

Origins and Development of Feminism in France

I. Intellectual Origins: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the “Rights Question” (18th Century)

The emergence of feminism in France is deeply rooted in the intellectual ferment of the **Enlightenment** and the political upheaval of the French Revolution (**1789**). Enlightenment philosophy proclaimed universal rights, yet in practice excluded women from political citizenship.

1. Enlightenment Contradiction

- Thinkers like Rousseau advocated liberty and equality—but largely for men.
- Women were relegated to the domestic sphere, justified through “natural differences.”

2. Radical Intervention: Olympe de Gouges

- In **1791**, she authored Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen.
- Argued:
 - Women are born free and equal to men.
 - Political rights (voting, property, representation) must include women.
- Her execution during the Revolution symbolizes the suppression of early feminist dissent.



DÉCLARATION DES DROITS DE LA FEMME ET DE LA CITOYENNE,

A décréter par l'Assemblée nationale dans ses dernières séances ou dans celle de la prochaine législature.

P R É A M B U L E.

Les mères, les filles, les soeurs, représentantes de la nation, demandent d'être constituées en assemblée nationale. Considérant que l'ignorance, l'oubli ou le mépris des droits de la femme, sont les seules causes des malheurs publics et de la corruption des gouvernements, ont résolu d'exposer dans une déclaration solennelle, les droits naturels, inaliénables et sacrés de la femme, afin que cette déclaration, constamment présente à tous les membres du corps social, leur rappelle sans cesse leurs droits et leurs devoirs, afin que les actes du pouvoir des femmes, et ceux du pouvoir des hommes pouvant être à chaque instant comparés avec le but de toute institution politique, en soient plus respectés, afin que les réclamations des citoyennes, fondées désormais sur des principes simples et incontestables, tournent toujours au maintien de la constitution, des bonnes moeurs, et au bonheur de tous.

En conséquence, le sexe supérieur en beauté comme en courage, dans les souffrances maternelles, reconnaît et déclare, en présence

3. Revolutionary Women's Activism

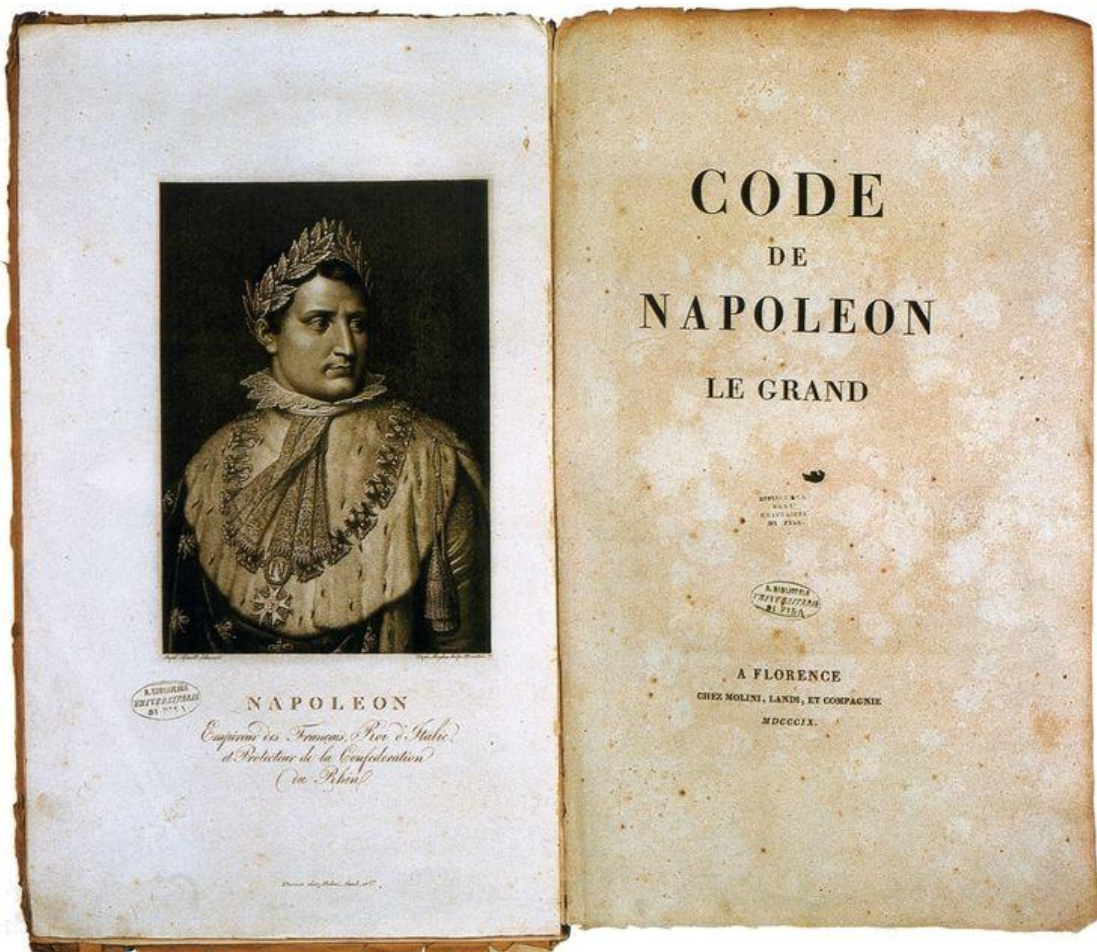
- Women participated actively (e.g., March to Versailles).
- However, post-1793:
 - Women's political clubs were banned.
 - Feminist voices were silenced.

