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Article

## "This Dangerous Ascendancy" Women's Political Participation in the French Revolution

Natalie Merten

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION ENDURES IN HISTORICAL MEMORY AS ONE of the "great turning-points in history," a complete upheaval of society ending the tyranny and inefficiencies of one of the world's oldest and most powerful monarchies and championing those oft-mentioned values of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*.<sup>1</sup> The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, one of the fundamental documents of the Revolution, declared that "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights," that "the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits other than those which assure to other members the enjoyment of the same rights," and that the law "only has the right to prohibit those actions which are injurious to society."<sup>2</sup> The charge that men were equal in rights was, for its day, incredibly radical. However, despite the Revolution's declaration of such ideals and abolition of old-regime privilege (an astonishing accomplishment), revolutionary leaders fell short of creating a completely egalitarian society even during the most radical points of the Revolution, in part because they applied the rights of man to man, and not to mankind. Despite the efforts of various advocates for women's rights, and despite the significant role of women in the Revolution (as seen during critical events such as

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1. Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789–1799* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.

2. "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution>.

the October Days or the assault on the Tuileries Palace), women continued to be denied the rights of citizenship. Eventually, even their participation in political societies and clubs was prohibited—under the law, it would seem, women’s involvement in the political public sphere was somehow “injurious to society.”

The purpose of this research is to examine different responses of male revolutionaries to female participation in the French Revolution from 1789–1793, focusing primarily on views of women’s activism in political societies. During the earlier stages of the Revolution, when the debate on women’s rights focused on the question of citizenship, we find that female participation was typically disallowed on the basis of appeals to nature (arguing in favor of women’s natural place in the domestic sphere) or claims of their inferiority to men. In the later stages of the Revolution, one further element of opposition to women’s rights emerged: fear of politically active women as a threat to public order (therefore, injurious to society). While arguments based on gender roles and supposed female inferiority persisted, the responses analyzed here suggest that this fear ultimately proved to be a more significant factor in the suppression of women’s involvement in revolutionary politics.

## The Debate Over Women’s Citizenship

The debate over women’s rights to democratic citizenship in revolutionary France arose with the National Assembly’s “unshakeable resolution” to create a new national constitution. Women’s right to political participation through citizenship was a novel concept, even for Enlightened thinkers such as the Abbé Sieyès. Sieyès proposed in “Preliminary to the French Constitution” (in 1789, the same year in which he published *What Is the Third Estate?*) that the National Assembly’s deputies must distinguish between active and passive citizens. Passive citizens, according to Sieyès, included women, children and foreign nationals: “those who contribute nothing to maintaining the public establishment.” They should be barred the right to exert “active influence on public affairs” by voting, for they were not “true shareholders in the great social enterprise” of the nation.<sup>3</sup> The Assembly agreed with Sieyès, for at this point in time the concept

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3. The Abbé Sieyès, “Preliminary to the French Constitution,” (August 1789) in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. and trans. by Lynn Hunt (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996), 81.

of granting full citizenship to women was almost unheard of, and as Lynn Hunt puts it, "unimaginable to almost everyone, men and women alike."<sup>4</sup>

The early days of the Revolution had thrown the discussion on citizenship wide open, though, and it took little time for proponents of women's rights to introduce their arguments to the public consciousness in an attempt to change the narrative. In 1790, the Marquis de Condorcet, often considered the quintessential Enlightenment thinker, published a provocative essay titled *On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship*, a response to those who would prohibit women's political participation by insisting on female intellectual or moral inferiority, or by arguing that women should remain in their natural domestic sphere (at this time, the two main arguments against women's rights). For Condorcet, the rights of man existed due to man's rationality and sentience—"they are feeling beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and reasoning about these ideas"—which "necessarily" gave women equal rights. To those who would claim that women lacked the reasoning capabilities of men, he challenged: "Elizabeth of England, Maria Theresa, the two Catherines of Russia—have they not shown that neither in courage nor in strength of mind are women wanting?" He also thought the 'domestic-sphere' argument poorly founded, for women given the right to vote would "no more be torn from their homes than agricultural labourers from their ploughs, or artisans from their workshops."<sup>5</sup> Among male revolutionaries, though, there were few in favor of equal social and political rights for both genders, and while Condorcet's argument created a stir, it did not create change.

