

## Women in the Enlightenment

French women helped spread the Enlightenment through their salons where philosophes like Rousseau, Diderot and Voltaire mixed with the most brilliant thinkers of Europe. Women helped to promote the careers of the Philosophes.

As King Louis XIV grew closer to death, the Court of Versailles lost its place as the intellectual center of France. Many wealthy aristocratic women began to host small gatherings in their Paris townhouses. Women like Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin (1699–1777 CE) and Claudine Tencin (1682–1749 CE) gave the Philosophes access to useful social and political contacts.

Madame Geoffrin (1699-1777 CE), who hosted two dinners each week, became so well known that she regularly corresponded with the king of Sweden and Catherine the Great of Russia. The women of the Enlightenment were also able to help the Philosophes avoid trouble with authorities and even secured pensions for some of them.

The Marquise de Pompadour (1721–1764 CE), the mistress of Louis XV, played a role in preventing the censoring of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and blocked the circulation of work attacking the Philosophes. However, the Philosophes were not on the whole strong supporters of women's rights. Although many criticized the fact female intellectuals largely had nowhere to go other than the Church, they did not advocate any radical changes in the social status of women. For example although the famed Enlightenment era philosopher Montesquieu believed women were not inferior to men, he supported a traditional view of family and marriage expecting men to dominate these institutions.

The writings of the authors in Diderot's *Encyclopedia* were also generally unfavorable to women. The editors almost exclusively recruited men and saw no need to include articles about women. The writers may have disagreed about the social equality of women, but in general, women were discussed primarily in traditional roles (daughters, wives, and mothers) and motherhood was their most important occupation. Rousseau, who was a political radical, urged a traditional role for women. In his novel, *Émile*, he claimed there should be separate spheres for men and women. Women were assigned the domestic sphere because of their supposed physiological limitations. Rousseau

excluded women from political life and felt they should not be granted equal education with men.

Inspired partially by the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797 CE), who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, criticized Rousseau for seeking to limit the hopes of women. As an early feminist philosopher, Wollstonecraft demanded women should enjoy the same basic rights and liberties that men enjoyed.