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## Direct and Indirect Effects of Feminist Actions on Women's Rights in France

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# **Direct and Indirect Effects of Feminist Actions on Women's Rights in France**

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**French Honors Research**

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# **Direct and Indirect Effects of Feminist Actions on Women's Rights in France**

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## **Background Information and Organization of Paper**

During my last visit to France, I was particularly surprised by the apparent indifference among women around me with regards to issues which I, as an American woman, considered to be of utmost importance. These included: reproductive rights, women's representation in politics, sexual harassment, and many others. The French attitude puzzled me. Asking French women around me for their opinion concerning this cultural difference produced the response that French women no longer needed to concern themselves with these issues; they did not feel their rights were threatened. I began to ask myself whether, in this Latin country where I remarked such macho attitudes from men, French women had truly escaped oppression. Or could it be that French women were just willing to content themselves with a lower social position than they ultimately desired? I wanted to know what rights French women enjoyed which enabled them to overlook their demanding family roles and consider themselves free and independent women.

I will attempt to examine these questions through a careful and categorical study of the political and social reforms achieved by French women's rights activists in the later part of this century. This study is divided into several parts, the first of which deals with the successes and weaknesses of the French women's movement. The second part will focus on the progress and shortcomings of governmental policies which concern women's rights. This will be followed by an analysis of women's participation in national government. Finally I will show that, overall, the advances in women's rights in France since the 1960s outweigh the setbacks. If we consider their achievements within their cultural context, French women have been successful in overcoming enormous social, legal and political obstacles.

### **I. The French Women's Movement**

#### **A. Successes**

Compared to similar movements in other western democracies, the French women's movement developed very late. French women were finally granted suffrage by General Charles de Gaulle in 1944<sup>1</sup>. In his mind, it was a way of thanking them for their

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<sup>1</sup> France was one of the last European nations to grant women the right to vote, ahead of only four others: Italy in 1945, Greece in 1952, Switzerland in 1971, and Portugal in 1976 (Stetson 48).

actions during the Second World War: helping the Resistance, working in factories and otherwise running the economy (Stetson 35). Unfortunately, new access to voting rights did not bring women to the polls in droves as the *suffragettes* had anticipated. More than 20 years elapsed between women's acquisition of the right to vote and their definitive insertion into French political life.

In May 1968, various groups of citizens who saw themselves as marginalized by society poured into the streets to decry governmental policies and actions which, they felt, kept them from enjoying their basic rights. This was not a specific, narrowly defined protest. Rather, it was a general uprising against the stifling control that the government had over French society. Begun as a student revolt against the constrictive educational system, the movement quickly spread to include workers, anarchists, Marxists, Trotskyists, Maoists, socialists, etc. These groups rose up in a spontaneous and chaotic manner against the authoritarian rule of Gaullist France and parliamentary politics (Duchen 5). May 1968 opened the door to a new way of practicing politics in its rejection of the traditional means of negotiating, filing official complaints and cooperating with the government.

The events of May 1968 provided the framework within which an active feminist movement could flourish. Prior to this uprising, women were beginning to discover that even as members of political parties they were often forgotten. Within the parties themselves, there were obstacles to women's advancement. Male party members were generally so focused on Party ideology that they would not accept alternative viewpoints, especially from women who claimed that men were being oppressive. One of the biggest changes brought about by the events of May 1968 was the realization that women could not achieve their goals through pre-established, male-dominated political bodies. They needed a movement which would focus uniquely on women. Since women generally had difficulties making themselves heard among stronger, more experienced male voices, such an organization would have to be exclusively female. This would encourage women to speak freely about issues such as reproductive rights, equality in the workplace and rights within the family without having to overcome male voices in order to express their opinions. The excitement generated by the events of May 1968 caused women to come together in rebellion against governmental authority, but also against the authority of men in society.

### Early Development of the Movement

Once the will was there for women to unite and defend their rights in a national framework, a plan of action was needed. One of the first steps taken by feminists was to

analyze the cause of women's oppression. By defining the "enemy", women could then determine what action was necessary to overcome it.<sup>2</sup>

Developing a concrete agenda was not an easy task, however, because women could not agree on the major causes of their oppression. Early gatherings of women to discuss questions of overcoming oppression and fighting for individual rights were plagued by a plurality of ideas and a division of interests. Some women thought that men themselves were the enemy while others targeted the capitalist system as the main oppressor of women's rights. Almost immediately the large assemblies of women broke down into smaller groups, each representing a different interpretation of how to improve women's rights. From the beginning, therefore, the women's movement was very fragmented. Nevertheless, the small groups which made up the movement did not allow their differences to isolate them from one another. In fact, they often combined their efforts in order to successfully carry out campaigns for women's rights.

Since there are so many diverse women's groups, all references to feminist actions or to the MLF (*Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*, or Women's Liberation Movement) will include all of them unless otherwise specified. This will simplify our task since most political actions of this era which were considered feminist were not the product of one specific group, but of the alliance of many small women's groups working together toward a common cause.

The first time these small groups joined forces for any particular motive was in 1970 following the publication of the article "*Pour la libération des femmes*" (For the liberation of women) in *L'Idiot Internationale*. Upon seeing this article, women's groups began to search each other out and assemble to discuss strategies for advancing their cause (Morgan 230). Referring to an initial meeting to unite these groups, Anne Tristan, one of the founders of the MLF, expressed her enthusiasm by saying, "Not since May 1968 had I seen so many women gathered together at once, at least thirty of us." (Moi 35).<sup>3</sup>

Initial actions undertaken by the MLF were small, but effective in attracting publicity to the emerging fight for women's rights. On August 26, 1970, twelve French feminists decided to show their support for the American women's demonstration

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<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, one of the founders of the French women's movement, attributed women's limited professional success to the upbringing that girls received compared with their male counterparts. According to her, boys grow up with more challenges and incentives to excel whereas girls are taught to seek protection and shelter from the harsh society in which their fathers and brothers circulate. De Beauvoir's solution, then, is to fight for increased opportunities and rights for women so that they will no longer be doomed to achieve less than men (Moi 31).

<sup>3</sup> At a similar meeting which excluded men, held at the University of Paris at Vincennes in 1970, male students interrupted the discussions by shouting "power lies at the tip of the phallus" (Duchen 8). The idea of women challenging men's authority was indeed an important threat to some men.

celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the right to vote (Stetson 10). Marching up to the *Arc de Triomphe*, they placed a wreath on the tomb of the unknown soldier with banners reading, "One man in two is a woman" and "There is always somebody even more unknown than the soldier: his wife." The police, upon arriving at the scene, removed the wreath and flowers and took several demonstrators into custody. The demonstration at the *Arc de Triomphe* earned the women's movement a feature in *France-Soir* (Moi 39). While this may seem like a small gain for women, the media played an important role in the development of the French women's movement. It was even responsible for the name *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*, translated directly from the American Women's Liberation Movement (Duchen 9).

In this same year, the MLF began to publicly decry women's oppression through the printing and distribution of various magazines. 1970 brought the first publication of *Le Torchon Brûle* as well as a special issue of the journal *Partisans* called "*Libération des Femmes: Année Zéro*", or "Women's Liberation: Year Zero" (Laubier 70). The latter of these has been dubbed the "first feminist review". It is unique in that only one man contributed to it, and his work was relegated to the appendix (Moi 38). *Le Torchon Brûle* was only published seven times in three years, but each edition was comprised of contributions from different women who had not previously voiced their opinions. This was to encourage as many women as possible to speak out. There was no censorship and no editing. Columns were not accepted either, since the premise of a column is a single person voicing her opinion week after week and in this magazine women were only allowed to submit one entry (Duchen 10).

In addition to these two exemplary magazines, feminist groups also had other resources for publishing original works. The group *Psychanalyse et Politique* contributed greatly to the women's movement through its various publishing and distribution facilities. The group ran and funded an all-female publishing house in Paris, as well as several bookstores and a printed magazine, all of which benefited women throughout the movement (Duchen 32).

Encouraged by these publications and by previous feminist actions, the group "*Les Petites Marguerites*" led a feminist intervention at a conference on "Woman" sponsored by the popular magazine *Elle* in November of 1970. These feminists with their newly-found voice made their way into the conference and headed directly to the stage where they seized the microphone. Having obtained a copy of a questionnaire which had previously been circulated by the magazine, these women rewrote a few of the questions and proceeded to read their new version to a very unwilling and almost exclusively male audience. The question: "Do you think that women are more, equally or less able to drive a car?" was edited to read: "In your opinion, do double X chromosomes contain the genes

of double declutching?” (Duchen 10). Although humorous, the edited version of the questionnaire makes a startling point, as seen in the following rewritten questions:

“Do you wear makeup: (a) out of self-loathing? (b) to look less like yourself and more what you’re expected to look like?

“When a man talks to a woman, should he address:

- (a) her tits and her legs?
- (b) her ass and her tits?
- (c) just her ass?” (Duchen 10)

Although this public demonstration against the symbols of sexism in popular culture did not win any major legislative reforms for women, it did help to advance the cause of the movement by once again bringing feminists into the public eye. It also gave women the sense of empowerment, encouraging them to speak out not only against blatant injustices but also against weak or negative images of their sex. As militant actions continued and political activism began to take root, more and more women began to identify themselves with others of their sex. They began to claim rights for themselves and think about how to use their voice, rather than just accepting what men and the government gave them.

