

Simone Veil's Struggle: A Cornerstone to French Feminism

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ABSTRACT

French Feminism began after the French Revolution and continuously faced ups and downs. Several feminists viewed the French Revolution as a breakthrough for women's rights due to the profound societal changes it brought about. The first wave of French Feminism emerged in the late 19th century and early 20th century and was characterized by the participation of middle-class and upper-class women. They addressed issues such as education, employment, suffrage, and the recognition of women's rights. The second wave began in the 1960s and continued the struggle for women's education, employment rights, and family life issues. Lastly, the third wave emerged in the 1990s and was characterized by its focus on diversity and individualism. World War II significantly impacted French emancipation, leading to a resurgence of feminist activism and new feminist groups. After the war, feminists continued to push for greater equality and rights for women, including reproductive rights. Abortion is a medical procedure used to end a human pregnancy. Debates about abortion, especially its legality, are still ongoing all over the world. In France, abortion was legalized in 1976 under the Veil Law, named after Simone Veil, the Minister of Health at the time. Simone Veil has played a crucial role in its legalization process. Her endeavors resulted in a law making abortion legal for any woman who requested it during the first ten weeks of pregnancy and for specific medical reasons afterward. Simone Veil has been celebrated as a promoter of reproductive rights and gender equality, and impacted future generations..

Keywords: feminism, women's rights, France, abortion, Simone Veil.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of French feminism is an ongoing journey that began in the 18th during the French Revolution and faced ups and downs until the 20th century. The struggle

for women's rights and equality has been an integral part of the larger social and political movements of France, evolving and adapting over time to address the changing needs and demands of women. From the early calls for education and civic participation in the 18th century to the suffrage campaigns of the 19th and 20th centuries, French feminists have been at the forefront of efforts to secure equal rights and opportunities for women. This essay will examine the history of French feminism, exploring the key events that shaped the movement from the French Revolution, to one of the latest struggles which was the legalization of abortion led by Simone Veil, a leading figure of French feminism in the 20th century.

2. 1789, the spark of the French feminist movement

The French Revolution brought about an era of enlightenment and freedom for women. Nevertheless, numerous historians contend that the French Revolution had a detrimental effect on women's rights. The radical social transformations that took place during the French Revolution were far-reaching, and many feminists hailed the revolution as a step forward for women's rights. However, the violence that characterized the revolution led to a backlash against those who fought for change. While the French Revolution did not guarantee substantial progress in terms of women's rights, it did lay the foundation for new possibilities for female citizens to emerge. One of the most far-reaching changes to society during the French Revolution was the elimination of all feudal privileges. This included not only the abolition of all titles and ranks but also the abolition of all laws and customs pertaining to noble rank. As a result, a commoner like Napoleon could now climb the social ladder as he did; previously, no Frenchwoman had ever become queen. Furthermore, as a direct result of abolishing noble rank, women were given the right to vote for the first time in French history. Another significant change brought about by the French Revolution was the citizenship rights of both men and women. Before 1789, only men could officially hold

citizenship status. A woman who had citizenship status would technically no longer be a woman; she would become an ellipse (a male with female privileges). Some argue that this practice perpetuated sexism, allowing men to exploit their new status as nationals to gain a further economic advantage over women. On the other hand, supporters of these rights argue that this practice exposes male citizens to exploitation by foreign nationals while giving them no such protections against female foreign nationals. Although many observed promises in the overall progress toward gender equality in French society during the revolutionary period, the aftermath proved to be disappointing. Several factors led to this disillusionment among activists: Backlash against those who advocated for better treatment of women; resentment among some male citizens towards female patriots like Pauline L'Aurore and Andromaque Courbet; anger towards those who fought against oppression during the Revolution who ended up imprisoned. In addition, the extremely hard conditions of French prisons, which resulted in a low life expectancy, further fueled feelings of injustice among those who were wrongfully treated during the Revolution.

