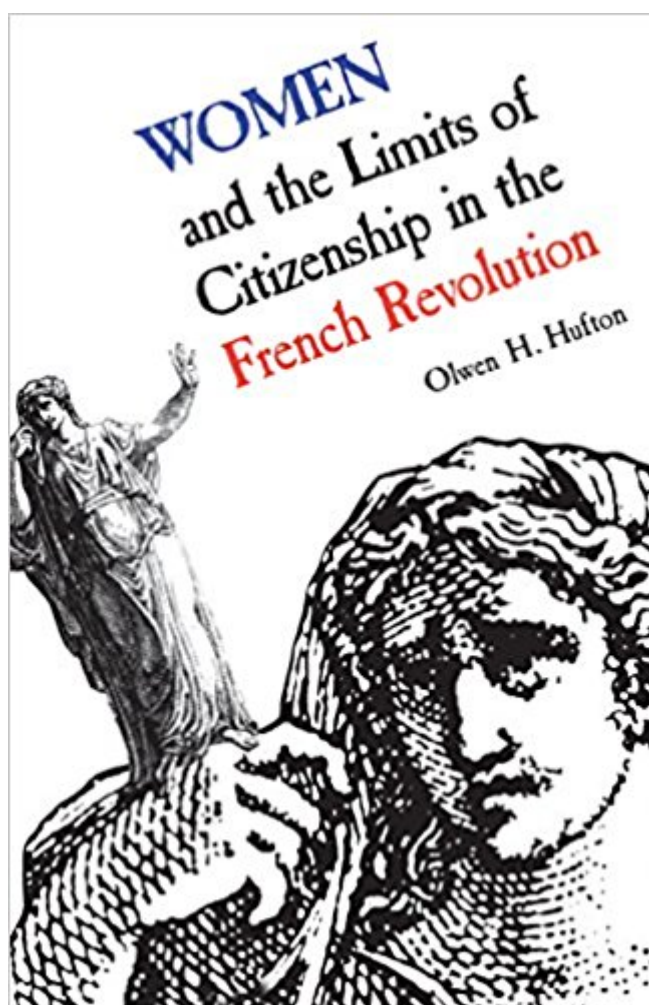


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# Women And The Limits Of Citizenship In The French Revolution (Heritage)



## Synopsis

The French masses overwhelmingly supported the Revolution in 1789. Economic hardship, hunger, and debt combined to put them solidly behind the leaders. But between the people's expectations and the politicians' interpretation of what was needed to construct a new state lay a vast chasm. Olwen H. Hufton explores the responses of two groups of working women — those in rural areas and those in Paris — to the revolution's aftermath. Women were denied citizenship in the new state, but they were not apolitical. In Paris, collective female activity promoted a controlled economy as women struggled to secure an adequate supply of bread at a reasonable price. Rural women engaged in collective confrontation to undermine government religious policy which was destroying the networks of traditional Catholic charity. Hufton examines the motivations of these two groups, the strategies they used to advance their respective causes, and the bitter misogynistic legacy of the republican tradition which persisted into the twentieth century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Olwen H. Hufton is a professor of European History and Women's Studies at Harvard University.

The title of this book may lead one to expect a treatise on the legal aspects of female citizenship and the limitations that were placed on them. The book's larger concern, however, is the female

reaction to revolutionary policy and the (male) authorities' perceptions (or misconceptions) of them. Hufton examines the ways in which the limitations on women were based not only on the law as it concerned their status in society, but also on the stereotypes (or "myths") that were believed by those in power. Some of these involved philosophic notions that political activity among women was a dangerous perversion. These and other tenets of a patriarchal society allowed a basic misunderstanding which led to a mistrust of women and their involvement in political life as well as notions that had tragic consequences, such as the belief that nuns were secretly pining away for life with a man, and that once "liberated" would quickly find comfort and security in matrimony. The reality was quite different. This perception vs. reality is a recurrent theme in the book, and is even extended to the present: Hufton notes that concerning the "October Days" march of women to Versailles, historians then and ever since have tended to downplay the importance of their actions or look for a male impetus. Women of the time, however, were often well aware of the stereotypical conceptions that men held, and used them to their advantage, playing up their whiles and charms (i.e., innocence) when it suited them - for instance, when it kept them out of prison, or away from the guillotine. This work is culled from a series of lectures given at the University of Toronto in 1989, and retains some of the idiosyncrasies that tend to differentiate lecture from scholarly writing. This has its pros and cons, depending on your point of view. On the upside, the author's sense of humor comes through in puns and wry observations. Some of these asides allow an exploration of themes that are not as central, but in a book of fewer than 200 pages, the end result is a certain lack of cohesion, and the feeling that many ideas are expressed without an adequate exploration of their relevance. In her review, Therese Taylor complains about the book's "synoptic format" which is a way of noting dismay over this lack of development in some areas. Daniella Sarnoff, reviewing the book for the journal LEFT HISTORY, also blames the lecture origin for a failure of Hufton to fully develop some of the themes that she mentions, yet admires the final assessment that there was a "mythology and legacy that ... kept women out of the public, political sphere for so long in France and continues to have ramifications for women in the public sphere today." This book is not a linear history of its subject, but rather an overview of Dr. Hufton's varied examinations. As such there are many ideas that do not get proper space, yet those that are sufficiently detailed show insight and are persuasive.

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