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CONDORCET

Political Writings

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On the emancipation of women.
On giving women the right
of citizenship (1790)

Habit can so familiarise men with violations of their natural rights that those who have lost them neither think of protesting nor believe they are unjustly treated.

Some of these violations even escaped the notice of the philosophers and legislators who enthusiastically established the rights common to all members of the human race, and made these the sole basis of political institutions.

Surely they were all violating the principle of equal rights by debarring women from citizenship rights, and thereby calmly depriving half of the human race of the right to participate in the formation of the laws. Could there be any stronger evidence of the power of habit over enlightened men than the picture of them invoking the principle of equal rights for three or four hundred men who had been deprived of equal rights by an absurd prejudice, and yet forgetting it with regard to 12 million women?

For this exclusion not to constitute an act of tyranny, we would have to prove that the natural rights of women are not exactly the same as those of men, or else that they are incapable of exercising them.

The rights of men stem exclusively from the fact that they are sentient beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning upon them. Since women have the same qualities, they necessarily also have the same

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rights. Either no member of the human race has any true rights, or else they all have the same ones; and anyone who votes against the rights of another, whatever his religion, colour or sex, automatically forfeits his own.

It would be difficult to prove women incapable of exercising the right of citizenship. Why should people who experience pregnancies and monthly indispositions be unable to exercise rights we would never refuse to men who have gout every winter or who catch cold easily? People argue that, differences in education apart, men are still naturally more intelligent than women; but this is far from being proven, and would have to be before women could justly be deprived of a natural right. Even if we did accept it, their superiority would consist in just two points. It is said that no woman has ever made an important scientific discovery, or shown signs of genius in the arts or in literature, and so on, but we would hardly attempt to limit citizenship rights only to men of genius. It is also said that no woman has the same breadth of knowledge, or the same power of reason, as certain men; but this simply means that, with the exception of a small class of very enlightened men, there is complete equality between women and all other men; and that, this small class apart, both sexes have an equal share of inferior and superior minds. It would be quite absurd to limit the right of citizenship and the ability to discharge public functions to the superior class. Why, then, should we exclude women, rather than those men who are inferior to a great many women?

People also claim that there are certain qualities in a woman's mind or heart which should debar her from the enjoyment of her natural rights. Let us study the facts. Queen Elizabeth of England, Maria-Theresa and the two Catherines of Russia all proved that women lack neither strength of mind nor the courage of their convictions.

Elizabeth had all the pettiness of women; but was this any more damaging to her reign than the pettiness of her father or her successor was to theirs? Did the lovers of some empresses exert a more dangerous influence than the mistresses of Louis XIV, Louis XV or even Henri IV?

Would Mistress Macaulay not have argued better in the House of Commons than many of the representatives of the British nation? During the discussion of freedom of conscience, would she not have emerged as more principled and more intelligent than Pitt? Although she is as much a supporter of freedom as Mr Burke is of tyranny, her defence of the French constitution would never have resorted to the revoltingly absurd gibberish with which this famous rhetorician has just attacked

it. Would Montaigne's adopted daughter not have defended the rights of citizens in the French States of 1614 better than Councillor Courtin, who believed in sorcery and the power of the occult? Was not the princess of the Ursins rather better than Chamillard? Could the marquise du Châtelet not have written a dispatch just as well as M. Rouillé? Would Mme de Lambert have accepted such absurd and barbarous laws as those passed by d'Armenonville, the Keeper of the Seals, against Protestants, thieving servants, smugglers and negroes? Men have no real reason to be so proud when they cast their eyes over the list of those who have governed them.¹

¹ The people mentioned in this paragraph are:

Catherine Gambridge Macaulay (Graham), 1731–91. Radical and republican. She published a *History of England* in 1763 which was well received in France when translated in 1791. Visited America in 1785 for the express purpose of greeting George Washington, whom she greatly admired. She published anonymously *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke on the Revolution in France, in a letter to the Earl of Stanhope* in 1790.

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was published in 1790.