Consciousness-raising was one of the MLF's main tactics to make women more aware of their oppression. In addition to holding regular meetings to discuss group objectives and future actions, many feminist groups also hosted informational sessions or showed films concerning political and reproductive rights. One of the largest and most-important consciousness-raising events sponsored by feminist groups was the “Days of Denunciation of Crimes Against Women” in 1972. Over 5000 women attended this event which was entirely organized and funded by women (Duchen 15). Among those who participated were Simone de Beauvoir, Benoitte Groult, Delphine Seyrig, Simone Iff, Yvette Roudy and representatives from the feminist groups *Choisir*, *Ligue de Droit des Femmes*, and *Mouvement Jeunes Femmes* (Stetson 168). “The Days of Denunciation of Crimes Against Women” addressed discussion topics of particular interest to women: rape, repression of homosexuality, motherhood as an obligation to society, domestic violence and others. As the event was designed to empower women and allow them to speak out and discuss issues which directly affect them, men were not allowed to participate. Although there were men present during the conference, most of them were assigned to low-profile tasks such as baby-sitting during presentations (Moi 62-63).



French women were beginning to take control of their situation. They began speaking through their militant actions until the public could not help but notice them. They had only to reach the politicians and bring their concerns into the political realm. This would take a major coalition, a combined effort from the entire movement.

### The Fight for Reproductive Rights

The first common cause to truly unite a large number of the feminist groups was the fight for reproductive rights, namely, contraception and abortion. In fact, this was one of the few issues upon which almost all factions of the MLF agreed.

In order to fully realize the importance of feminist actions pertaining to reproductive rights in their historical and social context, one must first understand the pre-existing laws affecting French society during the 1970s. These laws date back to the 1920s at which time low birth rate was a major political concern in France. In fact, France's dwindling population in the years immediately following the First World War was one of the major arguments presented against both abortion and contraception. In July of 1920, a law was passed which considered both abortion and contraception "délits", or minor infractions of the law. The law prohibited the mention of, incitement to, or sale of products used in abortion. The punishment for any of these offenses was between three and six years in prison and a fine. Under this law, the penalty for the sale of, or sharing of, information concerning contraception ranged from one to six months in prison with a possible fine (Stetson 56).

In 1923 a new statute was passed which added penalties for anyone actively taking part in the abortion procedure and thus violating the 1920 law. Persons performing abortions could be sentenced to between one and five years in prison and faced the possibility of fines or even professional suspension. The statute also set the punishment for women having abortions at anywhere from six months to two years in prison. Both procuring and performing abortions were seen as serious crimes against the national interest of France (Stetson, 56). In 1939, the law was slightly modified to allow for "therapeutic abortion" only when the mother's life was in danger (Stetson 57). Nevertheless, motherhood was still imposed upon French women as their duty to society.

The first assault on the 1920 law actually took place prior to the tumultuous events of May 1968. Before the women's movement even assembled for the first time, a group of women had already pushed the government to revise the portion of the law which prohibited the sale and use of contraception. The "*Loi Neuwirth*", which legalized contraception in 1967, was largely a result of campaigns by the *Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial*, or MFPPF (French Family Planning Movement) (Laubier 70). This organization was founded by a doctor named Marie Lagroua Weill-Hallé. After

spending some time at the Margaret Sanger clinic in New York in 1947 to complete her medical training, Weill-Hallé returned to Paris to do her residency. Upon her return, she had hoped to apply the knowledge about modern contraceptive techniques that she had gained abroad. She was instead faced with a professional attitude unreceptive to her ideas. In her hospital, she was appalled to discover that the French doctors were “regularly and gleefully performing [surgical] procedures without anesthetic on women they suspected of self-induced abortions: ‘So they won’t do it again’.” (Stetson 57). This experience prompted her to publicly denounce the 1920 law and demand that motherhood be a choice, and not a social duty, for all French women. Weill-Hallé founded *La Maternité Heureuse* in 1956. This organization later became, in 1960, the *Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial* (Stetson 58).

The MFPPF used any tactics they could muster to bring about policy change concerning contraception. They established illegal family planning centers throughout the country. They also obtained and smuggled female contraceptives such as diaphragms and pills from other countries. The MFPPF was so successful in evading the law that they rendered it impossible to enforce the 1920 law against contraception. Therefore, the government implemented legal reforms in order to save itself from further ridicule (Stetson 58).

Thanks to the Neuwirth Law of 1967, women in the 1970s no longer faced prison sentences or fines for the simple use of contraception. Unfortunately, passing a law did not make contraception readily available to women. According to an interview with Simone de Beauvoir, only seven percent of French women used any form of birth control pill in 1975 (Laubier 78). Whereas the condom, “the male contraceptive”, was easily accessible, birth control pills and other forms of female contraceptives remained products for the elite (Stetson 56).

The *Loi Neuwirth* was nevertheless successful in that it provided women with an alternative to forced motherhood. Also, the passage of this law demonstrated to the public that the government officially supported women’s objectives. This was essential to changing attitudes in society at large. Before the 1967 law was passed, only four percent of doctors agreed to aid the MFPPF in its campaign to promote and procure female contraceptives. After the official acceptance by the government of contraception, however, only five percent of doctors denied their patients access to modern contraceptive techniques (Stetson 69).

With the *Loi Neuwirth* paving the way, women of the MLF were determined to eliminate what remained of the 1920 law which prohibited abortion. In order to undertake such a monumental action, they first needed to bring their struggle into the public eye and perhaps attract the support of women who did not already associate

themselves with feminism. Thus began the planning of the Manifesto of 343. On April 5, 1971, a Manifesto was published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, a widely read Parisian newspaper. The Manifesto, signed by 343 women, read as follows:

A million women abort every year in France. They do it under dangerous conditions because they are condemned to clandestinity, although, when done under medical supervision, this operation is extremely simple. No one ever mentions these millions of women. I declare that I am one of them. I declare that I have had an abortion. Just as we demand free access to contraception, we demand freedom of abortion. (Duchen 12)

This public declaration by so many women, some of them celebrities, was an essential step in the advancement towards liberation of women from patriarchal oppression. Because of the extent to which the 1920 law controlled women, the Manifesto of 343 was a powerful assertion for the women's movement. The women who signed this document were defying a law which repressed the mere discussion of abortion.<sup>4</sup>

The campaign to legalize abortion thus began with this courageous publication. Among its signatories were many women already well-known to the public: actresses Catherine Deneuve and Delphine Seyrig, writers Simone de Beauvoir, Françoise Sagan and Christiane Rochefort, attorney Gisèle Halimi and socialist Yvette Roudy (Stetson 63). With these names attached to the Manifesto, the silence surrounding the abortion issue was shattered and the feminist movement was propelled into the public sphere. The creators of the Manifesto soon found themselves with a following of women who were supportive of their views and actions. The next step was to maintain the excitement generated from this action and utilize it to achieve other, more effective measures. On April 26, 1971, *Le Nouvel Observateur* organized a debate on the topic of abortion as a result of the favorable reactions to the Manifesto. At this event, the members of the MLF called on women in the audience to share their own experiences (Moi 55). For feminists, offering ordinary women the opportunity to speak was a means of empowering them and making them realize that they could stand up to oppression.

Although speaking out was an important step to combating oppression, it was only an initial step in what was to become a long struggle for women's reproductive

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that many of the women who signed the Manifesto had not actually undergone abortion procedures shows the extent to which women would go to support the abortion rights campaign (Duchen 52).

rights. Undoubtedly taking its cue from the fight for contraception, the movement for abortion employed various tactics to reach its goals: some legal, others not so legal. On an individual scale, these included demonstrations, public law-breaking and legislative lobbying (Nelson and Choudhury 253). At a more organized level, groups such as the *Mouvement pour la Liberté de l'Avortement et de la Contraception*, or MLAC (Movement for Freedom of Abortion and Contraception), the MFPPF and *Choisir* (a legal support group for women, founded by attorney Gisèle Halimi) banded together. These groups did attempt to achieve reforms through legal channels, but where their attempts failed they took it upon themselves to provide women with safe and affordable abortions (Nelson et al. 254). The MLAC began its militant campaign in 1972 by establishing abortion clinics, performing vacuum aspirations, showing a film providing information about abortion called *L'Histoire de l'A*, and organizing bus trips to England and Holland where abortion was both safe and legal (Stetson 64).

A law legalizing abortion came about soon after this campaign began. The success of the feminist fight for abortion rights is due in part to the precedent set by the *Loi Neuwirth*. However, the law which legalized abortion is credited to Simone Veil who was appointed Minister of Health by Valérie Giscard d'Estaing in 1974. In the very year in which she took office, she drafted a law granting women the right to safe and legal abortions. (This law will be explained in more detail in the section entitled Governmental Reforms: Progress for Women.)

Once the bulk of the fight for legislative reform concerning women's rights was past, the coalition of small groups which had formed around this issue began to fall apart. The MLF lost the cohesion which had held it together throughout the struggle for reproductive rights.

