

Gender Oppression in the Enlightenment era

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Since most histories have been written by men, the role of women in history has been largely ignored, and their works suppressed. Women have always been depicted as subordinated to men socially and legally. As such, they were subjected to many forms of oppression, backed up by religious texts which insist upon women's inferiority and subjugation.

To quote from Howard Zinn's book, 'The People's History of the United States' he wrote, "It is possible, reading standard histories, to forget half the population of the country. The explorers were men, the landholders and merchants... the political leaders, the military figures, were men. The very *invisibility* of women, the overlooking of women, is a sign of their submerged status. In this invisibility they were something like black slaves and thus slave *women* faced a double oppression".

The Enlightenment across Europe and America produced a great cluster of ideas. Different movements emerged, demanding freedom of religion, the abolition of slavery, rights for those who did not own property and universal suffrage among those ideas. The right to vote was the privilege largely of white male property owners. Even a woman of the aristocracy could not vote and any property which she held at the time of marriage became the possession of her husband.

One of the most important ideas was that of social progress. Society had always had a strict class system of royalty, aristocracy, middle and peasant classes. The world of birth and privilege, of absolute power under the King and Church, where a person's merit counted for nothing, meant that both men and women of the lower classes were oppressed and unable to better their circumstances.

The philosophers of the age believed that you ought to be able to use your intelligence to reconstruct your society. If science could progress, as it was, during that era, so could humans, and *women took that to mean it included them too*. Enlightenment thinkers had a high regard for knowledge, so the idea of equality between women and men, particularly in regards to education became an important issue for women.

While some philosophers supported the emancipation of women, some of the greatest thinkers of the Enlightenment, while defending the democratic principles of equality, believed that these principles should be applied *only to their own gender and their own race*. The idea of enlightened reason excluded women because of what was seen by many as their *innate feminine characteristics*, which were viewed as inferior, weak and childlike.

Some of the Greek philosophers had believed in innatism — the belief that the *mind* is born with certain ideas or knowledge, as opposed to the idea that knowledge is acquired through learning. Others also believed in, and practised equality of the sexes in their society.

The Nature of things or innateness, was a controversial topic of the time and an object of research — in natural history, biology and so on, and the question arose whether woman's nature was the same or different from man's. Was woman's intellect, morality and behaviour innate or was it based on education? The **nature versus nurture** debate is still being argued today between the socio-biologists, who base their thinking on biological determinism, and who see human behaviour as genetically programmed; and the anti-socio-biologists who say that the genes and environment work together, and neither nature or nurture is overpowered by the other.

John Locke's theory of the mind was that it was a blank slate, or a *tabula rasa*. He maintained that we are born without *innate ideas*, at all *knowledge* is acquired. He seemed quite egalitarian concerning the education of boys and girls. And the idea that man was superior to women was an idea invented by men and was therefore reversible. Unfortunately, he said, subordination was apparently a woman's lot, but *not* her destiny. He thought women should be on equal footing with men within a marriage, and argued, "*The biblical Adam did not have a Private Dominion over the world but shared it with Eve.*"

Claude Adrien Helvetius (1715-1771) French philosopher, also argued against the common belief of the "innate nature and behaviour" of women. As with the blank slate theory of John Locke, he said nothing in humans is naturally innate. All knowledge is acquired, regardless of sexual or ethnic differences. Helvetius said all men and women have the same size brains and so the same intellectual potential, and it was lack of educational opportunities that prevented women from making progress.

Philosophers such as **Thomas Hobbes and Jeremy Bentham** both advocated **equal rights for women**. **Hobbes** attacked the theory of the *natural* male superiority over women, arguing that there was no rational justification for it. **Bentham** spoke for complete equality between sexes including the right to vote and to participate in government, and he opposed the strongly different sexual moral standards for women and men.

In France the Marquis de Condorcet was one of the leading male voices for female political equality. His wife, Sophie de Condorcet started a famous salon, with the goal of equal political and legal rights for women, and is thought to have influenced him in this matter. Condorcet was a member of Paris' municipal assembly. In July 1790 he wrote, "*On Granting civil rights to Women*". He argued that women are just as able to acquire and analyse concepts as men, and therefore are entitled to equal rights. He cited, among others, Queen Elizabeth, Empress Catherine of Russia and Queen Maria Theresa of Austria as women of intellect, capable in philosophy, literature and the sciences.

Thomas Paine arrived in Philadelphia in 1774, where he got a job as an editor for the Philadelphia Magazine. In his first year he wrote an article entitled, "**An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex.**" He wrote, "If we take a survey of ages and of countries, we shall find the women, almost without exception... adored and oppressed... they are ... robbed of freedom of will by the laws... Yet such, I am sorry to say, is the lot of women over the whole earth. Man with regard to them, has been either an insensible husband or 9 an oppressor."

The Physician **Cornelius von Nettenheim** wrote, emphatically, "The only difference between men and \ women is physical... in everything else they are the same. Woman does not have a soul of a different sex. Both men and women are equally endowed with the gifts of spirit, reason, and the use of words"

But Samuel Butler, the 17th century poet and satirist wrote:

*The souls of women are so small
That some believe they've none at all.*

As with some other philosophers, I found mixed messages in **Immanuel Kant's** writings. He emphasised that freedom of thought, the right to reason, was a universal right, saying, "*Every human being is a free, autonomous being and therefore cannot be subjugated to the will of another*". But then, Kant argued that in marriage the husband is the master of his wife ("*he the party to direct, she to obey*") In his observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime, he idealises women, but also notes "*Laborious learning or painful pondering destroy her merits and weaken her charms. A woman with her head full of Greek like Mme. Dacier, or who talks about mechanics like the Marquise de Chatelet might as well grow a beard*"

Rousseau also thought that it was the order of the *nature* of things for women to obey men. He wrote, "Women do wrong to complain of the inequality of man-made laws. When she tries to usurp our rights, she is our inferior". Even though **Rousseau** had known and conversed with highly intelligent women in the salons, he was cheerfully misogynistic. In his book *Emile* he wrote, "*Men and women are not equal, it is the part of one to be active and strong, the other to be passive and weak. Woman is intended to please man and their education must be wholly directed to give them pleasure, and to be useful to them*".

