

What can historians learn from the study of gender relationships in the past?

Introduction

Over the past centuries, gender relationships have undergone huge transformations. Achievements in history—such as women’s suffrage across many countries in the early 20th century—have paved the way for greater social and economic contribution on the part of women. The labor force participation rate for prime-age women reached 77.8 percent in 2023, which “exceeded its all-time high” (Wang and Bauer, 2023). Meanwhile, the tertiary education level of women reached 41 percent, which is 5 percent higher than men's (Statista, 2020). However, prominent challenges persist: women still face a gender pay gap of around 20 percent, which, if continuing at the current narrowing rate, will take roughly 134 years to reach gender parity (“Global Gender Gap Report,” 2024). Women hold only 8.2 percent of the CEO positions at S&P 500 companies in 2023 (He and Whited, 2023). And women continue to shoulder disproportionate domestic responsibilities. The inadequacy of maternal leave policies (especially in the US), persistent workplace discrimination, and under-representation in political leadership highlight ongoing inequities. The stagnation of progress has created an overall atmosphere of malaise, which can be seen in recent phenomena that I discuss below.

Understanding these inequalities requires a closer investigation of history. Specifically, I would like to turn to the women during the French Revolution who fought for greater rights. By examining historical moments and analyzing influential texts like Mary Wollstonecraft's “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” and Olympe de Gouges's “Declaration of Rights of Women,” historians can trace the pioneers of modern feminism and their journey toward equality. For example, “Woman is born free and remains the equal of man in rights” (de Gouges, 1791). This analysis illuminates past social conditions and helps contextualize contemporary

gender issues, from gendered language in professional settings to persistent workplace inequalities such as the gender pay gap and under-representation in leadership roles.

This essay will explore what historians can learn from studying gender relationships in the past by examining three main aspects: the revolutionary period's impact on women's rights and social status, the foundational feminist texts that emerged during this era, and the parallels—and differences—between historical and contemporary gender dynamics. By analyzing these elements, we can better understand how historical gender relationships continue to influence modern society and what lessons we can draw from past struggles for equality. Rather than surrendering to pessimism, studying history can revitalize our sense of possibility by showing how women have fought for radical change in the past.

Gender Relations during the French Revolution

The French Revolution stands as a pivotal historical period for understanding past gender relationships, marked by turbulence and radical social and political transformations. While promising “liberty, equality, fraternity,” the revolution exposed glaring contradictions in how these ideals applied to women. Despite the revolutionary spirit, women still faced persistent structural discrimination that confined them to traditional domestic roles, denied them the basic rights of citizenship, such as voting and the ability to own property, and left them with limited economic independence. “Control over women's property was placed squarely in masculine hand,” writes R. B. Rose (1995). Joan Landes also makes a similar claim: “The Republic was constructed against women, not just without them” (1998).

However, key figures such as Olympe de Gouges, Etta Palm, and Théroigne de Méricourt emerged as advocates for women’s rights through their writings, speeches, and activism (Abray,

1975). Other women figures like Marie-Jeanne Roland and Germaine de Staël hosted salons to foster revolutionary ideas and arrange political power (Evans, 2021). De Gouges's Declaration of the Rights of Woman was not merely a response to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen but also a manifesto and call to arms imbued with a sense of energy and possibility. Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, argued that men "force all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain immured in their families groping in the dark" and states that "If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman ... will not shrink from the same test" (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Both figures emphasized the universality of virtues and the importance of cultivating strength of mind and character over superficial attributes like beauty or charm—an idea that remains strikingly relevant today amidst ongoing debates over gendered language and education.

Beyond individual activists, mass participation by women played a significant role in revolutionary events. Women were active in the October March on Versailles in 1789, the sans-culottes movement, and food riots, demonstrating their political and social influence (Evans, 2021). Organized groups such as the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women in 1793 highlighted women's collective power (Abray, 1975). This women's club, which addressed issues like food pricing and gender equality, marked a significant moment in women's organized political activity. However, this feminist awakening alarmed the revolutionary government, leading to its suppression. Olympe de Gouges, deemed "unnatural," was guillotined by the Republican government (Revolution, 1794). Numerous women's clubs were shuttered by 1795 and excluded from public discourse (Abray, 1975). Authorities justified these actions by

claiming that women's "natural" roles were domestic, reflecting a deep-seated resistance to gender equality and women's participation in the public sphere.

