

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: A CASE STUDY OF
OLYMPE DE GOUGES' FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHT (1789-1793)**

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Title page

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BY

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
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HONOURS DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND DIPLOMACY**

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that the project was carried out by Naomi Tejiri Okoro, of the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin under my supervision.

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Project supervisor

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Head of Department

Date

Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work first and foremost to God Almighty, whose grace, strength, and guidance made this project possible.

I also dedicate it to my parents, Anthony Okoro and Nelly Okoro, for their love, sacrifices, and encouragement.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
CERTIFICATION	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	8
Background to the Study	8
Aim and Objectives of the Study	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Scope of the Study	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Methodology	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapterization	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Endnotes	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (1789–1799)	14
Introduction	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Old Regime and Its Crisis	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Estates-General and the Birth of the National Assembly (1789) ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Constitutional Monarchy (1789–1791)	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Fall of the Monarchy and the Rise of the Republic (1792) ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Reign of Terror (1793–1794)	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory (1794–1799) ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Revolutionary Ideals: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Conclusion	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Endnotes	Error! Bookmark not defined.

CHAPTER THREE: ROLE OF WOMEN IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Introduction	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Everyday Women and the Revolution	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The October Days of 1789	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Political Climate	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Outbreak of the March	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Confrontation at Versailles	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Return to Paris	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Consequences of the October Days	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Historiographical Interpretations	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Endnotes	Error! Bookmark not defined.

CHAPTER FOUR: EARLY LIFE AND BACKGROUND**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Legacy of Olympe de Gouges	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Analysis of the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen (1791)	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Conclusion: Political Engagement, Marginalization, and Execution	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Endnotes	Error! Bookmark not defined.
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CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION, SUMMARY, AND RECOMMENDATIONS **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Introduction	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Summary of the Study	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Conclusion	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Recommendations	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Final Reflection	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Endnotes	Error! Bookmark not defined.

BIBLIOGRAPHY	Error! Bookmark not defined.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The French Revolution (1789–1799) was a turning point in modern history; it was celebrated for overthrown monarchy, at the end of feudal privileges, and the introduction of ideals such as liberty, equality, and fraternity. These principles inspired revolutions and political movements around the world, which promised to empower the common people against oppression. However, beneath the revolutionary slogans and political changes laid a contradiction that was very clear because while the revolution spoke loudly about universal rights, it consistently excluded women from the very equality it preached.

Before the outbreak of the French Revolution, women in France lived under strict social and legal limitations. Their activities were mostly restricted to household duties, and the law did not recognize them as independent citizens. They had no political rights, could not vote or hold public office, and had very limited access to formal education. A woman's legal identity was tied either to her father or her husband, leaving her with little personal freedom. Although the Enlightenment introduced new discussions about liberty, justice, and human rights, these emerging ideas still favored men. Thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Condorcet sparked conversations that encouraged many women to question their inferior status.

When the Revolution began, women became deeply involved in the struggle for political and social change. They joined demonstrations, wrote pamphlets, created women's political associations, and demanded recognition in national debates. One of the most memorable events was the Women's March to Versailles in 1789, where market women compelled King Louis XVI to return to Paris. Figures such as Pauline Léon and Théroigne de Méricourt also stood out for

their activism and radical proposals. Despite this remarkable involvement, women were still barred from exercising political rights, and many were gradually excluded from revolutionary spaces.

Among the women who challenged these injustices, Olympe de Gouges remains one of the most influential. Born in 1748, she gained recognition as a playwright and political writer. In 1791, she published a bold document titled *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*, which served as a direct critique of the male-centered *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. De Gouges argued that women were entitled to the same political and civil rights as men, including voting, public office, education, and personal freedom. She exposed the hypocrisy of a revolution that promoted equality while denying basic rights to half of its population.

Her outspoken criticism provoked hostility from revolutionary authorities, and in 1793 she was executed by guillotine. Her death symbolized the limits of the Revolution—while it promised equality and justice, it maintained traditional gender hierarchies. Even today, De Gouges is less recognized than many of her male contemporaries, and women's roles in the Revolution are often minimized.

This study examines the contributions of Olympe de Gouges within the broader context of women's involvement in the French Revolution. It explores how her writings confronted the Revolution's exclusion of women and why her work remains important for discussions about justice, citizenship, and equality. In doing so, the study highlights how women like De Gouges helped lay the foundation for modern feminist political thought.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

Aim

The main aim of this study is to assess the role of women in the French Revolution with special attention to Olympe de Gouges, and to evaluate how her ideas and activism challenged the exclusion of women from revolutionary principles of liberty, equality, and citizenship.