3. Ebb and Flow

A number of issues pertinent to the current women's movement are raised by the history of "first-wave" feminism in France. The emergence of a more organized fight for women's rights can be traced back to the struggle to establish a rationalistic, republican form of governance as a replacement for the Catholic monarchy. However, both the republican and socialist proponents of feminist change in educational institutions and in civil rights rejected women's political participation due to the majority of French women's commitment to the church. Feminists, who themselves prioritized changes to family law and economic opportunities, established a large number of organizations, published journals, and held national and international conferences, but they remained less of a movement than a patchwork of leaders and groups that were split along class, religious, and personal lines. In addition, they were separated from the majority of French women with issues such as how women should relate to the traditional patriarchal family, which remained central to the nation's religious, social, and economic life. Internal disputes arose over protective legislation and women's "right to labor." In contrast, external opposition focused on religious women's potential for political reaction and others who disapproved of motherhood as the "natural vocation" and the only career for women. Antifeminists were

successful in hiding the realities of women's oppression and alienating the majority of Frenchwomen who would have supported feminism by placing feminism against a specific type of family. The First Wave of feminism in France placed a significant emphasis on the campaign for women's suffrage. This is noteworthy since it occurred at the same time when women in France received the right to vote for the first time. This occurred in 1945, the year the nation was freed from German domination. Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre were leading figures in the French feminist movement during the 1930s and 1940s. They were well-known for their book *L'age des castes* which criticized traditional French society and introduced key concepts such as patriarchy and misogyny. Many readers were drawn to this book due to how clear Sartre was in his writing. He did not shy away from using crude language when describing his opinions on women, race, or class disparity. This made him a popular figure among rebellious youth at the time. The second wave began in 1968 with the publication of Jean-Denis Bredin and Anne Laure Bontemps's book, *La Troisième vague: la femme devant la machine et le monde*. This book made several observations about the current state of affairs for women. It presented a plan for action that highlighted three main areas of concern for women at that time: education, employment, and family life. The authors also called for women to unite politically while remaining autonomous and self-determined. By uniting political will with social consciousness, they believed that change could be accomplished. The French people celebrated their country's victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. After the war, France's victory over the Nazis gave women more power. They had demonstrated their ability to serve in the French military and carry out skilled labor during the conflict. As a result, a lot of French people thought that women ought to be able to join the military in times of peace as well. They also worked to destroy the patriarchal society that had allowed the Nazis to rise to power in the first place. Following the war, French women were encouraged to follow their passions and participate in society. Many people contributed to the political movements of the Communist Party and Socialism, which aimed to empower women. Women's standing rose in the postwar era as a result of the French people's purposeful endeavor to become more equitable. The French people also felt a sense of pride in their country as a result. As a result, once Allied forces overthrew their fascist rule, many French citizens believed it was crucial to mend fences with France's adversaries from World War II. Many still believe that a peace agreement with Nazi

Germany is required in order for their citizens to properly come to terms with this terrible chapter in their history. Recovery on a physical and social level

characterized the post-war era as France attempted to end one of its most protracted wars in history. After the war, women raised their families at home while the men returned to the workforce. *Épousez un Chantre*, a statute that was passed in 1946, gave married women the ability to acquire property rights over their own property. Some, however, thought that post-war France was too traditional and that it needed more time to modernize and reform before allowing its women to fully engage in society. France has made considerable strides toward gender equality over time in many spheres of society. Today, both men and women in France work towards guaranteeing a brighter future for their nation.

4. The right to abortion, a cornerstone in the feminist struggle

The UN Human Rights Committee has stated access to abortion and the reduction of maternal mortality are recognized as human rights. The institution has drawn attention to the link between harsh abortion restrictions and dangers to women's and girls' lives. Abortion is a medical procedure that involves ending a human pregnancy. Usually, several medical professionals are involved. It is frequently employed as a method of birth control and to protect the mother's life. However, some think abortion is wrong and ought to be considered a crime. Additionally, some nations have laws that forbid abortion, leaving women with few legal options. Abortion, as it entails the termination of human life, is a controversial issue. Although the procedure has been made legal in some countries, many countries still view it as a crime. For example, Andorra, Malta, El Salvador, Honduras, Senegal, Egypt, the Philippines, and Laos are countries that prohibit abortion. Laws that defend women's lives, reproductive freedom, and sexual autonomy are essential points of focus for feminists and activists fighting for women's rights. The examination of procedures that may pose a threat to pregnant women needs to be approached with greater transparency. By doing this, the mother and the unborn child are both protected. The medical consensus states that the procedure is typically performed with little risk to the mother after twelve weeks of pregnancy. Women who want abortions typically go through a medical facility where the procedure is safely carried out. Because of this, laws about abortion are more extensive than those related to contraception. While there are few legal restrictions on abortion, using contraception is

sometimes illegal, even if doing so prevents pregnancy. Prior to having an abortion, most women are required to complete state-mandated training. This guarantees that every practitioner is licensed and is aware of how to carry out a moral abortion. Abortion does not have to be costly or require complicated processes. Regardless of their choice between medication or self-induced abortion, women have alternatives in the event they need to terminate a pregnancy.