## **B. Weaknesses**

Like any movement born of revolutionary spirits, the MLF got off to an explosive start. Through its discussion groups, animated meetings and militant actions, it quickly attracted the attention of the media and therefore of women throughout the nation. Women's writings even began to permeate foreign "markets", as American women began to read writings by feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. However, the euphoria of this period and the excitement generated by militant actions soon began to dissipate. This is particularly true in the late 1970s when women had attained abortion rights and found no new cause which would once again motivate the different factions to work together towards one common goal. Whereas many feminists did go on to fight against rape, the French movement did not open itself to such issues as sexual harassment

and anti-pornography until the 1990s (Morgan 233). What remained in the 1970s and 1980s, then, was a loosely organized network of women's groups held together by the common name of the MLF. They soon became too diverse to operate under a single unified front.

#### The pluralistic nature of the women's movement

From its origins, the MLF consisted of a continuum of small groups, each with its own theories, objectives and expectations. The fragmented structure of the movement is due to the fact that feminism in France was born out of the uprisings of May 1968 which were themselves a revolt against hierarchy and institutionalism. To avoid recreating the same type of institutions against which they were rebelling, feminists chose to maintain a pluralistic structure in their movement. That is, they chose not to appoint specific leaders or establish a rigid procedure for making discussions more effective. Their meetings often contained no set programs and were highly disorganized.

Anne Tristan, one of the original members of the MLF, describes the initial meetings as utterly chaotic. She said of the first one she attended in May of 1970, "Those who shouted loudest and with most self-assurance got to speak" (Moi 35). Later meetings described by Tristan had neither agendas nor chairpersons. They consisted, for the most part, of groups of women gathered in one place, smoking, talking loudly, and spewing forth ideas. As the word spread about the women's meetings, the numbers in attendance rose, and with them, the confusion level (Moi 39).

Although the expansion of the women's movement was a positive development, it rendered organization all the more difficult. As increasing numbers of women were attracted by lively discussions and empowering speeches, the large assemblies became unmanageable and smaller groups began to break off. The movement began in 1970 with only three main factions. By the 1980s, there were at least 200 separate women's groups (Morgan 235).

Just as the meetings lacked organization, the actions undertaken by the MLF were initially improvisations (Moi 42). Whereas little planning was needed for the march to the *Arc de Triomphe* which first earned feminists positive media attention, the last-minute organization of the feminist interruption of the *Elle* conference opened the women up to scrutiny and criticism by the press. Their somewhat haphazard manner was embellished by the press who later described them as "Amazonians with close-cropped hair and large hats." For Tristan, it was this type of negative media image which created the "myth of the alarming, hysterical, lesbian feminist" and thus scared women away from the movement (Moi 42).

In terms of political action, feminism has had difficulty integrating with French party politics because of its premise of multiplicity and diversity. Due to its adamant rejection of hierarchy, the movement lacks two essential components of political success: leadership and direction. For feminist groups to participate effectively in party politics, then, they would need to narrow their multitude of goals to one specific political platform and designate a universally respected spokesperson to represent the entire movement (Duchen 104).

Although this may seem like an impossible task for a movement which values plurality and equality, the MLF has previously known political success by doing just this. One of the only successful endeavors executed by a coalition of many different women's groups was that for reproductive rights. With a very specific goal in mind and a clear focus on the consequences their actions could have for women, feminist groups were able to rally around the issue of abortion and effectively persuade legislators to act according to their demands. Since the 1980s, however, the internal divisions and rivalries have so fragmented the movement that the different factions can no longer come together to carry out specific projects (Duchen 134).

#### Divisions within the movement

Although all factions of the French women's movement arose from the same protests of May 1968, this common origin was not strong enough to prevent divisions within the movement. Feminists soon learned that women were anything but homogeneous in their way of thinking. As individual groups evolved, they also diverged in their interpretations and approaches to women's issues.

We find at one end of the spectrum highly theoretical groups such as *Psychanalyse et Politique* (Psychoanalysis and Politics), and at the other, Class-struggle feminists. *Psychanalyse et Politique*, or *Psych et Po* as it came to be known, was more extreme than most other women's groups in that it refused all political participation on the grounds that the political system was created and dominated by males. The women of *Psych et Po* sought to liberate themselves from any and all masculine influence, choosing to focus on femininity and a feminine expression of the female existence (Duchen 35).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One member of *Psych et Po*, Luce Irigaray, went as far as to say that all language as we know it is sexually charged. She claims that even when we are trying to be neutral in our descriptions, we invariably revert to the masculine form of expression because it is the only language we know will be understood by all (Moi 119). She herself refrains from using any conventional form of language, choosing to ignore the rules of syntax because they lead to a masculine form of expression (Duchen 88). In their campaign to eliminate the masculine from female society, *Psych et Po* published many articles in which it uplifted homosexuality as a necessary element in its philosophical struggle to end repression of the feminine (Duchen 94-95).

Whereas the members of *Psych et Po* refused to cooperate with men, *Tendance lutte des classes*, or Class-struggle feminists, still maintained close ties with the Socialist and Communist Parties, and thus with the male members of these Parties. Rather than attempting to change the patriarchal aspects of their society, they focused mainly on class tensions, blaming the bosses and entrepreneurs for the majority of women's problems.

*Lutte des classes* is different from other factions of the women's movement because it began as a continuation of the Marxist class struggle which was adapted to the context of the MLF. Throughout the 1970s there was much confusion among women in this branch of feminism because they found themselves caught between two conflicting movements. Due to their association with the men of their Parties, Class-struggle feminists were viewed by women of the MLF as outsiders who came to disrupt their meetings with "men's words" and ideas (Duchen 28). Class-struggle feminists also disagreed with other women on how to handle issues such as motherhood and women in the workplace. Since they believed that the socialist revolution would improve women's situations both at home and in the workplace, they felt no particular need to formulate a solution oriented specifically around women's concerns (Stetson 131).<sup>6</sup>

Somewhere between the two extremes represented by *Psychanalyse et Politique* and *Tendance lutte des classes*, we find what Claire Duchen refers to as "non-aligned feminism" (40). This is probably the category with which most French women identified themselves in the 1970s, when the feminist movement emerged. This group is not associated with any particular ideology. Unlike the two groups mentioned above, non-aligned feminists were more interested in attaining specific goals than they were in developing a concise feminist theory. This faction's roots are in the daily lives of real women and its purpose, to complete one project or demonstration at a time. Because non-aligned feminism does not promote any one theory, many different groups and offshoots of these groups fall under this category of feminism. Rather than contradictory allegiances, they entertain a plurality of interests and priorities within one broad allegiance: to women themselves (Duchen 40).

Throughout the 1970s, feminist groups overcame their differences and joined forces on important issues such as the aforementioned fight for reproductive rights. However, in 1979 *Psych et Po* created a huge rift among all factions of the MLF. They legally registered the name and logo of the MLF as their own property. In so doing, they

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<sup>6</sup> Even within the *Lutte des classes* faction there was a broad spectrum of opinions. Some, such as the members of *Femmes travailleuses en lutte* (working women in the fight), believed that the working class and feminist struggles could be remedied in the same manner. They turned their anger uniquely toward bosses, refusing to blame men within leftist parties for their role in sexist discrimination. There were also Class-struggle feminists who gradually began to consider themselves to be primarily feminists, and socialists secondarily (Duchen 27-28).

alienated many women's groups who suddenly found themselves isolated, without even a common name to tie them to other factions of the movement.<sup>7</sup> In addition, by 1979, the media commonly referred to all women's groups by the blanket title of MLF. By claiming this name for themselves, the members of *Psych et Po* were able to express their opinions on behalf of all women, whether or not they had the right or consent to do so (Duchen 32). Ironically, this meant that *Psych et Po* had bought into the man-made structure of hierarchy by placing themselves and their voices above those of their compatriots. *Psych et Po* came to be known as the official movement, or *MLF déposé*, while other groups referred to themselves as the *MLF non-déposé*.

The main result of *Psych et Po*'s appropriation of the name *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* was to cause the women's movement to focus inward rather than outward. This is particularly important because at the time, the *Loi Veil* had just been passed as a permanent protection of women's right to abortion. The women's movement, no longer rallied around this cause, was beginning to disperse. Without another cause to hold the various women's groups together, they began to focus on the internal difficulties of the movement.

## II. Governmental Reforms

### A. Progress for Women

Despite the gradual decline of feminist cooperation in the second decade of the movement, feminists can be credited with beginning a process which was to be continued by politicians in the years to come. If feminists were less visible on the streets after the 1970s, they made their presence felt in courtrooms and legislative assemblies. From the Napoleonic Code<sup>8</sup> to the Law of 1920, French legal traditions began to give way to modern demands for equality and justice.

#### Feminist contributions to political reforms

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<sup>7</sup> Pursuant to this legal domination of the MLF by *Psych et Po*, many women's groups began publicly denouncing this group's work. One journal, *Questions féministes*, opposed *Psych et Po* by challenging the usefulness of forming theories about "woman" and "femininity" if these theories are not applicable and can only exist outside any real and actual social or external context (Duchen 40). Similarly, the Class-struggle faction accused *Psych et Po* of being "elitist, bourgeois," and exclusive of other factions of the MLF and of society (Laubier 71).