Objectives

The study seeks to:

1. examine the political and social ideals of the French Revolution and how they were implemented;
2. analyze the general involvement of women during the Revolution;
3. investigate the life and political contributions of Olympe de Gouges;
4. assess the significance of *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* (1791);
5. explore how revolutionary leaders responded to De Gouges and her demands for equality;
6. evaluate the importance of De Gouges' ideas in the development of feminist political thought and their continued relevance today.

Scope of the Study

This research focuses on the experiences of women during the French Revolution, with special emphasis on the contributions of Olympe de Gouges. It covers the period between 1789 and 1799, examining the political atmosphere that shaped revolutionary debates and women's participation. The study also considers how Enlightenment ideas influenced early feminist arguments.

Although many women contributed to the Revolution, detailed attention is given mainly to Olympe de Gouges and her 1791 declaration, which is considered an early and influential feminist text. The work does not attempt to trace the full history of feminism in France or worldwide; instead, it uses De Gouges as a focal point for understanding gender exclusion during the Revolution.

Both primary sources (such as pamphlets, official declarations, speeches) and secondary materials (scholarly books, journal articles, and historical analyses) will be consulted. The study is geographically limited to France and thematically focused on gender, rights, and political participation.

Methodology

This study employs a historical and interpretative method. Because the topic concerns past events, historical inquiry is used to reconstruct the social and political environment of France before and during the Revolution. This approach makes it possible to identify the conditions that shaped women's experiences and the contradictions between revolutionary ideals and actual practices.

The interpretative approach enables the analysis of key documents such as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* and Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*. Through comparison and interpretation, the study highlights how women challenged the male-dominated definition of citizenship.

Primary sources—such as official decrees, pamphlets, and De Gouges' writings—were used to capture firsthand perspectives. Secondary sources, including works by historians like William Doyle, Peter McPhee, Joan Wallach Scott, and Lynn Hunt, provided scholarly interpretations

that helped contextualize events. Research materials were obtained through libraries and digital archives.

Some limitations were encountered, such as the scarcity of documented women's voices and dependence on translated texts. However, by combining historical evidence with interpretative analysis, the study offers a balanced evaluation of De Gouges' contributions and the wider role of women.

Literature Review

The French Revolution has attracted extensive scholarly attention, especially for its impact on citizenship and human rights. Classic historians like Georges Lefebvre, in *The Coming of the French Revolution* (1939), emphasized economic and social tensions that led to the Revolution but paid little attention to gender or women's participation.

Over time, feminist scholars have expanded the narrative. Joan Wallach Scott, in *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (1996), argues that revolutionary language of "universal rights" often excluded women, even though women actively participated in revolutionary struggles. She highlights how the rights celebrated as universal were constructed around male citizenship.

Lynn Hunt, in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (1992), examines how revolutionary ideals were shaped by gendered assumptions. She notes that many revolutionaries believed that granting political rights to women threatened social order, which explains why outspoken women like De Gouges faced hostility.

Carla Hesse's essay "The Other Enlightenment" (2001) situates De Gouges within a group of Enlightenment women who drew upon emerging ideas of liberty to challenge their exclusion.

Hesse argues that De Gouges' 1791 declaration exposed the Revolution's contradictions and offered a radical rethinking of citizenship.

Clarissa Palmer, in *Olympe De Gouges: Writing Revolutionary Women* (2001), provides a detailed study of De Gouges' political writings and argues that her execution in 1793 was partly due to her gender and her insistence on participating in political debates reserved for men.

Despite growing scholarship, many general histories still understate women's roles. This study contributes to closing that gap by focusing centrally on Olympe de Gouges and her challenge to gender inequality during the Revolution.

Chapterization

Chapter One: Introduces the study, provides background, outlines the research problem, aims, objectives, significance, scope, and methodology.

Chapter Two: Presents a historical overview of the French Revolution, discussing its causes, major events, ideological foundations, and impacts on French society.

Chapter Three: Examines women's participation in the Revolution, including protests, political activism, writings, and the challenges they faced. It highlights key female figures and the rise of women's political clubs.

Chapter Four: Focuses entirely on Olympe de Gouges, her life, writings, and her 1791 declaration. It evaluates her critique of gender inequality and explains the political reaction to her activism.

