

More than Bread and Butter: French Feminists among Working Class Women

Anya Deng^{1,a,*}

¹Harrow International School of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

a. anyad0305@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper will specifically explore the 1789 Women's March on Versailles, an event during the French Revolution where working class women protested against the monarchy for bread in joint effort with intellectual women, such as De Gouges, who demanded a voice in the political arena. The paper finds that whilst the primary demand of working-class women appeared to be bread and thereby purely materialistic, they too wanted political rights, marching as part of a broader political movement to make the desires of women heard. This paper highlights the interconnectedness between economic and political aspirations within the revolutionary context, particularly the concern of high living costs and women's political representation, and places emphasis on the working-class women's contributions to the success of the French Revolution. By analyzing the women's statements during protests and petitions, the paper presents evidence that challenges the perception that the demands of working-class women were solely driven by immediate material needs.

Keywords: Uprising, feminism, liberty, aristocracy, monarchy

1. Introduction

While feminism motivates many young people today, it has a very long history, with some important lessons for the present. One of the most important origin points for modern feminism was 18th century France, when women, and men, were struggling for their rights.

The French Revolution saw uprisings by many in France, with women playing an active role in the protests. The impoverishment suffered by the people, exacerbated by seeming indifference by the monarchy, prompted many women, working class and intellectual alike, to protest and demand that the king and queen return to Paris in order to be closer to the people and more responsive to their needs. In addition to their immediate concerns about food and the cost of living, the women who participated in the march had broader political grievances. They were frustrated with the monarchy's perceived apathy to the suffering of the people and the absence of female representation in the government, prompting both intellectual and working-class women to participate in the march. Olympe de Gouges, a renowned playwright, expressed this sentiment in her "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Citizeness," stating that "a society in which one sex is tacitly enslaved by the other is neither just nor free." [1] She called for women's participation in politics as a means to change this unjust situation.

2. Secondary source analysis

This topic has been studied by multiple historians in the past. In "Liberty, Equality, and the Power of Memory: French Monarchism and the French Revolution," Jack R. Censer examines the demands made by intellectual women that they should be allowed to participate in politics and have equal rights to men under the law.[2] Censer argues that these demands were part of a broader struggle for liberty and equality that was central to the revolutionary movement. From a slightly different perspective, in "Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary France," historians Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite examine petitions and memoirs written by intellectual women to gain insight into how their demands for political change and gender equality shaped the course of the revolution.[3] Levy and Applewhite argue that women, particularly intellectuals, played the role of an important catalyst for social and political change in France.

Both of these analyses emphasize that the French Revolution was a broader struggle for liberty, equality, and fraternity, especially for women, and the ideals of the revolution inspired a range of social and political movements that sought to achieve a more just and equal society. Censer's work and Levy and Applewhite's work both highlight the importance of these ideals and their impact on the course of events in France—referring to the series of social, political, and economic changes that took place in France during the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799, including: the overthrow of the monarchy, the establishment of a republic, and the establishment of the Republican Marriage Law in 1792 which gave women greater legal rights within marriage and was seen as a step towards greater gender equality. Ultimately, these analyses contribute to a broader understanding of the significance of the French Revolution as a transformative event for women's rights.

However, a problem with these analyses is that they mostly focus on the activism of intellectual women, neglecting the experiences of working-class women. This is problematic because working-class women were also participating in the marches and their experiences and contributions are equally important in understanding the historical context of the March on Versailles. Failing to consider the experiences of working-class women can create the impression that only intellectual women were advocating for political equality, which is not the case.