Analytical Insight: French feminism begins not as a separate movement but as a critique internal to liberal universalism—exposing its gendered exclusions.

II. 19th Century: Liberal Feminism and Structural Constraints

1. The Legal Barrier: Napoleonic Patriarchy

- The **Napoleonic Code (1804)** institutionalized women's subordination:
 - Women lacked legal autonomy.
 - Married women were under husbands' authority.



2. Early Feminist Voices

- Hubertine Auclert:
 - Advocated women's suffrage.
 - Critiqued taxation without representation.

3. Socialist Feminist Influences

- French feminism intersected with socialism:
 - Linked women's oppression to capitalism and class inequality.
 - Women workers' rights became central.

Key Characteristic: Unlike British liberal feminism, French feminism developed a **stronger socialist and anti-clerical orientation**, shaped by class politics and secular republicanism.

III. Early 20th Century: Suffrage and Political Inclusion

1. Delayed Suffrage

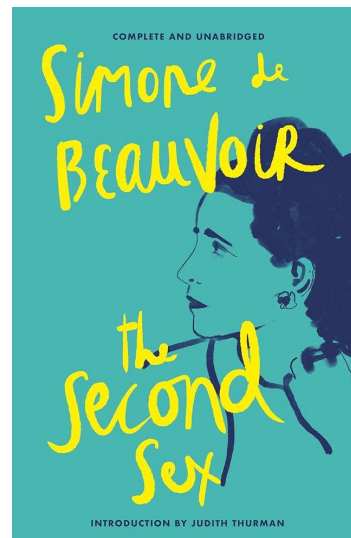
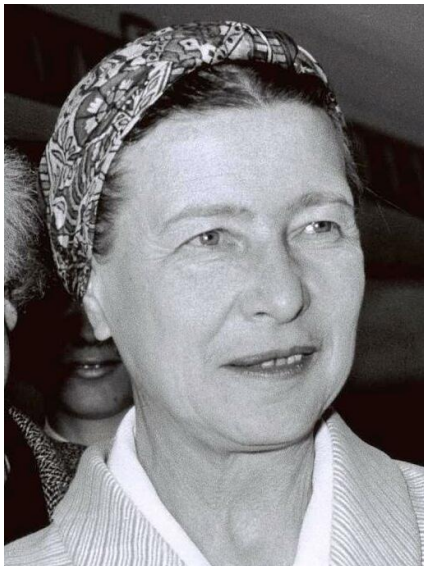
- French women gained voting rights only in **1944**, much later than Britain.
- Granted under Charles de Gaulle's **provisional government** after WWII.

2. Reasons for Delay

- Conservative fears (women influenced by Church).
- Political instability of the Third Republic.

Comparative Note: France's delay highlights how republicanism, despite its universalist claims, resisted gender inclusion longer than some monarchies.

IV. Second Wave Feminism: Radical Thought and Social Transformation (1960s–1980s)



1. Foundational Text: Simone de Beauvoir

- The Second Sex (1949):
 - Famous thesis: “One is not born, but becomes, a woman.”
 - Introduced **gender as a social construct**.

2. The Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF)

- Emerged in the 1970s.
- Focus areas:
 - Reproductive rights
 - Sexual autonomy
 - Patriarchal critique

3. Key Achievements

- Legalization of abortion (1975).
- Expansion of workplace rights.

Theoretical Contribution: French feminism became globally influential through **existentialist and post-structuralist frameworks**, unlike Anglo-American empiricism.

V. Post-Structuralist and Difference Feminism (Late 20th Century)

1. Key Thinkers

- Luce Irigaray
- Hélène Cixous

2. Core Ideas

- Critique of **phallogentrism** (male-centered language and thought).
- Development of **écriture féminine** (feminine writing style).
- Emphasis on **difference rather than equality**.

Analytical Distinction:

- Anglo-American feminism → equality-based
- French feminism → difference, language, psychoanalysis