Chapter Five: Summarizes findings, draws conclusions, and offers recommendations for future research. It also reflects on the ongoing relevance of De Gouges' ideas in discussions of gender rights.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (1789–1799)

The French Revolution remains one of the most transformative moments in European history. Beginning in 1789, it unfolded at a time when France's long-standing monarchy and rigid social hierarchy crumbled under financial collapse, widespread public dissatisfaction, and the growing influence of new political ideas. Under the Ancien Régime, French society was organised into three unequal estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate—made up of peasants, artisans, urban workers, and an increasingly assertive bourgeois class. The first two estates enjoyed significant advantages in taxation, political influence, and legal privileges, while the Third Estate carried most of the financial burden with little say in national affairs.¹

France's economic situation had deteriorated drastically by the late eighteenth century. Continuous warfare, including support for the American War of Independence, plunged the monarchy into severe debt. Successive poor harvests throughout the 1780s drove up bread prices, deepening hunger and unrest among ordinary people.² At the same time, Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire articulated powerful arguments about natural rights, equality, and individual freedom—ideas that inspired many within France, especially among the educated classes.³ Together, these factors created fertile ground for revolutionary change.

The Crisis of the Old Regime

The Ancien Régime was built upon royal authority and inherited privilege. Louis XVI ruled as an absolute monarch whose legitimacy rested on divine right. Beneath him operated a network of regional parlements, noble landlords, and a powerful clergy. The tax structure was deeply imbalanced: nobles and clerics frequently escaped direct taxation, leaving commoners to shoulder heavy dues, tithes, and indirect taxes on everyday goods.⁴

By the late eighteenth century, this system came under increasing criticism. War debts pushed the state toward bankruptcy, and financiers demanded structural reforms before granting further loans. Attempts at reform by ministers such as Turgot and Calonne collapsed in the face of resistance from privileged elites who refused to sacrifice their exemptions.⁵ As reforms stalled, public frustration grew. Combined with the spread of Enlightenment ideas, this rising dissatisfaction undermined the monarchy's authority.

The Estates-General and the Formation of the National Assembly (1789)

In a final attempt to resolve the financial crisis, Louis XVI convened the Estates-General in May 1789—the first meeting of the body since 1614. Representation disputes soon emerged, with the Third Estate demanding greater influence. On 17 June 1789, its delegates declared themselves the National Assembly, claiming to speak for the nation as a whole.⁶ When royal officials attempted to prevent their gathering, the deputies met in an indoor tennis court and vowed not to separate until a constitution had been written, in what became the Tennis Court Oath.⁷

Events in Paris heightened the revolutionary atmosphere. On 14 July crowds stormed the Bastille, a fortress long seen as a symbol of royal tyranny. In rural areas, fear and suspicion triggered the Great Fear, during which peasants attacked noble estates and destroyed feudal records. In response, the Assembly abolished feudal privileges on the night of 4 August 1789. Later, on 26 August, it issued the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, announcing national sovereignty, legal equality, and rights to liberty and property.⁸

The Constitutional Monarchy (1789–1791)

Over the next two years, the Assembly sought to rebuild France as a constitutional monarchy. It restructured provincial administration, eliminated feudal rights, and placed the Church under state control through the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790. Though the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* proclaimed universal principles, political participation was restricted to “active citizens”—men who met certain tax qualifications.⁹

The position of the king remained central but increasingly unstable. On 5–6 October 1789, thousands of Parisian women marched to Versailles demanding bread and political accountability. Their protest forced the royal family to relocate to Paris, where they lived under public scrutiny.¹⁰ This fragile trust collapsed in June 1791, when Louis XVI attempted to flee the country but was apprehended at Varennes. The failed escape intensified suspicion and strengthened the case for republican government.¹¹

The Overthrow of the Monarchy and the Establishment of the Republic (1792)

By 1792, war with Austria and Prussia dramatically altered the political climate. Revolutionary leaders hoped war would unify France, but early defeats triggered panic and radicalisation. A popular uprising in August 1792 toppled the monarchy, and Louis XVI was imprisoned. In September, the National Convention abolished the monarchy and proclaimed France a republic.¹² Fear of counter-revolutionary plots led to widespread violence. During the September Massacres, mobs in Paris killed prisoners believed to be royalist sympathisers. In January 1793, the king was

executed after being found guilty of treason.¹³ His death ended centuries of monarchy and ushered in a controversial new republican order.