3. Methods

In response to this lack of literature on the working-class women, this paper intends to delve deeper into the specific demands of working-class women by examining petitions from organizations with a significant working-class female membership to understand their demands and needs as well as investigate eyewitness accounts of the March, of which most marchers were working-class women. Several primary sources have been chosen to support the argument posed in the paper. One of these sources is "Les femmes de Paris à l'Assemblée Nationale" by Pauline Léon. This petition was presented to the National Assembly of France and outlined five demands, two of which will be discussed and analysed in this paper. Additionally, this paper will be referencing "Letter to the Count of La Luzerne" by Charles-Élie de Ferrières, an aristocrat who personally witnessed the March on Versailles; the letter is addressed to Anne-César de La Luzerne, a Major General in the French Royal Army who had a close relationship with the king.[4] Finally, this paper will be analyzing the chant "Ah! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira, Les aristocrates à la lanterne!" which was sung by working-class women marchers. The first two sources are selected as they provide first-hand accounts of what mass women wanted at the time of the French Revolution and confirm that the demands of the working-class marchers were not limited to basic necessities like bread; the chant is selected as it highlights the marchers' belief in collective power as well as their desire to exercise their human rights. The sources are made even more valuable by the fact that they come from authors with different backgrounds and perspectives. Léon was a prominent French feminist from the working class who helped to found the

Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. Meanwhile, Ferrières, a member of the aristocracy, offers a unique perspective on the attitudes and concerns of his class during this turbulent period in French history.

4. Primary source analysis

To analyze the primary sources, this paper will look at the movement from multiple perspectives and dimensions, thereby allowing me to see the interconnection and overlap of issues that women of different social classes were advocating for. By revealing key themes and patterns in the texts, such as: demands for affordable bread, political representation, and an end to the monarchy— whether these demands were shared across multiple classes of women or specific to one group can be determined, as well as whether they were mutually reinforcing or distinct. For instance, this paper will explore whether the marchers' desire for an end to the monarchy and the establishment of a new system was due to a lack of women's representation in politics.

The first source that will be explored is “Les femmes de Paris à l'Assemblée Nationale” by Pauline Léon, founder of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. This document was a petition submitted to the National Assembly of France in 1789 that stated the urgent need for bread, pleading “we are dying of hunger and we have no bread. Give us bread, and you will save the Republic.”[5] This shows that bread was indeed a primary demand by working-class women during the revolution, as they struggled to feed themselves and their families amidst severe scarcity of food. However, the petition also went beyond just the issue of bread and encompassed broader political and social demands for women's rights and equality.

The women who signed the petition demanded to be granted the same rights as men, including the right to participate in the government of the country (“we ask to be granted the rights that are owed to us, as free and equal citizens ... and to be able to participate in the government of our country”).[6] This demonstrates that working-class women were not solely focused on bread and basic rights of necessities, but were also advocating for political equality and female representation in government, of which there was none at the time. Moreover, the fact that the petition was initiated by Léon's organization, which was composed mainly of working-class women,¹ [7] and that many of the signatories were struggling with poverty and economic hardship, further emphasizes that the working-class women were not just passive victims of the revolution, but were actively seeking to obtain their basic human as well as political rights.

The second source that will be explored is “Letter to the Count of La Luzerne”, which was written by Charles-Élie de Ferrières, a French aristocrat in 1789. Ferrières writes: “the women who arrived yesterday at Versailles were not content with demanding bread; they also demanded political rights for themselves and their children.” Ferrières' acknowledgment of the plea for bread was referring specifically to working-class women, as intellectual women were not likely to be affected by the hunger crisis. Moreover, if Ferrières, an aristocrat, felt the need to address the multi-layered demands by the women marchers that he observed, it shows that the working-class women were making their voices heard and reaching different audiences in the French society, including the intellectuals among the aristocracy who had access to those in power, like the monarchy.