The debate over women's political participation through citizenship and its accompanying rights arose once more with the need to replace the Constitution of 1791, outdated in the aftermath of the deposition of Louis XVI. In the months leading up to the creation of the Montagnard Constitution of 1793 (accepted 24 June 1793), various individuals turned their attention, yet again, to the question of whether the Declaration of Rights applied only to men. In April 1793, National Convention deputy Pierre Guyomar published a pamphlet entitled "The Partisan of Political Equality between Individuals," in which he decried the government's continuing denial of political rights to women,

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4. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (NY: Norton, 2008), 170.

5. Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, "On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship [1795]," Online Library of Liberty, Liberty Fund, Inc. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/condorcet-on-the-admission-of-women-to-the-rights-of-citizenship>.

and pointed out what he viewed as the Convention's hypocrisy in referring to women as *citoyennes*: "If [women] do not have the right to vote in the primary assemblies, they are not members of the sovereign," thus making the title "more than ridiculous" in Guyomar's mind. He maintained that "the declaration of rights is the same for men and women," and that "half of the individuals of a society do not have the right to deprive the other half of the imprescriptible right of giving their opinion," thus drawing on arguments previously made by thinkers such as Condorcet (as well as female activists such as Etta Palm d'Aelders or Olympe de Gouges, who in 1791 had famously challenged the Liberal Revolution's failure to grant political rights to women in her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*).<sup>6</sup>

Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall notes that this debate also made its way to the floor of the National Convention in 1793, detailing an instance where deputy Gilbert Romme (most widely known for his development of the French Republican calendar), as a member of the "Commission of Six" created to analyze constitutional projects, "declared that women had an equal share in the category of the rights-bearing *homme*."<sup>7</sup> Other members of this committee, however, opposed these progressive views; moderate Girondin Jean-Denis Lanjuinais acknowledged Romme's "complaints" and Guyomar's "interesting dissertation" on the subject of women's rights, but ultimately argued that "If the best and most just institutions are those most in conformity with nature, it is difficult to believe that women should be called to the exercise of political rights." Lanjuinais further suggested that it would be "impossible" for men and women to gain anything good from women's admission to the rights of citizenship.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in 1793, the question of women's citizenship was again met with the response that granting political rights to women would fly in the face of nature. Sepinwall argues in her discussion of this event that Romme was clearly not the sole Convention member to favor political rights for women, since, reportedly, many deputies enthusiastically called for Romme's discourse on rights to be

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6. Pierre Guyomar, "The Partisan of Political Equality Between Individuals," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. and trans. by Lynn Hunt (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 133–134.

7. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, "Robespierre, Old Regime Feminist? Gender, the Late Eighteenth Century, and the French Revolution Revisited," *Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 1 (2010): 22. doi:10.1086/650505. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/650505>.

8. Jean-Denis Lanjuinais, "Report of the Committee Charged with Analyzing Constitutional Projects," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. and trans. by Lynn Hunt (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 133.

printed.<sup>9</sup> However, the views to which Lanjuinais subscribed (as well as male opinions of female inferiority) obviously remained predominant, for when the Montagnard Constitution was accepted less than two months later (24 June 1793), women's political participation in terms of citizenship and voting rights remained nonexistent. As had been the case in 1791, the Declaration of the Rights of Man was determined to apply solely to men.