The Reign of Terror (1793–1794)

Following the king's execution, revolutionary France faced both foreign invasion and internal rebellion. Uprisings in the Vendée and political opposition in various cities threatened the survival of the Republic. To meet these threats, the National Convention established the Committee of Public Safety, led by figures such as Robespierre, Saint-Just, and Danton.¹⁴

Between 1793 and 1794, the government carried out the Reign of Terror, during which thousands were executed for alleged disloyalty. Civil liberties were suspended in the name of safeguarding the Revolution. Women, who had been highly active in political life, were gradually silenced as women's clubs were banned in 1793. Among those executed was Marie Gouze, known as Olympe de Gouges, the author of the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* (1791). Her death in November 1793 illustrated the Revolution's refusal to extend political rights to women.¹⁵

The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory (1794–1799)

Robespierre's fall on 27 July 1794 (9 Thermidor Year II) marked the end of the Terror. The new leadership dismantled emergency institutions, released prisoners, and attempted to restore stability. A new constitution established the Directory in 1795, a five-man executive charged with governing France.¹⁶

Despite these reforms, the Directory struggled with corruption, factional conflict, and poor economic conditions. Civil unrest and military dependence continued. Ultimately, on 18

Brumaire Year VIII (November 1799), General Napoléon Bonaparte seized power in a coup d'état, replacing the Directory with the Consulate.¹⁷ The revolutionary decade ended not with democracy, but with the rise of authoritarian rule.

Revolutionary Principles: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

The Revolution championed the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, but their application was uneven. Liberty promised freedom from arbitrary rule, yet during the Terror many rights were curtailed. Equality aimed to eliminate legal privilege, though women and enslaved people remained excluded from citizenship. Fraternity symbolised unity, but often excluded political dissidents.¹⁸

In the colonies, these contradictions became especially apparent. In Saint-Domingue, enslaved Africans initiated a massive uprising in 1791. Under pressure, the National Convention abolished slavery in 1794—an important but temporary victory, as the policy was later reversed by Napoléon.¹⁹

Conclusion

The French Revolution brought an end to the Ancien Régime, dismantled monarchy, and introduced new concepts of rights and citizenship that shaped modern political culture. Yet it also unleashed violence and maintained deep exclusions, particularly concerning women and other marginalised groups. For women like Olympe de Gouges, the Revolution presented both a platform for advocacy and a harsh reminder of society's limits. Its legacy remains both revolutionary and incomplete, influencing struggles for equality long after the eighteenth century.

CHAPTER THREE

ROLE OF WOMEN IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

Introduction

The French Revolution of 1789 marked one of the most dramatic turning points in European history. It challenged centuries of monarchical rule, weakened the long-entrenched authority of the Church, and attempted to rebuild society on the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet these ideals were neither fixed nor universally applied. They were continuously debated, shaped, and resisted by different social groups. One of the most striking developments during this period was the sudden visibility of women in political, social, and intellectual arenas from which they had long been excluded.

Before the Revolution, women in France occupied a legally subordinate position. Customs and legal codes placed them under the guardianship of fathers or husbands, limiting their access to property and excluding them from civic and political participation. Their education was uneven, and most women—except those from privileged families—received only basic instruction. Despite these disadvantages, women played significant informal roles in public life. Market women in Paris, for instance, were known for confronting officials on economic matters, while aristocratic salonnieres helped circulate Enlightenment ideas through their intellectual gatherings. When revolutionary events unfolded in 1789, these women were not entering public life for the first time; rather, they expanded existing practices of engagement into a new political landscape. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen had promised freedom and equality, but its silence on women's rights quickly became evident. Revolutionary leaders often interpreted “man” exclusively as male citizens, excluding women from full political belonging. This contradiction fuelled women's involvement in the Revolution: while many acted as mothers, consumers, and workers, others demanded political rights, public recognition, and representation.

Women such as Pauline Léon, Théroigne de Méricourt, and Olympe de Gouges pushed the boundaries of revolutionary citizenship more boldly than ever. Their speeches, petitions, and clubs challenged long-standing patriarchal assumptions, while their activism exposed tensions within the revolutionary agenda itself. Male revolutionaries supported women when they demanded bread, but resisted them when they asked for political equality. By the mid-1790s, women's organizations were suppressed, and the radical voices that had pushed for gender inclusion faced severe repression.

This chapter examines the diverse roles women played during the Revolution—both as ordinary protesters and as political thinkers—and highlights the limits and contradictions they encountered. Through an exploration of women's participation in popular movements, political activism, intellectual production, and crucial events such as the October Days, the chapter illustrates how women contributed to the Revolution and how their struggle revealed the incomplete nature of revolutionary equality.

Everyday Women and the Revolution

The Revolution was not solely crafted by deputies in the National Assembly or by theorists of liberty. It was shaped daily by ordinary women whose struggles over food, survival, and justice fuelled the momentum of popular politics. Most working-class women had limited formal education and little access to political institutions, yet they became central actors in the unfolding revolutionary crisis.