Marie le Jars de Gournay, 1566–1645. Admirer of Montaigne, whose *Essais* she re-edited in 1595. Author of *L'Ombre de Mademoiselle de Gournay*, a collection of verse and essays.

Councillor Courtin is probably Germain Courtin, Seigneur de Monsel, 1587–1667, a prolific writer on 'medical' matters who was made Conseiller d'Etat in 1624.

Marie-Anne de la Tremoille, princesse des Ursins, 1642–1722. Played an important role in Spanish politics through her intrigues at the court of Philip V until 1714 when she was dismissed by the new queen.

Michel de Chamillard, 1651–1721. Became Minister of Finance in 1699 and Minister of War in 1701. Resigned 1708 and 1709. Owed his offices to Mme de Maintenon, who wished the king to be surrounded by nonentities. An honest and inoffensive man, he protested to Louis XIV that he was incapable of holding these offices, but Louis promised to support him. A contemporary rumour on the reason for his elevation was expressed as follows:

Ci-gît le fameux Chamillard
De son roi le protonotaire
Qui fut un héros au billard
Un zéro dans le ministère

This can be paraphrased as

Here lies Chamillard the great
The Royal Minister of State
At billiards, a hero –
As minister, zero.

Emilie le Tonnelier de Breteuil, marquise de Châtelet, 1706–49. Talented and enthusiastic scientist, author of several books. Exercised an important influence on Voltaire, whom she entertained in her chateau.

Antoine-Louis Rouillé, comte de Jouy, 1689–1761. Held various *parlementary* and royal offices, including Commissioner for Marine and Indian Affairs 1744–54. Nominally

Women are more gentle and more domestic than men. Like men, they know how to love freedom, even though they do not share in all its advantages, and, in republics, they have often sacrificed themselves in its cause: they have shown the virtues of true citizens whenever chance or civil unrest have brought them onto a stage which male pride and tyranny have generally prevented them from mounting.

It has been said that, despite a great deal of intelligence and wisdom, as well as the rational abilities of a subtle dialectician, women have never based their conduct on what is called reason.

This is quite untrue. They may never have behaved according to the reason of men; but they do behave according to their own reason.

By the fault of the laws, their interests are not the same as ours; nor do they consider the same things important. But the fact that they base their conduct on different principles and set themselves different aims does not mean that they are irrational. It is as reasonable for a woman to concern herself with her facial charms as it was for Demosthenes to cultivate his voice and gestures.

It has been said that, despite being better than men, gentler, more sensitive and less subject to the vices of egoism and hard-heartedness, women have no real idea of justice and follow their feelings rather than their conscience. There is more truth in this observation, but it still proves nothing since this difference is caused, not by nature, but by education and society which accustom women, not to the idea of justice, but to that of decency. They have no experience of business, or of any matter which is decided by positive laws or rigorous principles of justice; the areas which concern them and where they are active are precisely those which are governed by feelings and natural decency. It is quite unfair to justify continuing to refuse women the enjoyment of their natural rights on grounds which are plausible only precisely because they do not enjoy these rights.

If we accepted such arguments against women, we would also have to deny citizenship rights to anyone who was obliged to work constantly

responsible for the French-Austrian Treaty of 1756. Described as uninspiring but virtuous.

Anne Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, Madame de Lambert, 1647–1733. Author of several works, including essays on morality and education. Hostess of a famous salon frequented by Marivaux, Fénelon and Montesquieu.

Joseph-Jean-Baptiste Fleuriau d'Armenonville, died 1728. Appointed Director-General of Finance by his brother-in-law in 1702. Keeper of the Seals, 1702, dismissed in 1727. Regarded as competent but not brilliant.

and could therefore neither become enlightened nor exercise his reason. Before long, citizenship would be open only to men who had completed a course of public law. The necessary consequence of accepting these arguments is the renunciation of a free constitution. All aristocracies were formed or justified by this kind of pretext; the etymology of the word proves as much.

We cannot justify the exclusion by saying that women are dependent on their husbands, because we could destroy this tyrannical civil law at the same time. One injustice must never become a reason to commit another.