## Women's Political Participation: Societies and Clubs

While women had been denied the rights to citizenship during the creation of the Constitutions of 1791 and 1793 (Darline G. Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite characterize women's political exclusion in 1793 as the denial of "democratic citizenship," whereas 1791 had been a denial of "active citizenship" as outlined by Sieyès), they still initially retained a way to exert influence in the political public sphere—involvement in popular societies and clubs.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in 1789 (1790 in Paris), a healthy number of these clubs had emerged which permitted female as well as male membership. Known as "fraternal societies," these organizations included such groups as the *Amis de la Loi* (founded by female street activist and revolutionary agitator Théroigne de Méricourt), the *Société des Indigents*, and the *Société Fraternelle de Patriotes de Deux Sexes*; additionally, women frequented clubs such as the Cordeliers and Jacobins, although only as spectators.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, a further type of organization where women could be politically active was established: exclusively female political societies. The most notable of these was the *Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires* (the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women), a Parisian club founded during the spring of 1793.<sup>12</sup> While the Society declared that they were formed with the intent "to instruct themselves, to learn well the Constitution and laws of the Republic," the first, and perhaps most significant article of their regulations stated that "The Society's purpose is to be armed to rush to the defense of

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9. Sepinwall, "Robespierre," 22.

10. Darline G. Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, "Women and Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* (NY: Oxford, 1992), 79.

11. Shirley Elson Roessler, *Out of the Shadows: Women and Politics in the French Revolution, 1789–95* (NY: Peter Lang, 1998), 50–51.

12. Roessler, *Out of the Shadows*, 57.

the Fatherland.”<sup>13</sup> This ambition was one that male revolutionary leaders found deeply concerning.

What Levy and Applewhite characterize as French women’s “militant citizenship” (or the exertion of political influence through the use of force) had, however, been relatively well-accepted in the early stages of the Revolution.<sup>14</sup> Time and time again, male leaders and journalists held up the example of the women who participated in the events of the October Days in 1789, marching to Versailles to state their demands to the king, and forcing the royal family’s return to Paris. However, these men typically still promoted the roles prescribed by nature—men in the public sphere, women confined to the domestic sphere—as the societal ideal. Louis-Marie Prudhomme, founder of the radical Parisian newspaper *Révolutions de Paris*, published an editorial in February 1791 which exemplified such views: it at once called women to arms (“Citizenesses of all ages and all stations! Leave your homes . . . rally from door to door . . . Armed with burning torches, present yourselves at the gates of the palace of your tyrants and demand reparation . . . let the atmosphere be charged with the seeds of death”) and reminded them of their “natural” place in society. According to Prudhomme, “A woman is only comfortable, is only in her place in her family or in her household,” thus making civil and political liberties “useless” and “foreign” to women. Thus, women’s participation—even violent participation—in the Revolution was accepted, even encouraged, but only as a temporary necessity: “Once the country is purged of all these hired brigands, citizenesses,” Prudhomme declared, “We will see you return to your dwellings to take up once again the accustomed yoke of domestic duties.”<sup>15</sup> As the Revolution progressed, certain radicals continued to support women’s political activity, at least in terms of their role in exerting influence through violence, if not through more organized structures such as political societies. In the last days of summer 1793, Jacques-René Hébert was still inciting women to take up arms in the absence of their husbands and sons (called to subdue the Vendée

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13. “Regulations of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women (9 July 1793),” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/481>.

14. Levy and Applewhite, “Women and Militant Citizenship,” 81.

15. Louis-Marie Prudhomme, “On the Influence of the Revolution on Women” (12 February 1791), *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/483>.

Rebellion in the *levée en masse* of 23 August) and patrol the streets in search of counter-revolutionaries, utilizing the rhetoric of the October Days: "*Femmes du 6 octobre . . .*"<sup>16</sup>