Women in Urban Activism

The Parisian market women—the *poissardes*—were among the most influential of these grassroots participants. Known for their bold speech and fierce defence of market fairness, they had long represented the voice of the urban poor. When food shortages intensified in 1789, these

women mobilised quickly. They confronted officials, demanded regulation of food prices, and accused merchants of hoarding grain. Their activism was not merely economic but also increasingly political, as they linked food scarcity to the failings of the monarchy and the broader system of privilege.

Women's Involvement Beyond Paris

Similar forms of activism emerged in towns and villages across France. Women participated in protests against hoarding, attacked symbols of feudal privilege, and insisted that local authorities enforce fair prices. Their roles as caregivers and providers gave them moral leverage; acting on behalf of their families, they confronted state neglect in ways male authorities found difficult to dismiss.

Yet despite their contributions, women's political involvement faced resistance. Revolutionary leaders praised women's patriotism during crises but dismissed their claims for citizenship. Women could march, riot, and negotiate with officials, but were denied official political rights. This double standard underscored a central contradiction of the revolutionary project.

Bread, Survival, and Political Consciousness

Bread was the centre of daily life for French families, and its rising price sharpened women's engagement with revolutionary politics. Urban families often spent half or more of their income on bread, and even slight price changes triggered acute hardship. As women were largely responsible for feeding their households, food shortages placed them at the forefront of collective protest.

Women as Guardians of the Moral Economy

Women frequently led bread riots, stormed bakeries, seized grain, and forced the sale of flour at what they regarded as just prices. Their actions reflected the long-standing belief in a "moral

economy,” where basic necessities should remain accessible regardless of market pressures. By insisting on fair distribution, they infused the Revolution with a strong sense of social justice, arguing that liberty must include the right to subsistence.

Linking Hunger to Politics

Food protests often turned explicitly political. Women accused aristocrats of conspiring to starve the people and criticised the monarchy for mismanagement. Their participation brought the Revolution into homes, markets, and neighbourhoods—places often overlooked by elite political actors. Bread therefore became more than a subsistence issue; it symbolised revolutionary justice, with women as its steadfast defenders.

The October Days of 1789

The October Days were a crucial turning point in the Revolution, illustrating the power of popular pressure and the central role of women in reshaping national politics. What began as a protest for bread transformed into a dramatic confrontation that forced the king from Versailles to Paris.

Economic Hardship and Rising Suspicion

France’s economic crisis was severe. The disastrous harvest of 1788 had caused widespread shortages and a steep rise in bread prices. Urban workers spent nearly all their wages on bread, and frustration quickly turned to anger. Rumours of grain hoarding and aristocratic conspiracies—what many called the “famine plot”—intensified public fear. At a time of revolutionary uncertainty, economic suffering merged with political distrust.

Political Anxiety at Versailles

Tensions rose further when reports circulated of a royalist banquet where officers allegedly insulted the tricolour cockade. Revolutionary newspapers portrayed the event as evidence of

counterrevolutionary plotting, especially implicating Marie Antoinette. The gap between Paris and Versailles widened as the king appeared increasingly disconnected from popular misery.

The March Begins

On 5 October, thousands of women gathered in Paris's marketplaces demanding bread. When local authorities failed to address their grievances, they mobilised for a march to Versailles. Armed with makeshift weapons and soaked by rain, they travelled the fifteen miles to the royal palace. Their numbers grew rapidly as more Parisians joined the procession.

Confrontation and Violence

Upon reaching Versailles, the women entered the hall of the National Assembly and voiced their demands directly to deputies. Outside, tensions escalated. Over the night, crowds penetrated the palace, killing several guards. Marie Antoinette narrowly escaped physical harm by fleeing to the king's quarters. Lafayette's arrival with the National Guard prevented a complete disaster, though the atmosphere remained explosive.

The Forced Return to Paris

On the morning of 6 October, the crowd insisted that the king return to Paris. Faced with overwhelming pressure, Louis XVI agreed. The procession back to the capital became a symbolic march of triumph for the people and humiliation for the monarchy. The king, once a distant and untouchable figure, was now effectively under the control of the Parisian public.

Consequences and Significance

The October Days reshaped the Revolution in several ways:

- They demonstrated the political power of ordinary women.
- They undermined the monarchy by removing it from its traditional seat of authority.
- They intensified the influence of Paris over national politics.

- They fuelled international anxiety about the Revolution's radical direction.

Feminist historians have emphasised that women were not simply reacting to hunger but were acting as political agents who compelled the state to respond. Their march achieved what elite opposition had never managed: forcing the king to submit to the will of the people.

