

# Women's Issues on the Eve of the French Revolution

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## 44 • PETITION OF PARISIAN WOMEN OF THE THIRD ESTATE TO LOUIS XVI

### QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. The authors of the petition chose to address their concerns to the king rather than the Estates General. Why?
2. What attitudes toward men are stated or implied in the petition?
3. According to the petition, what laws and social customs of France determine women's vocational and matrimonial prospects?
4. What specific steps do the authors hope the king will take on their behalf?
5. If these steps are taken, what kind of future do these women envision for themselves in France?

Sire,

At a time when the various orders of the state are busy with their interests, when everyone is trying to assert his titles and his rights, when some people are worrying about recalling centuries of servitude and anarchy, when others are making every effort to shake off the last links which still bind them to the impetuous remains of the feudal system, women — continual objects of the admiration and scorn of men — women, wouldn't it be possible for them also to make their voices heard amidst this general agitation?

Excluded from the national assemblies by laws too well consolidated for them to hope to break, they do not ask, Sire, for your permission to send their deputies to the Estates General; they know too well how great a role interest would play in an election and how easy it would be for the representatives to impede the freedom of the votes.

We prefer, Sire, to place our cause at your feet; not wishing to obtain anything except from your heart, we address our complaints and confide our miseries to it.

The women of the Third Estate are almost all born without fortune; their education is very neglected or very defective: it consists in their being sent to schools at the house of a teacher who himself does not know the first word of the language he is teaching. They continue going there until they are able to read the service of the Mass in French and Vespers<sup>1</sup> in Latin. Having fulfilled the first duties of religion, they are taught to work; having reached the age of fifteen or sixteen, they can make five or six *livres*<sup>2</sup> a

day. If nature has refused them beauty, they get married without dowry<sup>3</sup> to unfortunate artisans, lead aimless, difficult lives struck away in the provinces, and give birth to children they are incapable of raising. If, on the contrary, they are born pretty, without culture, without principles, without any idea of morals, they become the prey of the first seducer, commit a first sin, come to Paris to buy their shame, end by losing it altogether, and die victims of licentious ways.

Today, when the difficulty of subsisting forces thousands of them to put themselves up for auction, when men find it easier to buy them for a spell than to win them over forever, those whom a happy penchant inclines to virtue, who are consumed by the desire to learn, who feel themselves led by a natural taste, who have overcome the deficiencies of their education and know a little of everything without having learned anything, those, to conclude, whom a haughty soul, a noble heart, a pride of sentiment cause to be called *pride-iss*, are forced to throw themselves into cloisters where only a modest dowry is required, or forced to hire themselves out when they do not have enough courage, enough heroism, to share the generous devotion of the daughters of Vincent de Paul.<sup>4</sup>

Also, several, solely because they are born girls, are disdained by their parents, who refuse to set them up, preferring to concentrate their fortune on the head of a son whom they designate to carry on their name in the capital; for it is good that Your Majesty understands that we also have names to keep up. Or, if old age finds them spinners, they spend it in tears and see themselves the object of the scorn of their nearest relatives.

<sup>1</sup>A Catholic religious service in the late afternoon or evening, consisting of hymns, scriptural readings, and prayers.

<sup>2</sup>Figuratively, a tiny amount of money, a few cents.

<sup>3</sup>Money or goods that a woman brings to her husband at the time of marriage. In prerevolutionary France the money would be controlled by the husband but returned to the woman if she became a widow. Without a dowry a young woman's chances of marrying were severely diminished.

<sup>4</sup>The Daughters of Charity, a religious order founded in 1633 by the French religious leader St. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660), was noted for its work among the poor and orphans.

To prevent so many ills, Sire, we ask that men not be allowed, under any pretext, to exercise trades that are the prerogative of women — such as seamstress, embroiderer, *marbände de mode*,<sup>5</sup> etc.; if we are left at least with the needle and the spindle, we promise never to handle the compass or the square.

We ask, Sire, that your benevolence provide us with the means of putting to use the talents with which nature will have furnished us, notwithstanding the impediments which are forever being placed on our education.

May you assign us positions, which we alone will be able to fill, which we will occupy only after having passed a strict examination, after trustworthy inquiries concerning the purity of our morals.

We ask to be enlightened, to have work, not in order to usurp men's authority, but in order to be better esteemed by them, so that we might have the means of living out of the way of misfortune and so that poverty does not force the weakest among us, who are blinded by luxury and swept along by example, to join the crowd of unfortunate beings who overpopulate the streets and whose debauched audacity is a disgrace to our sex and to the men who keep them company.

We would want this class to women to wear a mark of identification. Today, when they go so far as to adopt the modesty of our dress, when they mingle everywhere in all kinds of clothing, we often find ourselves taken for them; some men are mistaken and make us blush because of their scorn. It would be necessary that under pain of having to work in the public workshops for the benefit of the poor (it is known that work is the greatest punishment that can be inflicted on

them), they never be able to remove this mark. . . . [sic] However, it occurs to us that the empire of fashion would be destroyed and one would run the risk of seeing many too many women dressed in the same color.

We implore you, Sire, to set up free schools where we could learn our language on the basis of principles [and] religion and ethics. May one and the other be offered to us in all their grandeur, entirely stripped of the petty applications which attenuate their majesty; may our hearts be formed there; may we be taught above all to practice the virtues of our sex: gentleness, modesty, patience, charity; as for the arts that please, women learn them without teachers. Sciences? . . . They serve only to inspire us with a stupid pride, lead us to pedantry, go against the desires of nature, make of us mixed beings who are rarely faithful wives and still more rarely good mothers of families.

We ask to come out of the state of ignorance, to be able to give our children a sound and reasonable education so as to make of them subjects worthy of serving you. We will teach them to cherish the beautiful name of Frenchmen; we will transmit to them the love we have for Your Majesty, for we are willing to leave valor and genius to men, but we will challenge them over the dangerous and precious gift of sensitivity; we defy them to love you better than we; they run to Versailles,<sup>6</sup> most of them for their interests, and when we, Sire, see you there, with difficulty and with pounding hearts, and are able to gaze for an instant upon your August Person, tears flow from our eyes. The idea of Majesty, of Sovereign, vanishes, as we see in you only a tender Father, for whom we would sacrifice our lives a thousand times.

<sup>5</sup>One who makes or sells women's hats.

<sup>6</sup>The French royal residence, the construction of which was begun during the reign of Louis XIV in the 1680s.