By fall 1793, though, rhetoric such as Hébert's increasingly defied the norm, as this militant form of female "citizenship" was viewed in an ever more negative light by revolutionary leaders. Joan Landes emphasizes this trend, noting that initially "feminist protest" had been favored among the leaders of 1789's liberal Revolution, just four years earlier.<sup>17</sup> While Landes also suggests that the "austere republicanism" of the National Convention was significantly "less favorable to feminism," Sepinwall pushes back against the idea that the Jacobin faction was necessarily more opposed to women's presence in the public sphere; Robespierre, for example, had favored women's admittance to royal academies prior to the Revolution, arguing that "women drove progress and that their presence was necessary for enlightenment to spread."<sup>18</sup> Sepinwall posits instead that many revolutionary leaders held views on women's rights considered progressive by Old Regime standards, but the actions of revolutionary women—who "did not behave politely and charmingly," but were disturbingly "unruly and independent"—gradually pushed them to retreat from such positions.<sup>19</sup> These actions particularly included continued female agitation for the right to bear arms in the defense of the Republic, as claimed by the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. Delegations of women had presented this demand to the National Convention multiple times throughout the first half of 1792 (in an initiative spearheaded by activists such as de Méricourt and Pauline Léon), and had been continually denied.<sup>20</sup> Thus, by the time of the Society's creation, women's political participation in the form of activism was already considered suspect by revolutionary leaders: members of these societies and clubs, in their minds, were becoming radicalized, and posed a danger not only to the ideal, gendered society envisioned by Jacobin disciples of Rousseau, but to social and public order.

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16. Le Père Duchesne, issue no. 235, 1793. Gallica Digital Library, Bibliothèque nationale de France, [https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k105608\\_43?rk=729617;2](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k105608_43?rk=729617;2).

17. Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 146.

18. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*, 106.

19. Sepinwall, "Robespierre," 8, 26.

20. Levy and Applewhite "Women and Militant Citizenship," 89; Roessler, *Out of the Shadows*, 56.



## Responses to Women's Political Societies

The account of a 1793 meeting of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, recorded by one Pierre-Joseph-Alexis Roussel, offers an idea of the responses which such political participation received during these later stages of the Revolution. Roussel primarily took a dismissive and mocking view of the Society's proceedings; indeed, he begins his account by assuring the reader that while these memoirs were published some years after the fact (in 1802), his descriptions are all accurate, for "this session seemed so comical to us that we each made a separate record of it when we left, while our memories were still filled with these details." He details the lengthy discourse given by a Society member on the utility of women in republican government, a speech which he again found "comical," and observes that the women made various proposals of how to be more involved in the Revolution, "each one more ridiculous than the last."<sup>21</sup> This condescending view of the Society illustrates the continued tendency of men during the Revolution to claim that female political participation should be restricted, based on women's perceived inferiority.

These typically negative responses to women's societies and clubs can also be observed in contemporary artwork, as in Chérieux's *Club des femmes patriotes dans un église*, a "satirical" scene depicting a meeting of a club of revolutionary women in 1793. The women in the foreground, presumably the club's leaders, have distorted facial proportions—ugly, and often more masculine features—and aggressive expressions; they rise from their seats and point at each other dramatically, possibly indicating a disagreement among their leadership. One appears to be swooning. A number of men appear at the bottom of the scene, some standing, some seated in the gallery. In contrast to the women, they are composed and unemotional; a few appear to look on the impassioned women with some amusement (recalling the mocking attitude taken by Roussel).<sup>22</sup> Chérieux's drawing thus displays the methods by which men sought to discredit female revolutionaries throughout the Revolution—firstly, the portrayal of women as dramatic and disorganized implies their intellectual and moral deficiencies in comparison to the more rational men. Their physical depiction,

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21. Pierre-Joseph-Alexis Roussel, "Account of a Session of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/482>.

22. Chérieux, "Club des femmes patriotes dans un église," 1793. Gallica Digital Library, Bibliothèque nationale de France, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10303232d.item>.

moreover, conveys the idea that, as Landes proposes, women's participation in the public sphere elicited fears that independent, political women might be "femmes-hommes—women masquerading as men, forsaking their feminine duty."<sup>23</sup> Thus, this negative portrayal of the members of the club appealed to nature: proper, virtuous women were supposed to remain within the domestic sphere, and those who chose to become politically active were "unnatural."

Such unfavorable depictions of female political societies demonstrate that male participants in the French Revolution continued to oppose women's attempts to exert political influence by appealing to perceived male superiority and nature-prescribed gender roles (which dictated that the public sphere should be the realm of men). Nonetheless, the response which seems to have proved the deciding factor in the suppression of women's political activity was male revolutionaries' fear of female activism as a threat to public order. This is best demonstrated by examining the discussion around the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, immediately preceding the Convention's final resolution to disband all women's clubs.