The contrast between the revolutionary period and today reveals significant progress but also lingering challenges. Ideas that were considered radical at the time, such as equal representation in public office, are now more widely accepted if not fully realized. While de Gouges's and Wollstonecraft's writings are less controversial in modern discourse, the implementation of many of their ideals—such as equality in holding public office, emphasized in articles 6 and 13 of de Gouges's Declaration (1791)—remains incomplete. This unfinished revolution underscores the enduring relevance of these figures and the need to revisit their vision to inspire progress in contemporary society.

Contemporary Gender Relationships

Contemporary gender relationships reflect both significant improvement and persistent challenges. While legal frameworks now generally support gender equality and women's participation in education and the workforce has dramatically increased, new forms of gender-related issues have emerged, which means that the struggle persists. One prominent phenomenon, especially prominent in online spaces, is an overall sense of malaise and passivity. Two such examples are the rise of "heteropessimism" and the "tradwife."

Heteropessimism can be defined as a "performative disaffiliation with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience" (Seresin, 2019). Women who are heteropessimists often loudly complain about how "all men are trash" while admitting they keep dating men. Even as heteropessimists despair over the state of men in the contemporary world, they rarely abandon their heterosexuality or cease to

date the opposite gender. Change or collective action is not thinkable in this framework. The depressing present is all that there is.

Similarly, the rise of the “tradwife”, which advocates for women’s return to traditional domestic roles, represents the rejection of feminist progress and a glorification of domestic life. The “tradwives” who became popular on social media, though claiming not to believe women’s inferior to men, perform femininity with a “baby voice”, (Beatty, 2024) having “no intentions of making money”, and insist on women’s submission to men (Elmhirst, 2024). This romanization of women’s submission is commented as “promoting a return to the days of coverture and an erasure of the hard-fought gains of women’s rights activists” (Beatty, 2024). Many women cite difficulties in balancing work and home life as their reason for abandoning work altogether in favor of domestic life, which in reality conceals the assumption that it is women who are obligated to shoulder domestic responsibilities. Men do not face a similar dilemma between home and work life.

These dynamics are caused by the general withdrawal of women and feminism from public life. Earlier feminist groups placed a strong emphasis on group involvement and public participation, but the current environment favors individualized responses. Corporate feminism and consumerism have progressively appropriated the “energies” of feminism, turning its transformational potential into commercial slogans and goods. Corporate feminism, for example, prioritizes individual achievement above structural change, frequently failing to address structural obstacles in the workplace (Berwick, 2023). As noted by Allison Elia, throughout the mid-to-late 20th century, “women doing clerical and secretarial work, men being fast-tracked into more strategic and management roles ... created a workplace duality” (cited in Berwick, 2022). Once in a while, a woman may have broken through, but it only goes to hide the fact that

most women were still systematically excluded. In other words, while legal and institutional advancements have significantly improved women's opportunities and participation in public life, systemic inequalities persist, and it is their persistence that leads to the pessimism and retreat exemplified by heteropessimism and tradwives. We seem to be far from the time of de Gouges, in which a better world for everyone seemed to be just over the horizon.

Conclusion

The study of gender relationships throughout history reveals the profound influence of past challenges on contemporary society, as well as the ongoing pursuit of equality. By examining the French Revolution and its feminist figures and events, we can see that the struggle for equal rights is one that has a long history. We also see from the past that social constructs are not everlasting but can be radically reimagined and reshaped in an ongoing process. Historical analysis also highlights the persistence of structural inequalities, even in modern contexts. While significant progress has been made, such as advancements in women's education, workforce participation, and legal rights, systemic barriers and cultural setbacks continue to hinder full gender equality. These insights challenge us to move beyond surface-level achievements and confront the deeper issues that perpetuate inequality. Ultimately, history offers a vital reminder that change is possible, and that progress often requires collective action. Reflecting on the struggles and achievements of the past can reignite a sense of possibility, empowering us to address contemporary gender challenges with renewed energy and determination.

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