CHAPTER FOUR

EARLY LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Olympe de Gouges, originally born Marie Gouze on 7 May 1748 in the provincial town of Montauban in southern France, emerged from a modest social environment that offered little indication of her later political influence. Her family background was typical of many provincial households of the period: her mother, Anne Olympe Mouisset, worked within a domestic sphere, while her presumed father, Pierre Gouze, earned a living as a butcher. Although this was the officially recorded lineage, whispers persisted throughout her life that she was the illegitimate daughter of Jean-Jacques Lefranc de Pompignan, a prominent literary figure and local nobleman. The uncertainty surrounding her birth became part of the mythology she later cultivated, symbolising her desire to rise above the rigid social boundaries imposed by class and gender in eighteenth-century France.

Like most girls raised outside the intellectual circles of Paris, her formal education was extremely limited. She received only basic instruction in reading and religious doctrine, far removed from the cultural privileges enjoyed by daughters of elite Parisian families who had access to tutors, salons, and intellectual networks. This early restriction shaped her later advocacy, as she consistently referred in her writings to the injustices faced by women who were denied access to learning. The frustration born from her own limited education ignited a lifelong commitment to challenging the intellectual exclusion of women.

At the age of seventeen, Marie Gouze was compelled into marriage with Louis-Yves Aubry, a local caterer. The marriage was unhappy and short-lived, ending with her husband's death not long after their union. She later described herself as a "widow by law," a phrase that expressed both the involuntary nature of the marriage and her relief at regaining her independence. In a

society where women often remarried to secure their economic survival, her choice to remain unmarried was a radical act. She openly rejected the idea of entering another union of dependence, a stance that foreshadowed her later critiques of patriarchy and her insistence that women possessed the right to shape their own lives.

Following her widowhood, she relocated to Paris during the early 1770s with her young son, Pierre. This move marked the pivotal transformation of her life. Paris, the cultural centre of Enlightenment debate, theatre, and political agitation, provided a stark contrast to Montauban. It offered her the environment in which she could reconstruct her identity. It was here that Marie Gouze adopted the name “Olympe de Gouges,” a conscious reinvention that signalled her ambition to be recognised as a writer and a public intellectual rather than a provincial widow. In an era when names carried social weight, this new identity helped her secure a place within Parisian literary and philosophical circles.

Her early years in Paris were characterised by exposure to a wide range of influences. She entered salons, interacted with dramatists and thinkers, and attempted to build a career as a playwright. While she never benefitted from formal academic training, she absorbed the key ideas of the Enlightenment—liberty, equality, reason, and humanitarianism. At the same time, she witnessed the glaring contradictions of Parisian society, where intellectuals preached equality while women remained systematically excluded from public life. Her personal struggles for artistic recognition, coupled with the prejudice she faced as a woman without noble birth, sharpened her awareness of exclusion and inequality. These experiences profoundly shaped her later political convictions and informed her advocacy for gender justice, social reform, and racial equality.

Her journey from Montauban to Paris, therefore, illustrates more than personal ambition. It represents the broader obstacles encountered by women in eighteenth-century France, where public participation was restricted by both social hierarchy and gender norms. By reinventing herself as Olympe de Gouges, she sought to break these barriers and claim a public voice as a thinker, writer, and political commentator.

Legacy of Olympe de Gouges

The reputation of Olympe de Gouges has undergone dramatic transformations over time. Immediately following the Revolution, she was remembered less for her intellectual contributions and more for the controversy surrounding her political activism. Her critics—many of them male revolutionaries—portrayed her as a woman who had transgressed the boundaries considered proper for her gender. This early ridicule influenced how she was perceived throughout the nineteenth century: historians either ignored her entirely or depicted her as eccentric, emotional, or misguided, rather than recognising the depth of her political thought.

The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the rediscovery of her work, particularly with the rise of organised women's movements. Feminist scholars identified her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen) as one of the earliest and clearest expressions of the demand for gender equality. Her writings were reinterpreted as foundational texts in the global struggle for women's legal and political rights. In this way, she became a symbolic predecessor of modern feminist thought.

Her legacy also rests on her critique of the Revolution's failure to live up to its own ideals. By exposing the selective nature of "universal rights" that excluded women, she forced later generations to confront the limitations of revolutionary rhetoric. Her arguments influenced subsequent debates on citizenship, suffrage, and the nature of equality. In France, her reputation

continued to grow throughout the twentieth century as historians, public intellectuals, and activists acknowledged her courage and political foresight. Streets, schools, and public buildings were eventually named in her honour, reinforcing her place in French cultural and political history.