5. Simone Veil, and abortion in France

Abortion is considered a woman's right in France and is protected by law. "Abortion is a medical issue, and medical matters are for doctors." In this statement, former French president Valerie Giscard d'Estaing alluded to the strong resistance against the legalization of abortion in France in 1975. He further pointed out that 'medical matters' are kept far away from the general public to avoid causing controversy. To this end, many politicians and public figures still strongly reject the legalization of abortion in their country. One such person is Simone Veil, president Mitterand's former minister of health. Simone Veil has championed medical services as part of her political career. Simone Veil, who experienced the Holocaust, was born into a non-practicing Jewish household. She was resolved to follow the career that her mother had been denied, so she enrolled in the University of Paris's law program and started practicing law. She successfully passed the national exam to become a magistrate in 1956. She subsequently accepted a top position at the National Penitentiary Administration, a division of the Ministry of Justice, obtaining the first platform to pursue a lifetime goal of advancing women's rights. She made a special effort to improve the treatment of women in French prisons and, during the Algerian War of Independence, she succeeded in getting Algerian female prisoners transferred to France despite numerous complaints of rape and brutality against them. One of Simone Veil's contributions to French society was her work to make contraception and abortion readily available to all women in France. In the 1930s, the first national network to provide contraception opened its doors to women in Paris. A few years later, an abortion service also opened its doors as an extension of this network. This network remains open to this day as a testament to Simone Veil's influence on national health policy. While Veil had no direct influence over health care laws, she could champion her ideals through her role as a politician. As a politician, Simone Veil is best known for being the first woman to serve as a minister in the government under President Francois Mitterand. Mitterand chose Veil based on her already being an

outspoken feminist and supporter of abortion reform. As a result, Veil successfully guided her party to pass an amendment promoting legal abortion in France in 1974. She proposed the reform and advocated for women's reproductive rights in parliament. Her efforts were met with opposition from politicians belonging to all political parties, but Veil persisted and argued that legalization was a matter of public health and individual freedom. In the end, the amendment passed by an overwhelming majority with 436 votes for and 92 against it. It was Veil's work on this amendment that earned her the title of 'the mother of the French abortion law.' The amendment is now known as the "Veil Act", promulgated in January 1975.

6. Veil's Legacy

Abortion has been widely available in France since the 1970s; however, women still face societal stigma regarding their choice to terminate the pregnancy. Failure to improve the availability of abortion services poses a serious threat to the French population. It is crucial to acknowledge the impact politicians like Simone Veil had on shaping the direction of future national health policies. While Simone Veil has made

many other contributions to French society, she is best known for founding a nationwide network that makes contraception and abortion readily available to all French women. She is now remembered as 'the mother

of the French abortion law.' France was one of the first nations to outlaw forced abortion in 1951. This showed that they had progressive values when it came to women's rights. They allowed abortions during pregnancy only if there was a risk of life or serious health issues in the baby. Abortion remain legal if it saved the mother's life but was prohibited if it caused her physical or mental harm. Abortion has always been controversial in France; pro-life groups have successfully pushed for restrictive laws in recent years due to low birth rates among native French women. Since the French Revolution, French feminists have been at the forefront of efforts to secure progress for women. French feminism reached a significant breakthrough in the latter part of the 20th century with the struggle of Simone Veil to legalize abortion in France. Veil's tireless efforts were crucial in adopting the law that legalized abortion in France. This was an important victory for women's rights in France and set a precedent for the rest of the world.



Fig 1: Paris 1937: demonstration for French women's right to vote



Fig 2: Paris 1937: demonstration for French women's right to vote

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