<sup>8</sup> In 1810, Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte created a penal code which provided a structure to the entire legal system of France. In theory, this code was meant to allow people to be judged by unbiased standards of justice rather than by social class. However, gender was not considered to be a class, and women continued to be judged by different standards than men.



Prior to May 1968, the majority of women who took an interest in public affairs aligned their political ideas and actions with those of their husbands or boyfriends (Duchen 7). Within political parties, however, women members were often ignored or relegated to menial tasks such as sorting papers or making coffee while their male counterparts debated Party ideology and made important decisions. Women found it difficult to voice their opinions which, to the disapproval of Party members, tended to diverge from the strict ideology to which the Party adhered.

These women needed a new outlet for their political expression which they found in the women's movement. Their zeal for political involvement can be seen through their fight against the aforementioned 1920 law which banned abortion. By denouncing this repressive law, feminists saw themselves as refusing "social and sexual submission, and economic and emotional dependence on men" (Duchen 52). One group in particular, *Choisir*, tried to change the situation of women in France by employing legal channels to directly oppose the law of 1920. *Choisir* had three main political objectives: to attain free and legal contraception, to attain free and legal abortion, and to defend pro bono any person brought up on charges of performing, procuring or having an abortion (Moi 56).

One of this group's first official actions was the representation of a teenage girl, her mother and three other women in "*L'Affaire de Bobigny*" in November of 1972. The girl, seventeen year-old Marie-Claire Chevalier, and the other four women were on trial for procuring an abortion and thus violating the law of 1920. This case, which was to become a precedent in the fight against the outdated and oppressive law concerning abortion and contraception, received a great deal of media attention. Demonstrators outside the Courtroom shouted slogans such as "*Nous avons tous avorté*" (We have all aborted) or "*L'Angleterre pour les riches, la prison pour les pauvres*" (England for the rich, prison for the poor), (Laubier 73). The first slogan was in reference to the Manifesto of 343 and showed solidarity among women concerning reproductive rights. The second referred to the fact that rich women did not have to resort to illegal abortions because they had the financial means to travel to England or Holland where the procedure was both safe and legal. The majority of French women seeking abortions, however, did not have this option. The trial brought up the fact that the law did not deter women, especially underprivileged women, from procuring abortions. It also introduced the class discrimination inherent in the 1920 law, since 78 percent of those seeking illegal abortions did so because they were too poor to support the child.

In addition to protesters outside the courthouse, testimonies were given by celebrities such as: author/philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, the head of the French Family Planning Movement Simone Iff, actresses Delphine Seyrig and Françoise Fabien, politician Michel Rocard and Nobel prize winner in medicine Jacques Monod (Duchen

152). Although the women were found guilty of violating the 1920 law, the punishment of 8 francs assigned to each of them was so trivial that the MLF and *Choisir* considered the outcome to be a victory for French women.

The ability of feminists to draw media attention to their actions and to recruit celebrity support helped them to influence public opinion in France. However, their use of legal channels and their effectiveness in the courtroom brought the question of abortion to the center of the political arena. In so doing, feminists made abortion an issue which politicians could not ignore.

At the same time, trends in women's voting began to shift. In the presidential elections of 1965, only 38 percent of the women who voted supported the Socialist candidate François Mitterand, whereas 62 percent of women voted for General Charles de Gaulle. In 1974, 46 percent of women voted for Mitterand, while only 54 percent supported his opponent, Valérie Giscard d'Estaing (Stetson 38). Although the women's vote had shifted somewhat toward the political left, Giscard still enjoyed a considerable portion of women's electoral support. The Socialist Party would have to wait until the next presidential elections for women's voting trends to shift enough to benefit their candidates.

Since the women's vote had clearly been the deciding factor in Giscard's victory in the 1974 elections, his arrival to the presidency triggered a shift in policy. Under the administration of Giscard d'Estaing, French women began to see progressive reforms with respect to women both in the family structure and in the workplace. Rather than try to encourage women to choose between family and work, his administration strove to make it easier for women to do both. He replaced the standing allocation system with one which permitted both men and women to collect family allocations. In 1975, only one year after his election to the presidency, several important reforms were passed. The first entitled single fathers to collect government aid. The second allowed mothers to collect financial reimbursement both before and after the birth of their first child (Stetson 95). Laws were also passed which legally recognized divorce by mutual consent and assured equal opportunity for government jobs (Iglitzin et al. 8). Finally in 1977, working parents received a government reimbursement for their child care expenses (Stetson 95).

In another attempt to maintain the political support of women, Giscard appointed Simone Veil to his cabinet as the new Minister of Health. Veil was very sensitive to feminist demands, particularly concerning reproductive rights. She is credited with finally breaking the stalemate between the conservative government and the liberal activists with her *Loi Veil* which legalized abortion in France. This law was passed only two years after *Choisir's* representation of Marie-Claire Chevalier in the *Affaire de Bobigny*. Likewise, the *Loi Neuwirth* was passed shortly following demonstrations and militant actions by the

MFPPF. As the actions leading up to the passage of both the *Loi Neuwirth* and the *Loi Veil* illustrate, the feminist struggle has often ignited political interest in women's issues. In so doing, the feminist movement has contributed to important political reforms.

Likewise, it was the feminist struggle to protect the rights of rape victims which prompted the introduction of a rape statute into the French penal code. As late as 1980, there was absolutely no formal mention of rape in French law books. When courts finally did develop a legal definition for rape, it included only coitus and made no mention of marital rape. Also, the victim was required to prove that her attacker knew she did not consent. Although rape was officially considered a felony, it was often tried as a *délit*, or misdemeanor, in lower courts, therefore invoking minimal penalties (Stetson 164).

Without any official recognition of the serious criminal nature of rape or the mistreatment of the victims, the women's movement took the initiative to change the system themselves. The legal support group *Choisir*, founded by Gisèle Halimi, brought national attention to "the victimization of women in rape trials" through its participation in the *Procès d'Aix* (Laubier 74). These proceedings involved the prosecution of three men who had brutally gang-raped two Belgian women vacationing in France. The attack lasted four hours, yet it was to be charged as a "simple assault" in a magistral, or lower, court. After a two year battle to bring the case to criminal court, Halimi finally saw the three men convicted of rape in 1978. She claimed that the victims' rights had been overlooked because they were lesbians (Stetson 166).

In 1980, Monique Pelletier pushed a bill through the National Assembly which Senator Brigitte Gros had proposed. The bill added a rape statute to France's Penal Code which made it easier for women to prove rape. According to this statute, one only had to prove force, surprise or violence in order to prove rape rather than having to establish lack of consent as under the former law. Also thanks to this statute, rape was considered a crime punishable by 5 to 10 years in prison (Stetson 169).<sup>9</sup>

Continuing the work begun by Valérie Giscard d'Estaing's administration, the Socialist government led by François Mitterand from 1981 to 1995 also initiated many reforms to improve women's rights. Yvette Roudy, appointed Minister for Women's Rights in 1981, played an important part in the drafting of many of these reforms. In September of 1982 she was able to increase the number of state hospitals which were required to perform abortion procedures. By December of the same year, she had procured partial state reimbursements covering up to 70 percent of the cost for abortions (Iglitzin et al. 10). Two other reforms were passed in 1982 which helped to ease the economic situation of married or divorced women. The first permitted wives of

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<sup>9</sup> Although Pelletier saw the bill through its final stages of legislation, it must be noted that the MLF and *Choisir* played an important role in bringing the issue to public attention.

independent business owners to finally claim social benefits and assume the status of salaried associates. This was a substantial change from the previous law which gave husbands the authority to force their wives to work without the obligation to pay them. The second reform provided economic relief to women whose ex-husbands defaulted on alimony payments (Iglitzin et al. 10).

Other reforms passed during the 1980s include the eradication of a fiscal law dating back to the Napoleonic Code which required a woman to obtain her husband's signature in order for her to obtain credit, handle financial negotiations, receive social security payments, be eligible for family allocations, and obtain other services such as day cares or schools. According to this law which was finally changed in 1982, a woman could also be held responsible for her husband's debts, even though she was not entitled to know the amount of his income (Morgan 225).<sup>10</sup>

One of Roudy's most important political reforms is the Law on Sexual Equality in Employment, passed in July of 1983. This law, which came to be known as the *Loi Roudy*, stated that all workers must be treated equally in matters concerning salary and hiring procedures. It also gave feminist groups the right to file lawsuits against employers on behalf of female employees. According to the provisions of the *Loi Roudy*, the responsibility of identifying and overcoming discrimination rested with the unions. In order to better introduce women into the workplace, the law encouraged companies to incorporate women in training programs (Nelson et al. 255). Most importantly, the law ended provisions for unequal conditions which were already stated in labor agreements. It did this by closing two existing loopholes. Primarily, all language implying an employer's preference for hiring one sex over the other was prohibited. Secondly, the "good morality" clause which allowed employers to discriminate against lesbians was eliminated (Stetson 154-155).

