Women and the French Revolution

In 1789, the French Revolution broke out, by which time France was bankrupt, and hardship and poverty were widespread. Women of all classes were actively involved in the Revolution, taking part in bread riots, mass demonstrations, and political clubs. Their demands ranged from cheap bread to feed their families to rights for women. By and large, the leaders of the Revolution were not interested in women’s rights, and by 1793, women were banned from political clubs.

**REASONS FOR INVOLVEMENT**
- **Economic.** Poor and working women, responsible for feeding the family, took to the streets to demand bread for their families.
- **Political.** Some women believed that the ideals of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, and brotherhood—should also be applied to women.

**OLYMPE DE GOUGES (1748-1793)**
Born in the Languedoc, she ran away to Paris. She wrote plays and pamphlets calling for the abolition of the slave trade, public workshops for the unemployed, and a national theatre for women. In 1791, she published *Declaration of the Rights of Women*. She opposed the king’s execution and criticized Marat and Robespierre. She was tried and then guillotined.

**TIMELINE OF REVOLUTION**
- **1788 May** Louis XVI summons Estates General, elected representatives of different classes, to levy taxes. Instead, electors produce official grievances.
- **1789 May** Estates General meets in Paris. Women are denied representation but produce pamphlets and petitions. Working women demand protection of working rights, re-establishment of medieval guilds, and social justice. Upper-class women demand the vote, equality in marriage, right of divorce.
- **1789 July 14** Fall of the Bastille marks outbreak of Revolution. Women involved in storming the Bastille.
- **1789 Oct 5, 6** The Woman’s March on Versailles. Eight hundred women gather at the Champs-Elysees, pick up arms, gather volunteers, and set off for Versailles. About 6,000 women—laundry women, workers wives, servants, shop girls, fish sellers—arrive at Versailles to demand cheap bread and grain. They escort the royal family back to Paris.
- **1789 Dec 22** National Assembly establishes which citizens should be given the vote (tax-paying males); women are excluded from full legal citizenship.
- **1789-1791** Women challenge restrictions; attend National Assembly meetings as spectators, write pamphlets, organize political clubs, and petitions.
  - **1791 July 17** Mass demonstration of women and men demanding a popular referendum on fate of monarchy, and the rights of common people. It ends in bloody confrontation with National Guard.
  - **1791 September** Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen divides citizens into ‘active’ and ‘passive’ according to wealth, social class, and sex. Women are defined as ‘passive,’ excluded from voting and holding public office.
  - **1791** Olympe de Gouges, playwright and activist, publishes *The Declaration of Rights of Women*, calling for equal rights.
  - **1792 March–June** Thousands of women, men, and children take part in armed processions through Paris.
  - **1792 March 6** Activist and actress Claire Lacombe leads a delegation of women to petition ruling Legislative Assembly for the right of women to bear arms; granted by Paris Commune in April.
  - **1792 September** Monarchy abolished; republic established.
  - **1793** Claire Lacombe, actress, and Pauline Leon, laundress, organize the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. Members include dishwashers, laundresses, rag-pickers, artisans, and laboring women.
  - **1793 October** National Convention closes the Society on the grounds that its members threaten public order. The ban is extended to all women’s political clubs and popular societies.
  - **1804** Napoleonic Code re-establishes women as legal dependents with no political rights.