the Revolution, but they also played an integral role in the festivities, emphasizing the importance of women's 'civic duty' to the Republic. However, despite the fact that women began to participate more actively in social activities, their political rights were still limited, and even after the victory of the revolution, women's activities were still subject to male control in terms of their activities.

An initial comparison of women's activities in the two revolutions and the contexts in which they took place reveals the similarities between the two regions in the pursuit of the concepts of freedom and equality, as well as the unique political culture and social geography of each.

### **2.3. The Difference**

During the French Revolution, the role and status of women underwent significant changes. Although the French Revolution was labelled as 'human rights', it was actually against women's enjoyment of the same rights, which directly triggered women's struggle for their own interests and emancipation. As the revolution progressed, the feminist movement developed to a certain extent. During this period, women began to pay attention to current affairs and even voiced the pursuit of equality between men and women and expressed their enthusiasm to participate in social and political life. In addition, famous thinkers such as Condorcet and Olympe de Gouge represented feminism during the French Revolution. They defended women's right to political representation and equal opportunities in education, and established the so-called 'universalist' feminism [5].

In contrast, during the American Revolution, American women emphasized the values of freedom and equality. The American Revolution was seen as a great political revolution aimed at overthrowing British colonial rule and establishing a new nation based on the principles of freedom. In their quest for freedom and equality, American women were equally involved in this revolution, although their role in society may not have been as prominent or as widely publicized as it was during the French Revolution.

Both the French Revolution and the American Revolution were called for by Enlightenment ideas, and both attempted to break down old societal ideas and gender role limitations. However, the two countries differed markedly in the nature of their revolutions and social ideas. During the French Revolution, women's participation and the development of the feminist movement faced significant challenges but still made some progress. The American Revolution, on the other hand, focused more on the goals of liberation from colonial rule and the creation of a new nation.

### **3. Combination of women's emancipation and social revolution in both countries**

During the two revolutions, the women's movement in each country took action for the emancipation of women based on their respective social trends, among other factors. During the American Revolution, women gradually became actively involved in the struggle for freedom and equality, expressing their quest for equal rights through the publication of documents such as the Declaration of Sentiments. This was adopted at the first women's rights convention in the United States, and it

drew on the wording of the American Declaration of Independence to emphasize the equal and inalienable rights of men and women. The declaration stated that women, like men, were endowed with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Declaration criticizes the deprivation of women's rights by men, including the right to vote, the right to have a say in the making of laws, the right to property, etc., and demands that women be immediately granted the same civil rights as men.

In the Declaration of Sentiments, women's rights were enshrined in several key areas: the right to education, the right to property, the right to equality in marriage, and the right to participate in government. Its passage marked the beginning of the women's suffrage movement in the United States and laid the groundwork for subsequent women's rights movements.

In contrast, during the French Revolution, although women were equally involved in social and political activities, their efforts to fight for their rights were more centered on the domestic and social levels than on direct participation in the political decision-making process. At the time of the French Revolution, men believed that women should be chaste, homemakers, and focus their lives on raising children and caring for their husbands, rather than being socially active. Olympe de Gouge, a female representative of the French Revolution, argued for the equality of women and men, starting with the marriage relationship. The Declaration of the Rights of Women directly challenged the discrimination against women in the Declaration of Human Rights by arguing for a reform of the institution of marriage, advocating for the equality of men and women in marriage, and demanding that the law protect the rights of women and children rights [6]. She suggested that women's roles and responsibilities in society should not justify their exclusion from democratic rights, that gender differences were used to rationalize women's subordination, and that true equality and democracy should eliminate the injustices caused by these differences.

Although the two revolutions differed in their development of women's emancipation, both reflect the influence of Enlightenment thinking - the values of freedom and equality. Both revolutions contributed to some extent to women's reflection on their status and rights and enlightened women's feminist consciousness. Condorcet on women as Citizens argued for equality between men and women, and he argued that if rights are universal, then they should apply to all adults, including women. He opposed the denial of political rights to women simply because of their sex and pointed out that such discrimination was customary injustice. He argued that the difference between men and women was not a difference in ability but a product of society and education. He emphasizes that women, like men, are sentient beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and reasoning, and therefore they have the same rights. While Condorcet's discourse focuses more on rational and philosophical analyses, and the declaration of the Seneca Falls Conference focuses more on political and social reforms, De Gouge's declaration contains specific criticisms of the society of the time and suggests some concrete reforms in life.