Based on Ferrières' letter, it is reasonable to suggest that the working-class women were equally influential as, if not more than, intellectual women in the March on Versailles. In the letter, the women marchers were described as being “more like furies than women, and armed with all sorts of weapons”, [8] emphasizing the women's determination to be heard through their use of public protest to convey their demands. It can be inferred that this incident involves working-class women and not solely

¹ Kathryn Gleadle, “Women's Rights and the French Revolution: A Biography of Pauline Léon.” *Women's History Review* 5, no. 1 (1996): 110.

intellectual women since intellectuals —such as De Gouges— tended to advocate for change through writing and conversation in more private or exclusive setting instead of being violently confrontational. [9]

The last source that will be explored is a chant sung by the working-class women marchers: "Ah! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira, Les aristocrates à la lanterne!" ("Ah! It will be fine, it will be fine, it will be fine, The aristocrats to the lamp post!"). [10] The slogan "Ca ira, ça ira, ça ira" was a popular slogan during the French Revolution which not only expressed the people's enthusiasm for political change but also their sense of unity and shared purpose. By chanting this slogan together, the masses of people who were involved in the French Revolution were able to feel a sense of solidarity that empowered them to pursue their revolutionary ideals with greater conviction and determination. At the heart of the revolutionary movement was a sense that the women could collectively overthrow the old order and create a new, more just society; "ça ira, ça ira, ça ira" captured the belief that ordinary people, acting together, could bring about a better future. [11]

The chant also suggests that the working-class women who participated in the march were not simply demanding bread and relief from economic hardship, but were also calling for a fundamental shift in the political and social order. The aristocracy, who were seen as responsible for the widespread poverty and suffering experienced by working-class people in France, represented an oppressive system that the women sought to overthrow, as shown by "les aristocrates à la lanterne!". By calling for the aristocrats to be punished and stripped of their power, the women were also asserting their own right to participate in the political process— which is stated in Article 6 of the 1793 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen:

"Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally... all citizens, being equal in its eyes, shall be equally eligible to all high offices, public positions and employments...." [12]

It was not only bread the women were protesting for. They were also marching on for their rights to have a voice, and to raise that voice in medium such as in the legal and political system that can bring about substantive change from the status quo.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the history of early French feminism is multifaceted and goes beyond what might initially be assumed. Women from different classes had already been advocating for political rights during the 18th century, which, although it may seem distant, still resonates today. Moreover, feminism, and its success, is not solely political; nor is it purely materialistic. If the active participation by the working-class French women in the Women's March on Versailles has shown anything, it is that feminism aims to address struggles that are interconnected: from the basic necessities of bread and food to the right to vote and participate in the government. To understand feminism, both in its historical and contemporary terms, means to acknowledge the sophisticated understanding of and contribution to gender equality by all classes and groups of women. Bread, butter and books, working-class, middle-class and intellectual, the women marchers all had a part to play in driving positive change for greater equality. It is thus essential for the current generations of women to recognize and leverage the power of inclusive participation in social movements to successfully achieve unfulfilled demands of rights for women.

References

- [1] Olympe de Gouges. "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen." In *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, edited by Lynn Hunt, 85. Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996.
- [2] Censer, Jack R. "Liberty, Equality, and the Power of Memory: French Monarchism and the French Revolution." *French Historical Studies* 18, no. 1 (1994): 145.

- [3] Darlene Gay Levy and Harriet Branson Applewhite. In *The Women's Revolution in France, 1789-1795*, edited by Darlene Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson, 58. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- [4] La Luzerne, Anne-César de. In *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021.
- [5] Léon, Pauline. "Les femmes de Paris à l'Assemblée Nationale." October 30, 1789. Translated by Levy, Darlene Gay, and Harriet B Applewhite. "Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary France." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976): 808-824.
- [6] Léon, Pauline. "Les femmes de Paris à l'Assemblée Nationale," 58-60.
- [7] Gleadle, Kathryn. "Women's Rights and the French Revolution: A Biography of Pauline Léon." *Women's History Review* 5, no. 1 (1996): 110.
- [8] Ferrières, Charles-Élie. "Letter to the Count of La Luzerne." October 6, 1789. Translated by Richard Bienvenu. In *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, edited by Lynn Hunt, 55. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996.
- [9] Hufton, Olwen. *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution*. University of Toronto Press, 1992.
- [10] "Ah! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira, Les aristocrates à la lanterne!" chant, March on Versailles, 5-6 October 1789.
- [11] Schama, Simon. *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.
- [12] French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, Article 6, 26 August 1789.