By making women's issues a central focus for female voters, feminists were able to indirectly influence lawmakers' decisions on these issues. Early on, feminists relied on militant actions and consciousness-raising efforts to prompt the drafting of laws such as the *Loi Veil*. Later, they began to involve themselves more often in legal battles, primarily in the courtroom and later in legislature. Women benefited greatly from politicians such as feminist Yvette Roudy who represented feminist interests when drafting laws. Thus, by using tactics ranging from demonstrations to electoral pressure on candidates, French women were able to advance their objectives in the form of national legislation.

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<sup>10</sup> 1982 also brought about the legalization of homosexuality which, under the regimes of Vichy and De Gaulle, was considered a criminal offense (Morgan 226).

## **B. Shortcomings**

Despite the wide range of reforms obtained for women during the 1970s and 1980s, feminists of the time believed that governmental policies remained conservative. According to women's groups, the government had not gone far enough to insure women's rights within the family, the workplace, and society in general.

### New laws did not satisfy feminist demands

One of the earliest laws to be passed as a result of women's actions was the aforementioned *Loi Neuwirth*. Although this law officially legalized the sale and use of contraception in France, it carried with it certain stipulations. For example, before they could purchase these contraceptive devices, women had to have a prescription and produce a user card. Also, women's contraceptives were not reimbursed as a medical cost. Thus, contraception was not readily available to all women and therefore did not allow women the free choice of alternatives to childbearing (Stetson 59). Furthermore, until the election of Valerie Giscard d'Estaing in 1974, the Gaullist government had refused to implement the *Loi Neuwirth*. Between 1967 and 1974, only ten percent of women had access to modern contraceptives (Stetson 59).

The *Loi Veil* also carried with it certain stipulations which limited the availability of abortions. The final draft of the law stopped short of allowing women freedom of choice. Abortions were to be performed only by doctors in hospitals. The problem with this restriction is that a moral clause allowed doctors to refuse to perform abortions for personal reasons which were often unrelated to the woman's or the fetus's health. Also, a woman had to be in a "situation of distress" caused by her pregnancy in order to procure an abortion. Once the hospital had explained the procedure to its clients, there was a mandatory waiting period of one week in which the woman was to reflect upon her options and make an informed decision. Since abortions were illegal after the first ten weeks of pregnancy, doctors often extended this mandatory waiting period past the ten week limit so that it would be too late for the woman to legally procure an abortion (Duchen 58). In addition to all these shortcomings, the law was only provisional. There was a trial period of five years, after which time it would once again come up for a vote before the National Assembly.

All of these conditions served as obstacles to keep women from having legal abortions. Since there was no provision for government reimbursement of abortion by

the social security system, women of the lower classes were often unable to pay the high prices that hospitals charged. Also these women generally were not as well educated and did not fully understand all facets of the law. Because of this, many of them still resorted to self-inflicted abortions. Unfortunately, it was not uncommon for women seeking illegal abortions to bleed to death.

The practical and legal limitations of the *Loi Veil* were many. Nevertheless this reform was an important achievement for feminists in the fight for women's rights. They were not about to let it slip away after such a short trial period. When the law came up for a second, and definitive, vote on October 6, 1979, Veil had moved to the European Parliament (Stetson 66). Although Giscard had appointed another woman to his cabinet, Monique Pelletier as his Minister for the Status of Women, feminists were afraid that she would not be persuasive enough to defend the bill in its second debate. The MLF mobilized more than 50,000 women in the streets of Paris to support the preservation of the law (Duchen 59). This action was successful in influencing legislators who cast 271 votes to keep the Veil law and only 201 votes against it (Laubier 74).

Feminists were frustrated not only with the inadequacy of the laws, but also with the politicians in positions to change them. Women's groups began to see that many of their political gains were bound to meet obstacles in their enforcement. Even once it was passed as a permanent law, the *Loi Veil* proved to be troublesome to enforce. In 1976, the feminist journal *Pétroleuses* criticized the failure of the government to enforce the *Loi Veil* which it describes as "*la moins appliquée de France*" (the least enforced [law] in France). The authors also denounced the fact that the price of abortions had augmented since the passage of the law (Laubier 82). In 1979, 95 percent of all abortions were carried out in private clinics for prices ranging from \$625.00 to \$750.00 (Morgan 226). Also, there were difficulties getting doctors and hospitals to comply with the law (Stetson 70). As of 1980, only 14 out of 29 state hospitals were performing abortions (Morgan 226).

Legislation protecting women's rights in the workplace met a fate similar to that of laws for reproductive rights. The Equal Pay Bill, passed during Valérie Giscard d'Estaing's administration, was passed without any consequences for employers who did not comply with its standards. Therefore, it was not a real victory for feminists (Stetson 142). The *Loi Roudy*, which was meant to improve upon the Equal Pay Bill by prohibiting discrimination in employment procedures, also seemed forgotten once it passed legislation. It was not applied religiously and thus did not see the success originally expected by the Ministry of Women's Rights.

In addition to drafting the Law on Sexual Equality in Employment, Roudy also opposed the increasing trend toward employing women as part-time workers because

these positions were not accompanied by benefits or training opportunities. She feared that confining women to temporary or part-time positions would eventually lead to what she called an “occupational ghetto” for women (Stetson 140).<sup>11</sup> Other legislators, however, viewed part-time work as serving a dual purpose: aiding women and encouraging natality. They thus did not join Roudy in her vehement opposition to this practice. In fact, most affirmative action measures proposed by Roudy were shot down by her male political counterparts before they reached a vote (Nelson et al. 256).

Even female politicians were not particularly helpful in furthering feminist goals. Around 1975, the MLF, inspired by British feminists, tried to organize an initiative to provide relief to victims of rape and domestic battery. When they approached Secretary for the Status of Women Françoise Giroud, she declined helping them, saying that wife battery was not a problem in France (Stetson 167).

It was not until the appointment of Yvette Roudy as Minister of Women’s Rights that the question of violence against women was seriously considered at the national level. As a feminist, Roudy was more understanding of the need to provide some type of relief to victims. The Ministry of Women’s Rights therefore established three main goals to help rape victims. The first was to make the victim feel secure, and not discriminated against, at the police station. To accomplish this, the Ministry was to set up “sensitivity conferences” at police stations. The second aim was to make the medical examination less traumatic for women. The third consisted of government subsidies to women’s organizations which supplied information and actively fought battery and sexual assault (Stetson 171). Unfortunately, these goals remained in the planning stage and were never implemented by the government. By 1986, some steps had been taken by the Ministry of Women’s Rights to support women in distress. Nevertheless, women were still made to feel guilty in courtrooms. Seminars to make the police more helpful and less threatening in cases of rape were never put into practice (Stetson 172).

Another reform which Roudy attempted to push through legislation was government reimbursement for abortions. Although she began drafting proposals in March of 1982, a pending fiscal crisis impeded its success. After demonstrations by feminists and socialists in October to protest the failure of the reimbursement bill, it was finally approved in December of 1982. However, the funding for reimbursement was to come from the annual budget rather than Social Security revenues. This meant that the

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<sup>11</sup> Whereas a large percentage of French women form part of the active population, many must settle for lower-paying positions. Men’s full-time salaries are often set 25 percent higher than those of their female counterparts (Nelson et al. 248). Also, the higher the position that a woman occupies, the greater the earning disparity (Iglitzin et al. 17).

money would have to be reappropriated each year. Such a precarious resolution was unsatisfactory to feminists (Stetson 73).

Due to the limited nature of the laws passed and the government's failure to enforce them, feminists remain disillusioned with the political system as a whole. During the 1970s, women's frustration with the inadequacy of reforms, as well as with the party system which contributed to the oppression of women, led many female citizens to abstain from voting altogether (Duchen 106). This trend of refusing to vote, rather common among French women until the 1980s, has surely contributed to the poor representation of women in the French government today.

### **III. French Women in Government**

#### **A. Increasingly Important Roles**

Since the 1960s, the number of women politicians has greatly increased. However, women remain vastly underrepresented at the national level. Of the presidents of the Fifth Republic, Valérie Giscard d'Estaing was one of the first to appoint several women to top positions.<sup>12</sup> Simone Veil is perhaps the most well-known of his female Ministers for legalizing abortion in 1974. Also in this election year, Valerie Giscard d'Estaing created a new position, Secretary of State for the Status of Women, to which he appointed Françoise Giroud. Although this was not a full cabinet position and was appropriated neither budget nor staff, Giroud managed to use her post to open up civil service entrance exams to women as well as extend Social Security benefits to better compensate widows and divorcees (Iglitzin et al. 8). She is also known for passing an amendment through the National Assembly which included women in the Antiracist Act of 1972. The penalty for discrimination against women was set at: 3000-30 000 FF. fine or a prison sentence ranging from two months to two years. This law, however, contained the loophole that discrimination could be justified if there were "legitimate motive" to do so (Stetson 144). Of course, employers easily took advantage of this clause because of its vague wording. Women would have to wait until 1983 to see the loophole eliminated by the *Loi Roudy* which guaranteed sexual equality in employment.

