

18th Century Writing on Equal Protection for Women: America & France

America, 1776. The Adams correspondence.

Source: *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* by Alice S. Rossi, 1988

Abigail Adams letter to John Adams

Braintree March 31 1776

—I long to hear that you have declared an independency—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in immitation of the Supreem Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

John Adams letter in reply to Abigail Adams

Ap. 14. 1776

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented.—This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticcoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy.

Her demand:

That the new Constitution recognize women's right to equal protection of the law

His response – No.

To silence a woman, use

- 1) Ridicule
- 2) Contempt
- 3) Iron fist
- 4) Velvet glove
- 5) Reversal of reality
- 6) Suffocating hyperbole
- 7) Threat

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France 1793, Marquis de Condorcet and Sophie Condorcet.

Source: *The Life and death of Mary Wollstonecraft* by Claire Tomalin, 1992

Marquis de Condorcet

[O]ne of the most important advances in human thinking must be the total destruction of the prejudices which have established differences in the rights of the two sexes. . . . There is no justification for these differences, either in the physical nature of women, their intelligence or their moral sensibility. *The only basis for inequality is the abuse of brute strength*, and all the sophistry that has been brought to bear on the subject cannot alter this brute fact.

From Marquis de Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progres de l'esprit humain*, 1793.

On Condorcet, Sophie Condorcet, and the times

Before the end of 1793, the feminist movement [in France] was crushed. Only Condorcet, hidden in an upstairs room near the Sorbonne, continued to write on the subject of equal education and equal rights for women until the very last days of his life. His wife Sophie, who remained at Auteuil working on a translation of Adam Smith, visited him when she could and urged him to get on with the book he had been planning, a historical demonstration of the theory of perfectibility: and though he grew increasingly panic-stricken at the thought of what might happen to Sophie and his daughter as well as himself, he did complete his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progress de l'esprit humain*. . . . It described history in terms of a struggle between those who seek to control others by keeping them in superstitious ignorance and those who wish to enlighten and thus set free the whole of humanity, including women and the supposedly inferior races. Condorcet did not think that future improvements would solve all difficulties. . . . But both in the *Esquisse* and in another fragment in which he sketched a plan for an improved society, he reverted to the feminist cause.

Written by Claire Tomalin, *op. cit.* page 205.