There are therefore just two obligations to discuss, and these oppose exclusion only with reasons of utility, which cannot counterbalance a true right. The opposite claim has too often served as a pretext and excuse for tyrants: it is in the name of utility that trade and industry are fettered and Africans enslaved. It was in the name of public utility that the Bastille was filled, that books were censored, that judicial proceedings were kept secret and that people were tortured. But we shall discuss these objections, so that nothing remains unanswered.

People claim that women's influence on men would be a threat.

But this influence, like any other, is far more of a threat if it acts in secret than if it acts in a public debate. Besides, any influence particular to women would lose all the more by becoming public, because any influence which extends beyond a single individual loses its effect once it is known. Women have never been given complete equality in any country, and yet they have been influential everywhere; and the more they have been maltreated by the laws, the more dangerous their influence has become. We should not therefore place much trust in this solution. On the contrary, is their influence not more likely to decline if it is less in their interests to preserve it, and if it ceases to be their only means of protecting themselves and escaping oppression?

In society, politeness prevents most men from defending their opinions against women, but this politeness has much to do with pride; they allow women an empty victory and their defeat is no humiliation because it is seen as voluntary. Do we really imagine that the same would occur in a public discussion on an important matter? Would politeness prevent us from arguing with a woman?

The second objection is that this change would contradict general utility, because it would distract women from the tasks which nature seems to have reserved for them.

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I cannot see how this objection is justified. Whatever form of constitution we establish, the current degree of civilisation of the European nations means that there will never be more than a very few citizens who can deal with public affairs. Women would be no more forced to abandon their homes than labourers their ploughs or craftsmen their workshops. No woman in the richest classes is so busy with domestic affairs that we need worry about distracting her, and a serious task would distract her far less than the futile pastimes to which women are condemned by idleness and bad education.

The main cause of this objection is the idea that as soon as a man is given the rights of citizenship his immediate aim is to govern. This may be true while a constitution is being established, but it will last only a short time. So there is no need to fear that just because women could be members of the National Assembly they would immediately abandon their children, their homes and their needlework. In fact, this would only make them better able to raise their children and to make men of them. It is natural for a woman to nurse her children and for her to look after them when they are young. Forced by this to stay at home, and weaker than men, it is also natural that she lead a more secluded, more domestic life. Women therefore fall into the same category as men who need to work for several hours a day. This may be a reason not to elect them, but it cannot form the basis of a legal exclusion. Chivalry may lose out by this change, but domestic life would gain from this equality, as from all others.

Until now, all known races have had either corrupt or savage customs. The only exception I can think of is the people of the United States of America, who are spread thinly over a large area. Until now, all races have also had a legal inequality between men and women. It would not be difficult to prove that the second of these equally universal phenomena is one of the main causes of the first; for inequality necessarily causes corruption, and is its most usual, if not its only, cause.

I hope that anyone who attacks my arguments will do so without using ridicule or declamation, and, above all, that someone will show me a natural difference between men and women on which the exclusion could legitimately be based.

The equality of rights given to men by our new constitution has earned us eloquent declamations and constant ridicule. But no one has yet succeeded in presenting a single serious objection, and this is certainly not for lack of skill or enthusiasm. I dare to think that the same will be true of equality between the sexes. It is strange that in many countries women

have been considered incapable of any public function and yet worthy of the monarchy; that a woman could rule France and yet, before 1776, she could not become a dressmaker in Paris,² and, finally, that the elective assemblies of our bailiwicks gave to feudal rights that which they refused to natural rights. It is to women that several of our noble deputies owe the fact that they sit amongst the national representatives.

Instead of depriving women who own feudal property of this right, why do we not extend it to all women who own property or who are the heads of households? Why, if we consider it absurd to exercise citizenship rights by proxy, should we deprive women of this right, instead of giving them the freedom to exercise it in person?

² Arago's note: Before the suppression of guild-masterships in 1776, women could only become dressmakers – or conduct certain other professions which attracted them – if they were married, or if a man lent or sold them in his name, to enable them to acquire a privilege. See the preamble to the Edict of 1776.