Françoise Giroud was later replaced by Monique Pelletier as Minister for the Status of Women. During Pelletier's term in office, the State began to envision programs such as state-run child care, priority in housing and additional family allowances to compensate women for the sacrifices they might make in jobs or education to raise their families (Stetson 96).

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<sup>12</sup> Women were in government even before they had the right to vote. In his Popular Front government of 1936, Leon Blum already had women as ministers (Duchen 156).



With the accession of the socialist party to power in 1981 came the creation of yet another cabinet post: the Minister for Women's Rights. The appointee to this post, Yvette Roudy, is described by Dorothy McBride Stetson as "a committed feminist" (Stetson 16). In addition, she was a long-standing member of the Socialist Party and a strong supporter of Mitterand since the elections of 1965. During her term as Minister for Women's Rights, Roudy encouraged women to be aware of their treatment in the workplace and to take full advantage of laws created to improve their working situations. She also worked jointly with the Ministry of Education to revise textbooks and raise the consciousness level concerning women's issues (Iglitzin et al. 11).

Roudy's position was much less symbolic than that of Giroud during Estaing's presidency. She presided over a "full ministry with a budget of about 110 million francs". Her staff consisted of 240 members and she had at her disposal offices throughout the country (Iglitzin et al. 9). Whereas Pelletier and Giroud focused mainly on improving family law, Roudy aimed to improve women's rights. Roudy did not consider family issues a high priority unless they directly "interfered with job training, jeopardized a woman's right to work, or applied to women according to their marital status" (Stetson 97).

One of Roudy's first actions as Minister for Women's Rights was to establish the *CIDFS*, or *Centres d'Information sur les Droits des Femmes* (Information Centers on Women's Rights). These centers provided women throughout France with a source of information regarding women's rights and recent laws. They also offered legal advice and support in reclaiming rights through various institutions.

With the cooperation of Simone Iff, head of the French Family Planning Movement, Roudy also launched a massive advertising campaign promoting the awareness of modern contraceptive techniques and of abortion laws. The Ministry for Women's Rights managed to use television, feminist and women's organizations, various government Ministries, unions and political parties to inform women of family planning. The result was a doubling of activity in pre-existing family planning centers. In fact, before the campaign, there were only 377 centers for contraception information in all of France. By the end of 1981, 1000 new centers had opened to cater to the more than 13 million women who were of childbearing age (Stetson 67-68). This campaign was a milestone in showing government support for women's rights, especially in light of the fact that until 1967 it was still considered a crime to even talk about contraception.

Finally in 1983, Yvette Roudy proposed her controversial Anti-Sexist Bill. Whereas her previous campaigns and political actions had been received enthusiastically by the French public, this bill met some opposition. The advertising industry in particular criticized the bill as the State's attempt to regulate expression (and thus business).

Roudy, however, described it as a legal tool which women could use to combat sexism. The Anti-Sexist Bill was passed, albeit “quietly... and quickly,” in 1985 (Stetson, 189).

Later in 1991, Edith Cresson became the first and only woman ever to occupy the position of Prime Minister. Although she only held the position for one year, her accession to this level of national government broke the glass ceiling which seemed to be restricting women to posts which dealt specifically with women’s issues.

When we consider the oppressive traditions and attitudes which have been historically prevalent in France, the advances made by women such as Veil, Giroud, Pelletier and Roudy seem monumental. These women have played a major role in winning personal freedoms and legal protection for French women in a struggle which has been going on for only a few decades. Yet, despite the increasing importance of the positions held by women and the power accorded to them in the national government, the percentage of women in national politics remains embarrassingly low.

### **B. Underrepresentation**

Women choosing to participate in party politics have encountered unexpected obstacles in the political realm. With the new constitution of the Fifth Republic, women systematically lost standing in all parties as the structure of the electoral system began to solidify. In 1958 alone, the number of women candidates dropped seven percentage points to a dismal two percent. The low representation of women can partly be attributed to the voting system used to elect members of the French Parliament. In 1958, France moved from a proportional to a uninominal (single-member) voting system. Almost immediately, women’s representation dropped. In 1956, the percentage of women elected to the National Assembly was 3.6 percent. In 1958 this percentage had already plummeted to 1.3 percent (Stetson 43).

Also, upper-level officials often ascended into the political ranks directly from l’ENA (*l’Ecole Nationale de l’Administration*) or *Polytechnique*, schools which rarely admitted women. In fact, ninety percent of the incoming students to l’ENA are upper-middle class Parisian males, showing France’s tendency to selectively train its elite (Duchen 156). Since women lack the rhetorical training that their male counterparts enjoy, they simply do not command enough attention when they speak to make themselves heard among the voices of male politicians.

Although the percentage of women running for office in national parliamentary elections has gradually increased since the 1960s, female representation at the national level is little better today than it was immediately following women’s acquisition of the right to vote. Between 1968 and 1978 the percentage of women candidates increased

from 3.3 percent to 15.9 percent. This increase was not, however, reflected in the election results (Stetson 43). In fact, the percentage of women elected to the French Parliament was higher in 1946, when women first obtained the right to vote, than it is today. In 1946, women made up seven percent of the National Assembly and likewise seven percent of the Senate. Following the changes in the electoral system in 1958, the percentage of women in French Parliament dropped significantly. It hit a low of 1.4 percent in 1973 (Stetson 43). Since that time, the percentage of women in the both houses has been slowly climbing, but today women still make up only 5.6 percent of the legislative body.<sup>13</sup>

According to Claire Duchen, women have always been, and continue to be, misrepresented in French government. This proves true even at the level of individual political parties. The RPR (*Rassemblement Pour la République*) boasted a female membership of 41 percent in the 1980s, yet its executive committee contained only eight percent women. Likewise, the PCF (*Parti Communiste Français*) is deceptive in its percentages, since it has more women at all levels of party hierarchy than other parties, but very few are feminists (Duchen 156).

Women were particularly prevalent in the Communist Party after World War II. Although the high percentage of women suggests a level of political openness on the part of the Party, women members were still considered subordinate to their husbands until the 1960s (Nelson et al. 246). A substantial group of women who were members of the Communist Party in the 1970s broke away from the Party because they were tired of not having their opinions heard or published simply due to their criticisms or different perspectives. The communists refused to accept conflicting views within the party and although they claimed to be “the party of women’s liberation”, women members were discouraged by the official anti-contraception stance that the Party assumed (Duchen 111). Some of the women who left Party ranks to join feminist groups collectively published an article in *Le Monde* in 1978 entitled “*Le Parti mis à nu par ses femmes*” (the Party exposed by its women) in which they denounced the treatment of women within the framework of the Communist Party (Duchen 107).

Problems also arose within the Socialist Party. In the 1970s women party members decided to form their own “current” to vie specifically for women’s issues. However, the proposed current did not receive enough Party votes and therefore could not be fully active as a partner at the national level (Duchen 113). Following this disappointment, a group of female Party members published a magazine called

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<sup>13</sup> This is considerably lower than the world average where women represent 11 percent of those elected to national legislatures. In Europe, the average percentage of women in Parliamentary bodies is at 17 percent (“Keeping Mum”).

*Mignonnes, allons voir sous la rose* (Lovelies, let's look under the rose). Since the symbol of the Socialist Party is a rose held in a fist, the goal of this magazine was to examine the Party which, although claiming to be against oppression, paid no real attention to women's issues (Duchen 113).

A common concern for feminists entering the political realm is the possibility for advancement. It is difficult for them to reach upper-level positions either within political parties or in the national government without sacrificing their views to some extent.<sup>14</sup> When women do finally reach prestigious positions, they are often confined to issues dealing specifically with women or family matters. The prominent women who have achieved substantial reforms for women's rights have had titles such as: Secretary for the Status of Women or Minister of Women's Rights. Also, these posts are not always accompanied by the same power and privileges as are posts occupied by male politicians. The Secretary for the Status of Women, for example, had no real power. The position was originally intended to be an advisory position to the Prime Minister who, in turn, ignored suggestions made to him regarding the improvement of women's conditions (Duchen 127).

Françoise Giroud resigned from the Secretariat for the Status of Women in 1976. For two years the position remained unfilled until Monique Pelletier was chosen to step into the role in 1978. This laxity with regard to filling the position provides an obvious commentary on the part of Giscard's government with respect to the relative importance of women's issues in national politics (Stetson 19). Having created the post for electoral reasons, the administration tended to ignore it. Similarly, when the Socialist Party lost the legislative majority in the elections of 1986, the newly composed National Assembly dissolved the Ministry of Women's Rights (Stetson 21).

The ease with which elected bodies have eliminated high-ranking positions held by women indicates the relative unimportance of these posts. Yet, as we have seen, women such as Simone Veil and Yvette Roudy were able to use their positions in order to promote women's rights. In spite of the low percentage of women in the French legislature and the limited power associated with the positions to which women are appointed, French women have nevertheless managed to improve their rights dramatically over the past three decades.

#### **IV. Overview of the French Women's Movement**

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<sup>14</sup> During the presidential elections of 1981, a feminist named Huguette Bouchardeau presented herself as a candidate from the PSU (*Parti Socialiste Unifié*) (Duchen 115). Bouchardeau chose to affiliate herself with the PSU because it was not one of the four major parties and thus did not entail the same electoral pressures as PCF and PS. This allowed her to participate in party politics without compromising her feminist views (Duchen 118).

