

WOMEN IN FRENCH REVOLUTION: THE KNITTING WOMEN AND THE REIGN OF TERROR

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ABSTRACT

The French Revolution was one which happened between 1789 and 1799, and which influenced France's history as well as world history. This revolution first started against the Bourbon dynasty that ruled France. In France, society was chiefly divided into three categories: The First Estate that included the clergy, the Second Estate which comprised the landowners, and the Third Estate which consisted of common people. Of these, while the burden of tax fell completely on the ordinary people of the third estate, the other two categories enjoyed many privileges just like the royal family. The common man had to pay tax to the lords and the clergy. The wars during the reign of Louis XVI had adversely affected the economy of France. Excessive tax burden, poverty, joblessness etc. created discontent in the people. The dawn of an educated middle-class section marked the beginning of the spread of new ideas. The ideas of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu led to decentralisation of power, democracy, and the spread of ideas like liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Keywords: Women, French Revolution, Knitting, Reign, Terror



1. INTRODUCTION

Louis XVI's summoning of an assembly of the three estates in order to impose more taxes set the ground for the revolution. The estate of the commons left this meeting which was called the General Assembly, and they proclaimed themselves as the National Assembly. This incident known as the Tennis Court Revolution, started the rebellion against the Bourbon dynasty. On July 14, 1789, the revolutionaries attacked the Court of Bastille which was the symbol of monarchy and freed the political prisoners there. They continued to revolt against food scarcity, and this spread to many parts of Paris. On October 5, 1789, a mass revolt, mainly consisting of women, marched to Versailles Palace, and attacked the palace. This revolt known as October Days marked the end of the reign of Louis XVI.

There were two main groups in the Legislative assembly formed in 1791. Girondists and Jacobins. Landlords who were against the revolution protested against this section. Austria, Hungary, Holland, Russia, Spain and Britain formed an alliance army to bring back autocracy in France, and they attacked France. Louis XIV was held responsible for this foreign interference, and he along with his dynasty/ royal family were imprisoned. In 1792, a national convention was formed in France. In this period, the Jacobins had more influence and power in the convention. They used the guillotine to kill everyone who was against the revolution, and Louis XVI, the queen, and the royal family members fell prey to this.

It is in this period known as the Reign of Terror that women called Tricoteuse are mentioned about.

Women had a big role in the French revolution. In order to spread revolutionary ideas in many places, they were in the forefront in participating in revolts, and conducting marches. The French Revolution gave women a previously unheard-of, albeit precarious, platform to participate in politics. Women in Paris and the provinces petitioned legislatures, imposed price restrictions, marched, established clubs, and wrote political writings during the first few months of 1789 and the second year. However, the same ground breaking terminology that made "the rights of man" universal was swiftly repurposed to regulate sexual difference and keep women in the home. This essay follows that trajectory from mobilization to exclusion while emphasizing how women nevertheless changed family life and political culture, leaving a nuanced legacy for contemporary citizenship.

The entry of women into politics was not marginal nor sporadic. A repertoire of crowd action that was based on women's daily duties as home producers and neighbourhood organizers was solidified during the October Days of 5–6, 1789, when market women led thousands to Versailles to demand bread and accountability. Subsistence politics and constitutional demands were intertwined as women insisted on petitioning the delegates and accompanying the royal family back to Paris, as evidenced by contemporary accounts and subsequent social histories. This mobilization was the outward manifestation of regular female involvement in popular politics, not an anomaly.

Women's activism spread from the streets to institutions between 1792 and 1793. In addition to monitoring bakers and butchers and attending sectoral meetings, they also started political clubs, the most well-known of which was the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, which was created in May 1793 by militants like Pauline Leon and Claire Lacombe. Its rules, which were based on those of men's clubs, required women to be acknowledged as full members of the Republican Party and to swear allegiance to civic virtue, public order, and revolutionary vigilance. Members of the Society protected the sans-culotte moral economy, police markets, and faced down speculators. Later, during the Reign of Terror, women were excluded from the public arena, especially from formal institutions and popular politics. Women knitting beside the guillotine is a cultural myth that symbolises their exclusion.

The gender discrimination against women that prevailed in Europe ultimately was strong in France as well. Women were looked upon as second sex. None of the rights promised by the Declaration of Rights were available for women. However, there were enlightened women in France in those days who were aware of their needs and rights, and at the same time women who were only conscious of their existence. Women spoke about their rights in the pamphlets connected to the revolution. Rights of a citizen is something that was highlighted in the pamphlets made by women. Many women's clubs were formed between 1789 and 1793. In the initial days, the women members were from the middle class, and relatives of revolutionaries. Initially, the main aim of these clubs was charity. However, all of them turned radical after 1792, and began to strongly influence political life.

When they began to notice the increasing political influence of women, the Jacobin club excluded them from their right to be part of the meetings of the National Convention. Protesting against this side-lining from political powers and rights of citizens, women began to lay chairs and sit in the places of public execution, knitting wool. They knitted the symbols of the revolution called Liberty Caps and sold them, and sometimes even sold chairs to those who came to witness the execution, thus marking their protest. The square of the revolution became a centre where they could see justices carried out publicly.

2. CONCLUSION

Knitting women known as Tricoteuse were considered symbols of domestic labour and political violence during the time of the French revolution. They had connections with the Reign of Terror that prevailed in France from 1793 to 1794. The pictures of these women who sat beside the guillotine watching death punishment, depicted the kind of gender justice that prevailed in France those days, more than the cruelty of women and the position women held in the power hierarchy, or in other words, how they were excluded from power. Knitting guillotine was an act of survival and assertion. After the revolution, they were portrayed by artists and writers in different ways. Madame Defarge in *A Tale Of Two Cities* is an example.

The Revolution restructured the field on which gender and citizenship would be debated rather than outright emancipating or repressing women. Despite lawmakers denying them the ability to vote and political affiliation, women marched, passed unofficial laws, upheld morality in public spaces, authored texts that guaranteed their rights, and fought for their families. Although the prohibition of women's clubs in October 1793 sparked a strong backlash, it was unable to eradicate the customs and languages of citizenship that women had already claimed. By incorporating women into the

fabric of contemporary politics and law through acts like petitioning, policing provisioning, public speaking, publishing, and suing, the "rights of man" could never again be claimed without taking into account the claims of women.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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