Her legacy therefore developed along two major lines: she became both a symbol of the dangers faced by women who dared to claim public authority in a male-dominated society, and an enduring figure whose writings helped expand the definition of democratic citizenship.

Analysis of the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen (1791)

In 1791, Olympe de Gouges produced her most influential text, the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen. Modelled directly on the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, her work challenged the Revolution's claim to universality by insisting that women, too, were entitled to the rights of citizenship. She addressed the document to Queen Marie-Antoinette, a deliberate and provocative choice intended to draw maximum attention to the cause of women's rights.

The structure of her Declaration echoed that of the 1789 text, beginning with a preamble followed by seventeen articles. This mirrored format was strategic: by using the Revolution's own framework, she demonstrated that the exclusion of women was neither natural nor justified but simply an omission rooted in prejudice. Her bold rewriting of the famous phrase "men are born and remain free and equal in rights" as "woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights" directly confronted the inconsistency of revolutionary ideals and revealed the gendered limits of its application.

Among the most radical elements of her text was the demand for women's political participation. Article VI argued that both sexes, being equal before the law, should be admitted to all public positions according to merit. This challenged the deeply ingrained belief, shared by many revolutionaries, that women's primary role belonged in the domestic sphere. Her argument did not merely request political inclusion but asserted a fundamental redefinition of citizenship itself. The Declaration also addressed marriage and family law, areas traditionally governed by patriarchal norms. De Gouges insisted that marriage should be a voluntary contract between equals and called for the legal recognition of children born outside wedlock. She emphasised that women should share equal control over property and inheritance, directly challenging the legal structures that subordinated women within the household.

Her conception of the social contract extended beyond rights to include responsibilities. She affirmed that women were capable of civic virtue and should therefore be subject to the same duties as men. Her approach balanced demands for equality with a demonstration of women's capacity to contribute to the public good—strengthening her argument in a political environment wary of female activism.

Overall, the Declaration represented a powerful combination of critique and reconstruction. It exposed the Revolution's contradictions and simultaneously proposed a more inclusive definition of citizenship. The issues she raised—political rights, legal equality, marriage reform, and the meaning of universal rights—anticipated debates that would continue well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Conclusion: Political Engagement, Marginalisation, and Execution

Olympe de Gouges's involvement in revolutionary politics demonstrated a rare determination to participate openly in public life at a time when women's voices were systematically silenced. Through pamphlets, plays, and political essays, she addressed not only women's rights but also slavery, constitutional reform, and humanitarian concerns. Her willingness to intervene directly in national debates positioned her among the few women who attempted to shape the Revolution from within the public sphere.

However, her prominence also made her a target. Revolutionary leaders tolerated radicalism among men but condemned similar boldness in women as unnatural or destabilising. The Jacobins, who increasingly sought to control political expression, viewed her writings with suspicion. Her appeal to Marie-Antoinette, her opposition to the king's execution, and her criticisms of Jacobin policies branded her in their eyes as a counter-revolutionary sympathiser.

Her marginalisation was intensified by gendered hostility. Male revolutionaries mocked her intellectual ambitions, dismissed her arguments as vanity, and accused her of attempting to overstep the "natural" boundaries of womanhood. In the tense political climate of 1793, dissent was equated with treason, and her outspoken positions placed her directly in danger.

She was arrested, tried, and executed by guillotine in November 1793. Officially, she was condemned for sedition, but her death served as a symbol—an unmistakable warning to other women who might attempt to claim political authority. Her execution reinforced the Revolution's systematic exclusion of women from citizenship and exposed the contradiction between its proclaimed ideals and its actual practices.

In retrospect, her political engagement was both visionary and costly. By challenging the Revolution to extend its promises to women, she confronted entrenched prejudices and political orthodoxy. Her death illustrated the limits of revolutionary universalism, while her writings and example laid the groundwork for future debates on gender equality.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION, SUMMARY, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter brings together the main arguments and findings of the study, which examined the French Revolution with a particular focus on the role of women and the contributions of Olympe de Gouges. Although the Revolution is remembered primarily for its dramatic political, social, and economic transformations, it also served as a period during which women forcefully articulated their demands for recognition within the emerging ideals of liberty, equality, and citizenship. Among these voices, Olympe de Gouges stands out for her clarity and courage. Her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* (1791) challenged the patriarchal framework of revolutionary politics and laid an intellectual foundation for later feminist movements.

The Revolution fundamentally reshaped French society. It dismantled the *ancien régime*, curtailed aristocratic privilege, redefined sovereignty, and inaugurated the principles of secular citizenship and legal equality. However, despite these sweeping reforms, women remained largely excluded from the political rights granted to men. Olympe de Gouges confronted this contradiction directly, insisting that rights proclaimed as “universal” must also apply to women. Her work gave early shape to political arguments that would only gain formal recognition many decades later.