If we consider the amount of time that French women have been openly and actively fighting for improvement in women's conditions, we must conclude that they have succeeded in procuring a considerable number of liberties. Although French feminists themselves are not completely satisfied with the numbers of women in office or the extent of the policy changes they have obtained, it must be admitted that they have made great strides forward for a movement which was so late in getting started.

The French women's movement as we know it today is truly a recent development. Since the late 1960s, feminists have achieved both political and social freedoms. With the laws *Neuwirth*, *Veil* and *Roudy*, French women have increased their reproductive rights and procured legal protection against discrimination in the workplace. Through their militant actions and consciousness-raising sessions, women's groups have attracted media attention and thus put themselves and women's concerns before the public. Also, some feminists such as Yvette Roudy and Edith Cresson have ascended to important positions in national government. In Roudy's case this enabled her to change public attitudes through publicity campaigns and circulation of information.

One reason feminists in France have experienced so much success in such a short period of time is that the French political system is easily swayed by interest groups. Parties must form political alliances according to special interests in order to win the second round elections. Because these coalitions are essential to gaining the necessary amount of votes, candidates must appeal to as many constituents as possible. Therefore, women's voting trends have become a key factor in a candidate's success at the polls. Once women began to vote more consistently as a group, they were able to exert a sort of electoral power over the politicians. Thus, despite the small number of females in upper-level government positions, women have enjoyed an important influence over French political life due to the crucial place their vote occupied in the electoral process (Stetson 48).

### **A. New Directions for the Movement**

In the early days of the movement, women relied on marches and protests to voice their opinions on pivotal issues. Today, women employ less militant means to attain their goals of equality than in the 1970s. These alternative means are made possible in part by the institutionalization of feminism. According to Yvette Roudy, the creation of new feminist institutions has changed the face of the women's movement. Although feminism as it existed in the 1970s is no longer a driving force, women continue to make progress today through organizations and legal channels (Iglitzin et al. 14). The marches and

demonstrations of the early years are no longer visible, yet as Claire Duchen points out, “an impressive range of feminist groups and projects” are available today to channel women’s energies in a common direction (Duchen 142).<sup>15</sup>

One factor which affected the way in which feminists influenced political reforms was the shift in control of the government. Once the Socialist Party came into power in 1981, feminists found it easier to change their situation from the inside, by playing the political game, rather than through demonstrations and marches which took place outside of the realm where political decisions were made. Thus, women began to form organized bodies with specific goals in order to continue their political march toward equality.

Another reason that feminist tactics have changed is that the issues which most effect women today are no longer the same as in the 1970s. French women no longer need to fight for reproductive rights. Nor do they need to expose the fact that women encounter discrimination in the workplace, because the government has already officially acknowledged this fact and passed legislation in an attempt to rectify it. Instead, women today are concerned with maternity benefits, daycare at work and job training opportunities (Laubier 133-142).

Recently, a new issue has come to the forefront of French feminist objectives. Inspired by American Women’s Liberation groups, French women have begun to inform themselves about the topic of sexual harassment. According to Barbara Nelson and Najma Choudhury, this could be the issue to catapult the women’s movement back into French public life (257).

In December of 1991, the French Parliament adopted an amendment to the penal code which establishes strict penalties for incidences of sexual harassment. This measure, which carries with it the penalty of a heavy fine and a one year prison sentence, prohibits anyone from abusing his or her authority in the workplace in order to obtain sexual favors (Coignard 65).

This new legislation, however, does not by any means end the discussions surrounding this controversial issue. On the contrary, according to a survey conducted by the popular French magazine *Le Point*, most people do not agree on what constitutes sexual harassment (Coignard 66-67). Although the law will surely act to protect women from blatant exploitation, feminists wish to change public opinion regarding the treatment of women. Some even wish to convince French legislators that any derogatory comment or illicit invitation should be regarded as harassment, whether or not it involves a figure of authority abusing his or her power. For the most part, however, the French consider

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<sup>15</sup> One of these feminist groups is called the *Maison des Femmes*. This is a women’s center in Paris which provides a meeting place for different feminist groups to come together in order to determine a common political agenda for the future (Duchen 148).

this interpretation of harassment to be too extreme (Coignard 66). They prefer to maintain a natural balance between men and women which avoids the anxiety and distrust present in countries where the mere mention of sexual harassment sends the corporate bosses running for their lawyers.

Another goal of feminists today is to increase the number of women in both local and national government. They propose a quota system which would promote gender equality in French legislative bodies and ensure that women are not kept out of Party ranks.<sup>16</sup> The proposal is being led by Edith Cresson and ten other women politicians. Cresson was Prime Minister of France from 1991-1992, the first and only woman to occupy this position ("French Women").

Feminists also hope to introduce more women into politics at the local level. At this time, a person holding one political office may also run for another. Thus, a mayor of a small town may also hold the title of Deputy of his or her region. This practice, known as the *cumul des mandats et des fonctions*, greatly benefits male politicians and limits the number of political positions open to women. If it were eliminated, women would find it easier to enter into the political realm, and possibly continue to pursue careers at the national level. In fact, according to Brigitte Cassigneul, the elimination of accumulation of posts would free several thousand elected positions at the local level (3).

According to a poll conducted last summer in the weekly magazine *L'Express*, 84 percent of French citizens who took the poll were in favor of eliminating the accumulation of posts in order to open positions up to women. In addition, 77 percent of the people surveyed supported modifying the constitution to add the principle of gender equity to French politics while 82 percent were in favor of holding a national referendum to decide measures to achieve political equality. Overall, 71 percent of those who took the poll believed that increased political equality would improve equality between men and women in society in general ("*Nouvelle Révolution*"). In accordance with this new swing in public opinion toward gender equity in politics, the Socialist Party has already proven responsive to feminist initiatives. It has set a goal to have women make up 30 percent of its legislative election candidates by 1998 ("French Women").

## **B. Recent Obstacles**

Although feminists continue to bring new issues into the political arena and defy the long-standing social traditions of their country, new obstacles have recently arisen which challenge the very rights for which French women have fought since the 1970s.

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<sup>16</sup> Alain Juppé, Prime Minister to Jacques Chirac, openly opposes the proposal for quotas concerning female representation in French national legislative bodies ("French Women").

For example, some religious groups in France are beginning to model themselves after pro-life groups in the United States. They have recently been using “tactics of terror and intimidation” similar to those practiced by American groups in their demonstrations against abortion (Warner 20).

The election of Jacques Chirac has raised new concerns about the future of reproductive rights. By 1984, Chirac had already spoken out in opposition to Roudy’s and Mitterrand’s bill for government reimbursements for abortions (Duchen 136). Soon after the 1995 elections, Alain Juppé, Chirac’s conservative Prime Minister, appointed Hervé Gaymard, a confirmed anti-abortionist, to the position of Minister of Health (Warner 20).

Despite these recent challenges to the Veil Law, French feminists do not feel too threatened. It is astounding to note that in a country whose population is 80 percent Catholic, 79 percent of the citizens do not want to see the Veil Law changed (Warner 20). This level of popular support makes it almost impossible for the government to amend or eliminate the law. Legislators whose careers depend on the voters can not afford to let this happen.

These recent obstacles, though potentially important, are not sufficient to undermine the political and social successes attained by French feminists. France remains a country in which women enjoy government support of their reproductive rights. In addition, the government has passed numerous bills guaranteeing equal employment and encouraging both men and women to share in family responsibilities by offering maternity leaves and more flexible schedules to both partners.

Compared to its European neighbors, France continues to lag behind in the number of women in its legislation. However, feminists in the legislature are already pushing to change this situation. In addition, French women have recently begun to look to other European countries in search of possible alliances in their quest for equal rights (Nelson et al. 257). Last May, 400 women gathered in Rome to discuss ways in which to use the European Union to enforce policies designed to end the exclusion of women from public office (Vogel-Polsky 1). A joint effort with other European women could be very beneficial for the French in terms of boosting the representation of women in Parliament.

## **Conclusion**

At one time, French women faced the challenge of overcoming the entrenched set of moral laws and beliefs imposed upon them by the Napoleonic Code of 1810 and then by the repressive law of 1920. Not only have they overcome these moral codes and succeeded in changing public opinion with regards to women’s capabilities, but they have



also achieved reforms which surpassed those of other countries in which women had fewer obstacles at the outset (Stetson 82). For example, although the fight for safe and legal abortion began as recently as 1968, French women were able to influence laws to guarantee not only the right to abortion, but also government reimbursement for this procedure. Compared to other western democracies in which a woman's right to even procure an abortion is still in jeopardy, French women benefit from very progressive laws protecting their reproductive rights as well as their equality in the workplace and at home. Keeping this in mind, we can marvel at the amazing reforms achieved by French women in the past century.

Women in France feel very secure about the rights they have achieved. During the fourteen years of socialist rule, the government continually reaffirmed its dedication to improving women's rights by passing new legislation and making attempts to enforce laws passed under previous governments. Although the party in power has changed and feminists are a bit leery of what to expect from their new president and his administration, the high level of public opinion in favor of women's rights makes it difficult for any party to begin cutting programs for women without jeopardizing their own political agendas.