On 8 brumaire an II (28 October 1793), the revolutionary committee of the Paris "Section du Contrat-Social" reported that, earlier that morning, the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women had assembled in order to attend the that day's meeting of the Paris sections, which would include the unveiling of the statues of the two revolutionary martyrs, Marat and Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau. However, the committee claimed, "enemies of liberty" had taken the opportunity to mislead the other women in the crowd into believing that the Society wished all the women to adopt the red cap which they—and other sans-culottes—wore as a symbol of their republicanism. The committee complained that they had been occupied all day in dissolving the "considerable gathering" ("*rassemblement considérable*") which formed from the resulting dispute among the members of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women and the other so-called *citoyennes*. They had finally succeeded, but decided that it would be best to ban the Society from assembling until further notice, on the grounds that their meeting might serve as an excuse for others to disturb public order and safety.<sup>24</sup> This report of the Section du Contrat-Social contrasts in many ways with the far more aggressive address dealing with the same event which

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23. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*, 146.

24. "Commune de Paris: séance du 7 du second mois," *Mercuré Universel*, report of proceedings, 30 October 1793. Gallica Digital Library, Bibliothèque nationale de France. <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/mercuré-universel/30-octobre-1793/431/1504199/10>.

Jean-Baptiste Amar, a prominent member of the Committee of General Security, delivered to the National Convention two days later (30 October 1793). Both responses, though, suggest that revolutionary leaders' views of politically active women as disruptive, potentially violent, and difficult to control had a more immediate influence on women's ultimate exclusion from any role of political influence than did the idealization of traditional gender roles or general opinions of female weakness.

Amar's address, unlike the Section's report, did draw on these last two arguments (once again demonstrating their persistent presence in the debate on women's rights during the Revolution). A significant portion of his speech focused on the idea that women and men were destined by nature to exist in particular social spheres and to fulfill particular roles; Amar claimed that "Each sex is called to a type of occupation that is appropriate to it," and that women were thus "destined" to carry out "private functions" within the household, promoting republican virtues within the family, but not to participate in government. Furthermore, Amar called up the idea that women were inferior to men in terms of intellectual, moral, and physical capabilities, notoriously declaring that "Man is strong, robust, born with a great audacity, energy, and courage," and "almost exclusively destined to . . . everything that requires force, intelligence, and ability," while women, in contrast, were "hardly capable of lofty conceptions and serious cogitations." He claimed, too, that women were generally incapable of possessing the "required attentions and qualities" for participation in governance, such as "extended knowledge" and "abnegation of self."<sup>25</sup>

Even more notably, though, Amar's address displayed the growing concern that women's political societies were radical, violent, and sources of disorder. The Section's committee had temporarily banned the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women from assembling on the basis of public safety, but they had also attributed the disturbance at the Paris sections' meeting to counter-revolutionary activity (highlighting the atmosphere of paranoia that, not without reason, pervaded France in 1793). Amar, on the other hand, placed the blame squarely on the Society itself. What the committee had referred to, in more neutral terms, as a "considerable gathering" was for Amar a "mob" of 6,000 unruly women (a characterization which does seem consistent with the Paris government's reported difficulties in dispersing the women, and the Section's report

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25. Jean-Baptiste Amar, in "Discussion of Women's Political Clubs and Their Suppression, 29–30 October 1793," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. and trans. by Lynn Hunt (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 137.

to the Commune that the gathering "took on the character of mutiny").<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, while the "revolutionary committee" had referred to the *citoyennes républicaines révolutionnaires*, Amar's language took a far more disparaging tone: "so-called women Jacobins, from a club that is supposedly revolutionary," thus refusing to categorize them with male revolutionary leaders, and implying that, rather than seeking to implement republican virtues, these women were only promoting their own agenda, leaving chaos (as in the incident of 28 October) in their wake.<sup>27</sup>

