

Liberty and equality ...

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feminist movement of the post revolution days; organised women's groups were banned. Women were denied the rights of active citizenship and relegated to their 'natural roles'—to stay home and tend to the family. Earlier, during the "enlightenment" years in the 1750s, when the French needed women to support their cause, Louis de Jaucourt wrote, "it would be difficult to demonstrate that the husband's rule comes from nature, in as much as this principle is contrary to natural human equality . . . a man does not invariably have more strength of body, of wisdom, of mind or of conduct than a woman . . . women can succeed equally . . ."

On 4 August 1789 the French Constituent Assembly passed the Declaration of the 'Rights of Man' leaving behind women of the revolution. The process was completed by adoption of the Napoleonic Code which established the right of the man to take decisions on woman's education and property, relegating all the advances made by the feminist movement to pre-revolutionary days.

The French Declaration of the Rights of Man together with the US Bill of Rights later served as the working documents for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. Alas, none of these bills which propagated freedom of individuals on the basis of natural rights and protected by law of equality, considered liberty and equality as fundamental to ensuring women's rights. For the next thirty years women of the world imbued by the spirit of the revolutionary women of France continued the fight for their

equal and inalienable rights until the UN Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, popularly known as CEDAW, was signed in 1979. CEDAW, however, has not yet been able to give women freedom from discrimination.

Women who participated in the French Revolution had begun their struggle for equality in decision making long before the revolution was over. Led by Pauline Leon and Claire Lacombe, the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women was founded on 10 May 1793 to fight against hoarding of grain and inflation, and demanding bread and a new constitution with guaranteed citizenship rights for women. Most of them were later persecuted, exiled, or put under the guillotine. Other than these militant women, another group influenced the fight for liberty and equality through their writing and political engagement. Olympe de Gouges authored the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen in 1791. She sought to transform France into a country liberated, moderate, and "equal for all" by influencing policy decisions through her writings, in defence of which she offered to jump into the Seine River if the extremist and autocratic revolutionary Robespierre would join her. Olympe de Gouges was arrested, tortured and executed. Marie Roland influenced political decisions and policies through her letters addressed to male revolutionary leaders. She was not an activist for women's liberation but believed that women had a role to play in politics. She attributed their lack of education as their biggest weakness in being involved and observed—"it was their inferior educa-



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tion that turned them into foolish people." Roland also believed that given the opportunity to be properly educated women could be involved in "serious business of politics." These women were supported in their struggle by a few great thinkers of their time, such as Nicolas de Condorcet who advocated for equal rights for women and penned the article "For the Admission to the Rights of Citizenship for Women" in 1790. French women did not get their full rights until 1965, nearly two hundred years after the revolution. Bangladesh cannot wait that long!

Writings of de Gouges and Roland

proved that women could be intelligent and serious political change makers. Although guillotined, their ideas shared through their writings did not die down. In fact, growing awareness of rights stemming from Olympe de Gouges' writing of the Rights of Women gave momentum to later day movements for equality, liberty, and change for women around the world.

Bangladeshi women joined men in the armed struggle and in policy making in the formative years of the country. The constitution, in recognition of their role in the liberation struggle, guarantees their equal rights in all

spheres of public and private life. Yet, nearly fifty years on women are still not treated as equal citizens. Bangladesh continues to have reservations on the preamble of the CEDAW that declares equality of men and women in the eyes of the law, for reasons that are undefendable. For nearly forty years foreign exchange earnings of Bangladesh has piggybacked on women's labour in the garment and processed food industry. Yet, these poor women remain exactly where they were, with little or no education and no wealth to move upwards with equal rights towards a better life.

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