#### **4. The trajectory of women's rights in post-revolutionary countries**

Following the French Revolution, which saw the French people embark on a path of emancipation in pursuit of freedom of marriage, there were significant changes in the status of women in terms of the institution of marriage and the role of the family. These changes led to an increase in the active role of women in society. The Constitution and laws of the French Revolution clearly declared that 'marriage is a secular contract', which was recognized in the French Civil Code of 1804. This change meant that marriage was no longer a social contract based on religious rites, but a secular contract based on the consent and equality of the man and the woman. This change of mindset opened up new possibilities for women's role in the family, which was no longer limited to the traditional model of the 'good wife and mother'. At the same time, the political arena of the Revolution created the conditions for women to enter the public sphere, leading to the emergence of women's revolutionary

practice and feminist ideology, and enabling them to play more diverse and independent roles in the family and society according to their own wishes and abilities.

As the twentieth century progressed, France continued to introduce legal and social policy reforms to promote gender equality. In 1974, for example, then-President Destin created the post of Secretary of State for Women's Affairs with the aim of promoting the advancement of women, facilitating their access to positions at all levels of French society and eliminating any discrimination to which they might be subjected[7].

At the end of the twentieth century, France adopted a constitutional amendment that explicitly emphasized women's equal rights with men and radically improved the status of women in society in symbolic terms. In addition, France has endeavored to apply the concept of 'parity between men and women' to all aspects of legislative elections. For example, the Act on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women in Running for Office provides for a quota system for candidate lists, which requires that 50 percent or more of the candidates on each party's local election lists must be women, and that the party concerned will be required to pay a fine if it fails to meet the 48 percent quota [8]. These measures have not only improved the environment for women's political participation, but also promoted women's participation and advancement in the political arena.

However, in the United States, the advancement of women's rights is reflected more in political power than in social and family roles. After the American Revolution, American women's development in politics has gone through a process from nothing to something, gradually fighting for their rights. During the War of Independence, American women changed the prejudice against women at the time and improved their status by participating in war support work. As a result of this war, American women no longer subscribed to the traditional notion that women were the dominant force in the home and men were the dominant force outside the home, and women began to be allowed to vote in some areas.

In the 20th century, the political status of women in the United States improved significantly, and in 1920, American women finally won the right to vote, even half a century later than the black male suffrage, an achievement that marked an important advance in the political power of women in the United States. American women have become increasingly aware of their political participation, and more and more women are demanding to participate in political life. Despite the challenges of gender politics, such as 13 female presidential candidates made 16 attempts between 1872 and 2008 [9]. All ended in failure, but American women's struggle for political power never stopped. By the end of the 20th century, the United States gave birth to the first female Supreme Court Justice in history, Sandra Day O'Connor, which marked a major breakthrough for American women in the political field.

The development of American women in politics has been a long and difficult process. From limited participation during the War of Independence, to the struggle for the right to vote in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the adoption of the constitutional amendment in 1920, American women have made remarkable progress in political participation and social status. This process not only reflects the evolution of the concept of gender equality in American society, but also demonstrates the awakening of women's self-awareness and their efforts to fight for their rights.

## 5. Conclusion

As can be seen, the feminist movement in both countries underwent a shift from focusing on the right to vote to advocating for broader social, economic, and educational rights. At the conclusion of the American Revolution, the United States emerged as a nation with the autonomy to determine its own destiny and a democratic political system. Consequently, the feminist movement initially focused on the campaign for the right to vote in order to establish popular control of the government. This subsequently broadened to encompass access to education, employment opportunities and the redefinition of family roles. Although French women did not gain the right to vote and stand for



election on an equal footing with men until 1945, they gradually gained the right to political rights and education. This began with the advancement of the family through marriage, and to a certain extent contributed to the development of French capitalism.

The struggle for women's rights in these two periods reflects the characteristics and challenges of women's liberation movements in different historical contexts and social structures. These contradictions and conflicts had a profound impact on bourgeois democratic thought. On the one hand, they reveal the limitations of bourgeois democratic thought, namely, the pursuit of freedom and equality, while ignoring the importance of gender equality. On the other hand, these contradictions and conflicts have also promoted the development of the feminist movement, prompting people to re-examine and reflect on bourgeois democratic thought and explore a more comprehensive and inclusive concept of democracy.

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