

Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King (1 January 1789)

[*Introductory note:* Little is known about women's grievances or feelings in the months leading up to the meeting of the Estates-General in November 1789. They did not have the right to meet as a group, draft grievances, or vote (except in isolated individual instances) in the preparatory elections. Nevertheless, some women did put their thoughts to paper, and though little evidence exists about the circumstances or the identities of those involved, the few documents offering their views bear witness to their concerns in this time of ferment. In this document working women addressed the King in respectful terms and carefully insisted that they did not wish to overturn men's authority; they simply wanted the education and enlightenment that would make them better workers, better wives, and better mothers. The petitioners expressed their deep apprehensions about prostitution and the fear that they would be confused with them; like prostitutes, working women did not stay at home but necessarily entered the public sphere to make their livings. Most of all, however, the women wanted to be heard; they saw the opening created by the convocation of the Estates-General and hoped to make their own claims for inclusion in the promised reforms.]

Sire,

At a time when the different orders of the state are occupied with their interests; when everyone seeks to make the most of his titles and rights; when some anxiously recall the centuries of servitude and anarchy, while others make every effort to shake off the last links that still bind them to the imperious remains of feudalism; women— continual objects of the admiration and scorn of men— could they not also make their voices heard midst this general agitation?

Excluded from the national assemblies by laws so well consolidated that they allow no hope of infringement, they do not ask, Sire, for your permission to send their deputies to the Estates-General; they know too well how much favor will play a part in the election, and how easy it would be for those elected to impede the freedom of voting.

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

The women of the Third Estate are almost all born without wealth; their education is very neglected or very defective: it consists in their being sent to school with a teacher who himself does not know the first word of the language [Latin] he teaches. They continue to go there until they can read the service of the Mass in French and Vespers in Latin. Having fulfilled the first duties of religion, they are taught to work; having reached the age of fifteen or sixteen, they can earn five or six *sous* a day. If nature has refused them beauty they get married, without a dowry, to unfortunate artisans; lead aimless, difficult lives stuck in the provinces; and give birth to children they are incapable of raising. If, on the contrary, they are born pretty, without breeding, without principles, with no idea of morals, they become the prey of the first seducer, commit a first sin, come to Paris to bury their shame, end by losing it altogether, and die victims of dissolute ways.

Today, when the difficulty of subsisting forces thousands of them to put themselves up for auction [prostitution], when men find it easier to buy them for a short time than to win them over forever,

those whom a fortunate penchant inclines to virtue, who are consumed by the desire to learn, who feel themselves carried along by a natural taste, who have overcome the deficiencies of their education and know a little of everything without having learned anything, those, finally, whom a lofty soul, a noble heart, and a pride of sentiment cause to be called prudes, are obliged to throw themselves into cloisters where only a modest dowry is required, or forced to become servants if they do not have enough courage, enough heroism, to share the generous devotion of the girls of Vincent de Paul.*¹

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

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—whether as seamstress, embroiderer, millinery shopkeeper, etc., 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 making the most of the talents with which nature will have endowed us, notwithstanding the impediments which are forever being placed on our education.

¹ St. Vincent de Paul organized communities for women who served as schoolteachers, nurses, and the like. They took simple vows, did not wear religious costumes, and worked outside in the community rather than staying in their convent. These communities often appealed to poor women but demanded hard work.

May you assign us positions, which we alone will be able to fill, which we will occupy only after having passed a strict examination, following 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 safe from 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 women who overpopulate the streets and whose debauched audacity disgraces our sex and the men who keep them company.

We would wish this class of women might wear a mark of identification. Today, when they adopt even the modesty of our dress, when they mingle everywhere in all kinds of clothing, we often find ourselves confused with them; some men make mistakes and make us blush because of their scorn. They should never be able to take off the identification under pain of working in public workshops for the benefit of the poor (it is known that work is the greatest punishment that can be inflicted on them). . . . [in text] 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 might learn our language on the basis of principles, 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? . . . [in text] they serve only to inspire us with a stupid pride, lead us to pedantry, go against the wishes of nature, make of us mixed beings who are rarely faithful wives and still more rarely good mothers of families.

We ask to take leave of ignorance, 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 certainly willing to leave valor and genius to men, but we will always challenge them over the dangerous and precious gift of sensibility; we defy them to love you better than we do. They run to Versailles, most of them for their interests, while we,

Sire, go to see you there, and when with difficulty and with pounding hearts, we can gaze for an instance upon your August Person, tears flow from our eyes. The idea of Majesty, of the Sovereign, vanishes, and we see in you only a tender Father, for whom we would give our lives a thousand times.

Source: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/>>.