### Cultural attitudes

In response to the original questions posed in the beginning of this paper, I do not believe that French women are complacent or that they settle for less than they should. In addition to all the gains they have already made in terms of reproductive rights, family allocations, equality in the workplace, and an increased role in French political life, they continue to exert pressure on their legislators to further increase their rights and representation. The differences in the attitudes of French women I encountered may have more to do with cultural values and means of expression than with the specific rights that French women enjoy.

A clear understanding of French culture is necessary to analyze the development of women's rights in France without hiding behind an American perspective. French citizens, women and men alike, share a common history which influences the manner in which they interact with and respond to others. In examining French political history since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, we discover that France has consistently practiced a policy of independence. As the first president of the Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle wanted to compensate for what he considered to be the mistakes and the weaknesses of France during World War II. He thus entered into an international power game. By developing a nuclear arsenal, De Gaulle was able to claim independence from both of the world superpowers. He then expanded this policy of independence to include Europe, urging legislators not to give up sovereignty in the name of a European alliance.

Successors to De Gaulle have continued this independent stance, often defying the rest of the world as if to prove their national might. A good example of this is the series of nuclear tests ordered by President Jacques Chirac in the fall of 1995. While most of the Western world was focusing on disarmament, the French were demonstrating that they were still powerful enough to stand on their own if necessary.

This desire for independence permeates almost all aspects of French culture today. Whereas Americans take pride in their individualism and their lack of common traits to define and bind them together, the French show solidarity in their systematic defiance of the world. We notice this defiance in the nation's concerted effort to preserve their language and culture. Not only do they willingly and gleefully correct any foreigners who mispronounce their language, but they do everything in their power to prevent it from being contaminated by alien expressions. Even simple words have been officially changed so that they sound more French. For example, I distinctly remember my fellow French students being corrected for using the word "*pin's*", referring to lapel pins which people collect, because only the official word "*épinglettes*" was accepted by French language authorities.

As with their language, the French are very sensitive about their national pride. They still look to Charles de Gaulle as a national hero and refer to him reverently as "The General". I even had a high school history professor who went so far as to tell me that the Americans did not deserve credit for the liberation of France during World War II because "The General" had already achieved victory before the American intervention took place. These examples about language and history, drawn from my own personal experience, are very representative of the French desire for autonomy from all outside influences.

This desire also dictates the social relations within France. During my stay in Paris last year, I spoke to many first and second-generation African immigrants. I noticed that when I would ask their nationality, they would almost always respond that they were French citizens and neglect to mention their African heritage. This is in stark contrast to immigrants in the United States who take pride in their ethnicity and actively try to preserve their cultures of origin. Perhaps the reason behind this difference in perspectives lies in the nature of national power. The United States is a world leader in business and economic matters whereas the French claim a cultural leadership in the world. Thus, the French place a greater importance on the role of national culture than do Americans. The more I spoke with French citizens of foreign descent, the more I came to understand that they preferred to adapt to the French way of life rather than to identify with the cultures in which they were raised. This negation of one's roots is accepted, even expected, in order for immigrants to earn the honor of calling themselves French.

I believe a similar phenomenon occurs in the domain of women's rights. Whereas American women tend to see themselves first as women, then as Americans, French women identify themselves first as French. For them, being French means much more than simply belonging to France; it means sharing a rich artistic, literary, intellectual and historical heritage unique from any other. They work hard at being French, at arguing just for the sake of argument, at perfecting their language, at criticizing others, at rebelling against those in power, and at claiming their independence from the rest of the world.

Throughout the campaign for women's rights, French women's groups have followed their own policy of independence. They first claimed their freedom from subservience to males and, following the events of May 1968, they formed their own all female political and social groups. They then renounced male forms of thinking. Deciding that hierarchy was an organizational form devised by men, French women chose to form their groups in the absence of hierarchy. They purposefully avoided choosing specific leaders or spokeswomen. In fact, some groups defied politics altogether, claiming that it was a realm dominated by men.

Now that women are participating in national politics in both direct and indirect ways, they are asserting their French nationality and claiming their independence from foreign ideas. Although they are still struggling against the male-dominated political system, they are now leading their struggle from within organized institutions as they begin to accept the participation and cooperation of men.

With respect to the issue of sexual harassment in particular, we see that French women are identifying with their culture before their sex. That is to say, many French women agree with their compatriots rather than with their American counterparts on how to handle the issue of harassment in the workplace. Even though the interest in the issue of sexual harassment was initially sparked by the Clarence Thomas hearings in the United States, the French response to these hearings differed greatly from the American one.

The argumentative and proud spirit of the French is very prominent in the workplace. There, men and women seem to adhere to a "friendly complicity", where tact is the only weapon available (Laushway 39). When faced with a sexually charged comment, a French woman's initial reaction is not to feel threatened. She does not necessarily view it as a mark of disrespect, but rather as a challenge. In order to meet the challenge, the woman prefers to show her savvy and delicately put the man back in his place. This allows her to maintain a measure of equality in her working relations without the need to feel defensive or alarmed.

Not all French women, of course, are comfortable with such relaxed relations in the office. More and more women, especially in larger French cities, are becoming aware

of the issue of sexual harassment and are turning to legal remedies. According to an opinion poll conducted in 1992, at least twenty percent of the people questioned had faced sexual harassment in the workplace ("France: Jail" 1). Whereas a few years ago French men were shrugging off the example of the Clarence Thomas hearings as "oddly American", French people today are at least recognizing that harassment exists in their country ("Sexual harassment" 1).

For the most part, it is agreed that demands for sexual favors by superiors are inappropriate and interfere with work. However, for the majority of French citizens the issue of harassment stops there. The French draw a distinction between blatant abuses of power to obtain sexual favors and casual flirtation in the office. According to the July 6, 1991 issue of The Economist, flirtation is such a natural aspect of French daily life that the French have difficulty understanding normal social relations without it ("Frenchmen, beware" 50).<sup>17</sup>

This is why the recent law regulating sexual harassment punishes sexual demands by hierarchical superiors, yet ignores sexual advances by colleagues which, according to American law, could also contribute to a "hostile or offensive work environment" (EEOC). According to Veronique Neiertz, French Secretary of State for Women's Rights in 1992, the sexual harassment law was constructed specifically to avoid "American excesses" ("Sexual harassment" 1). The French, whose Mediterranean culture allows for more physical contact in social settings, seem to actively evade legislation which will put men and women on the defensive and cause presumably innocent advances to be viewed as potential criminal offenses.

A 1992 opinion poll illustrates the somewhat relaxed French attitude with regards to this issue. When faced with the question of whether an employer asking a potential employee to take off her clothes during an interview was sexual harassment, 20 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men said that it was not. Propositions by a boss to a female employee to go away for a weekend to determine a possible promotion were considered harassment by less than half of those surveyed (Laushway 39). One explanation for this apparent ambivalence on the part of French citizens is that the French, instead of engaging in sexual power struggles, relate to one another as individuals. In so doing, they allow their sexuality to punctuate their professional and social interactions in the form of flirtation. In the April 1992 edition of Europe, Ester Laushway characterizes flirtation as "one of the favorite pastimes of both French men and women: the art of seduction" (39). By maintaining this level of human relations in the workplace, the

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<sup>17</sup> The article claims that the apparent absence of such flirtation in America, Britain and Germany has led former Prime Minister Edith Cresson to the conclusion that "those countries must be largely populated by homosexuals." ("Frenchmen, beware").

French are protecting themselves from a work environment plagued by distrust and defensiveness. The recent law regarding sexual harassment punishes only cases where hierarchy strips the victim of the power to reproach his or her aggressor. In other cases where an employee's job security is not at stake, the French do not see a need to regulate flirtation and other expressions of sexual identity which are better handled on an individual basis.

In addition to their very original perspective on the issue of sexual harassment, the French approach other issues in their own distinct manner. The recent legal battle for gender parity in government is the French solution to the contested policy of affirmative action. Whether or not this new initiative was developed as a result of American influence, the French plan to resolve the question in a manner very specific to their own legal system.

I have attempted in my conclusion to briefly explore the effects of French culture on legislation concerning women's rights in order to demonstrate the importance of cultural influence. One must see the various issues from a French perspective in order to judge the progress which French women have made since their struggle began in the 1970s. A simple comparison, for example, of the sexual harassment laws in France and the United States does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the American law is more progressive. On the contrary, one must look at the attitudes of the population concerning this issue in order to determine the success or failure of the law. As it stands, the French prefer to maintain a comfortable work environment rather than push for protective laws which might put them on the defensive and destroy the delicate rapport that exists between the sexes in professional as well as social situations.

Thus, I reiterate that the political and social gains of French women must be measured by French standards rather than American or European ones. If we consider the legal advances of French women within the context of modern French culture, we find that French women have surmounted many formidable obstacles in order to attain the rights which they enjoy today. The very fact that they have achieved so much in such a short period of time, and continue to work today for increased rights and representation, confirms their success as a movement.

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