At the end of this address, Amar proposed that women's political clubs and popular societies, "under whatever denomination," be prohibited. The decree was summarily passed; Lynn Hunt states that there was "virtually no discussion" of the issue within the Convention.<sup>28</sup> One deputy (Louis-Joseph Charlier, an ardent Montagnard whose typically brief term as president of the Convention had ended eight days prior) did speak up, opposing the motion on the grounds that there was no justification for preventing women's right to assembly, but his argument was quickly rebuffed: other deputies shouted Charlier down, declaring that women's political clubs and associations were "dangerous" to public safety.<sup>29</sup> Without doubt, many delegates believed that women were incapable of matching men's ability to govern and were best suited to remain within the home, long-established justifications for opposing female participation in the public sphere as cited by Amar. However, the National Convention's nearly unanimous approval of this proposal suggests that in this later stage of the Revolution, its members were likely more preoccupied with the threat that women's political activism posed to public order and, therefore, Jacobin governing power. Just six months previously, members of the Convention such as Guyomar and Romme had argued in favor of political rights for women, opposing men who insisted female nature necessarily limited women to the domestic sphere. Theirs was not a popular opinion, but one which apparently still received some approval

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26. "Commune de Paris: séance du 7 du second mois," *Mercuré Universel*, 30 October 1793. Gallica Digital Library, Bibliothèque nationale de France. <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/mercure-universel/30-octobre-1793/431/1504199/10>.

27. Jean-Baptiste Amar, in "Discussion of Women's Political Clubs and Their Suppression, 29–30 October 1793," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. and trans. by Lynn Hunt (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 137.

28. "Discussion of Women's Political Clubs and Their Suppression, October 29–30, 1793" in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 135.

29. Roessler, *Out of the Shadows*, 159–160.

(consider the deputies' enthusiasm for Romme's report, which at least indicated no "serious objection" to his stance on female citizenship).<sup>30</sup> Faced with the disruptive activism of new women's clubs and societies such as the Revolutionary Republican Women, though, male revolutionaries overwhelmingly concurred that women's political participation must come to an end.

## Conclusions

Although they were unsuccessful in securing political rights for women, it was possible for supporters of women's rights to push back against their opponents' appeals to nature or illogical claims of female intellectual and moral inadequacy when the main debate over women's political participation had to do with whether they would be granted active, democratic citizenship—whether women were truly, as Sieyès questioned, "true shareholders in the great social enterprise of the nation." It would have been far more difficult, though, to oppose the overwhelmingly negative response to women who attempted to influence the Revolution through political clubs and societies, continuing to endorse the use of violence and call for radical action long after male revolutionary leaders had grown distrustful of female militant citizenship. Consequently, the trend we find when observing French revolutionary society from 1789 onwards is a growing fear of women's political participation, culminating in the effective exclusion of women from meaningful political activity in late 1793.

If we return to Roussel's account of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, we find yet another example of this fear of radicalized, politically active women and the impact they might have on society. Despite his repeated mockery of the Society and belittling portrayal of its members as "ridiculous," clearly inferior to the male leaders of the Revolution and less capable, Roussel also confessed that "When I think about it, the delirium of these women frightens me." He suggested that the "obstinacy" of women made them capable of "committing certain excesses," undoubtedly referring to the violent actions of *révolutionnaires* who engaged in militant citizenship to achieve their goals and exert political influence.<sup>31</sup> As discussed, women's use of violence was ini-

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30. Sepinwall, "Robespierre," 22.

31. Pierre-Joseph-Alexis Roussel, "Account of a Session of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women." *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/482>.

tially encouraged as a temporary necessity, a catalyst for revolution—but by late 1793, in the minds of most revolutionary leaders it had reached the limits of its usefulness, and the organized activism of women's societies instead became a threat. As Roussel termed it, France was faced with a "dangerous ascendancy" of women, and revolutionary leaders' fear of this ascendancy, rather than opinions of natural gender roles or male superiority, appears to have proved the driving factor in the suppression of female political societies and the exclusion of women from the Revolution.

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