Summary of the Study

This research began by outlining the significance of the French Revolution and situating women's role within it. The introductory sections highlighted that although revolutionary history has often been narrated as a male-dominated story, women actively shaped political events through protests, political clubs, market demonstrations, and intellectual contributions. The study also stressed that women's roles have frequently been marginalized in historical scholarship, an oversight this research sought to address.

The literature review offered diverse scholarly interpretations. Traditional historians such as Georges Lefebvre and William Doyle concentrated on political structures, class tensions, and economic decline, while feminist scholars such as Joan Wallach Scott and Suzanne Desan emphasized the gendered dimensions of revolutionary change. This review demonstrated that although women made visible contributions, the Revolution institutionalized a political culture that restricted their participation in formal governance.

The historical background explored the origins of the Revolution, illustrating how fiscal crisis, social inequality, Enlightenment philosophy, and rising political consciousness produced demands for change. It traced the Revolution through its major phases—the fall of the monarchy, the radicalization of the Jacobins, the Reign of Terror, and the emergence of Napoleon—showing how each stage reshaped the possibilities available to women.

A detailed examination of Olympe de Gouges highlighted her intellectual courage at a moment when public dissent could easily result in persecution. Her writings demanded political equality, educational opportunities, and legal reform within marriage and family life. Her execution in 1793 marked the dangers faced by women who challenged the revolutionary government, yet her ideas survived and influenced feminist thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The thematic discussions also assessed the broader impact of the Revolution, demonstrating how it redefined political legitimacy, abolished feudalism, and established the principle that citizens—not monarchs—constituted the foundation of political authority. Yet the exclusion of women revealed the Revolution's contradictions, highlighting the incompleteness of its egalitarian project and the need for continued struggles for gender justice.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the French Revolution was both transformative and incomplete. While it introduced ideas of equality, citizenship, and national sovereignty that remain central to modern political life, it denied women access to the rights and responsibilities embedded in these ideals. Olympe de Gouges exposed this contradiction with remarkable clarity. Through her writings, she demanded that women not be treated as passive subjects but as active participants in civic life. Although her advocacy cost her her life, her ideas became an enduring part of the intellectual foundation of modern feminism.

Women's involvement in the Revolution—whether through activism, writing, or public protest—demonstrates that they were not silent observers but essential contributors to the reshaping of French society. A complete understanding of the Revolution must therefore include their voices, struggles, and aspirations. Recognizing women's contributions deepens the historical narrative and connects past struggles with contemporary debates about gender equality, political participation, and human rights.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Re-examining Revolutionary History

Historians, educators, and curriculum developers should integrate women's contributions into mainstream narratives of the French Revolution. This will provide a more accurate and inclusive historical record and help students understand the full complexity of revolutionary change.

2. Preserving Olympe de Gouges' Legacy

Greater academic and public attention should be devoted to Olympe de Gouges. Her works should be studied not only as historical documents but also as pioneering feminist texts with enduring intellectual relevance.

3. Advancing Gender Equality Today

The discrepancies between revolutionary ideals and women's exclusion reveal the ongoing nature of gender inequality. Policymakers and social institutions should continue working toward equal access to education, political participation, and economic opportunity. The historical struggles highlighted in this study can inspire contemporary efforts to eliminate gender-based disparities.

4. Expanding Future Research

Comparative studies should be conducted to examine women's participation in other revolutions—such as the American, Haitian, and Latin American revolutions. Such research would identify both shared challenges and unique strategies employed by women in different political environments.

5. Linking Revolutionary Lessons to Modern Activism

Activists, educators, and policymakers can draw important lessons from the French Revolution when addressing contemporary issues of representation, citizenship, and social justice. The

exclusion of women in the eighteenth century serves as a reminder that rights are not automatically inclusive and must be continually defended and expanded.

Final Reflection

The French Revolution remains one of the most influential events in world history. Its ideals continue to shape global debates about justice, equality, and governance. Yet its failures remind us that transformative political change can leave significant groups marginalized. Olympe de Gouges stands as a powerful symbol of resistance to such exclusion—a woman who insisted that universal rights must genuinely be universal.

In today's world, where discussions about equality and representation persist, the lessons of the Revolution and the writings of de Gouges remain deeply relevant. Their legacy challenges us to build societies that fully include all people, irrespective of gender. Acknowledging the contributions of women who fought for rights long before they were recognized is not only a historical responsibility but also an essential step toward creating a more inclusive future.