In 1772 Antoine-Leonard Thomas was a distinguished member of the French academy, and a habitué of a prestigious salon, held by a Madame Necker, where many such things were discussed. He agreed with Rousseau, and published **Essay on the character, nature of morals and spirit of women through different centuries**. In it, he wrote that, *"Because of their 'delicate' natures and natural modesty, women are less able than men to feel and express strong emotions, to excel in intellectual pursuits or to create great art. They are by nature inferior to, and dependent upon men, and their primary function is to serve as wives and mothers. They should therefore be excluded from the public sphere and be educated only for a domestic role"*.

The philosopher Denis Diderot didn't agree. He wrote the essay *Sur les femmes* (On Women). He strongly criticised Thomas' essay, and called him an ingrate for failing to praise women for their intelligence and the inspiration they provided the intellectual men and women, who gathered in their salons. He suggested that Thomas was a hermaphrodite. Then he went a bit further, and called him a eunuch, saying that Thomas' lack of experience with women explained his inability to portray women as they truly are.

Denis Diderot was a regular member of the salon of **Madame Louise D'Epinay** (1726-1783). Louise D'Epinay was a prolific writer and she contributed essays, theatre and book reviews, articles on politics, economics and philosophy to the literary journal of her lover, and Diderot's closest friend, Friedrich von Grimm. She too wrote, hotly disputing a number of Thomas' well-worn arguments. She also attacked Rousseau for his comments, and broke relations with him.

We may forgive men of the eighteenth century for clinging to traditional attitudes, but modern feminists ask, How is it that they could argue reasonably that all human beings are naturally equal and free, yet also argue against the same things for women?

How did women get an audience for expressing their ideas? Some avenues were opened for them.

The Republic of Letters was one. The Republic of Letters was a community of learned men and women that spanned Europe, the Americas, and parts of Asia from roughly 1400 to 1800. Originally based on the exchange of letters between religious scholars, by the 17th and 18 centuries it had become a forum for men and women for intellectual exchange and propagation of Enlightenment ideas. For women especially, who had little chance of getting anything published, the Republic of Letters was an important part of their acceptance in the academic world.

Salon - another forum The salons, which were held all over Europe, originated in the 16th century, where visitors had polite and witty conversations, and refreshments were served. In the Enlightenment salons, pleasure was not the objective. Women, now, were not just there to be decorative and make witty conversation. On the contrary, under the guidance of famous hosts, known as *salonistes*, like **Louise d'Epinay, Madame Geoffrin, Mlle de Lespinasse, Sophie de Condorcet and Madame Necker**, the salon was transformed into an informal university for them. There, they were free to exchange ideas, read their own works and hear the works and ideas of other intellectuals, scholars and scientists.

The salons of England, such as those held by **Elizabeth Montague, Elizabeth Vesey and Hester Thrale** were intellectual and political salons. Hester Thrale's salon attracted figures such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Fanny Burney and Samuel Johnson, among others. Dr Johnson, in fact, lived for 16 years at the home of Hester and Henry Thrale.

The Blue Stockings Society was an informal women's educational movement in the mid-18th century in England. The society's name derived from the European fashion in which *blue stockings* were worn for more informal wear, which they preferred for their gatherings. They invited various people to attend, but they wanted intellectual discussion and debate only and would have no part in what they saw as foolish pastimes like card playing and gossip.

The coffeehouses of England and France, which sprang up in 17th century were public places

where intellectual debates took place over a cup of coffee. They were called "Penny universities", a penny being the price of a cup of coffee. They were great social levellers - everyone had a say, except women - Women owned coffeehouses, women served coffee, but they were not encouraged to join in debates.

Debating houses were another story. London had the largest number of debating houses throughout the Enlightenment period. Initially men-only, they developed into mixed-gender organisations and there were women-only meetings too. Debating societies would rent a hall, charge a small admission, and allow the public to discuss and debate the topics of the day: What made them different was that women were invited to *take part* in their debates and they were treated as equals.

Here are a couple of typical topics for debate:

[1]. "Is it not detrimental to the world to restrain the female sex from the pursuit of classical and mathematical learning?"

2] "Would it not tend to the happiness of mankind, if women were allowed a scientific education?"

The Academies The middle of the 17th century saw the rise of Academies. In England, The Royal Society, was founded in 1662, primarily for the promotion of science. Isaac Newton was its most famous leader from 1703 to 1727. One most important feature of the academies was that information did not have to pass from individual to individual, as it had with the **Republic of Letters**, it could pass from academy to academy, in the form of academic journals that the whole scholarly community could read.

So what place did women hold in these academies? Their admittance was rare and almost entirely dependent upon their class and/or their high connections. Women in general were excluded from scientific studies. They couldn't get into laboratories; they couldn't use scientific instruments, such as the microscope, so they couldn't do much serious research. If women got an education, it was through self-study or by the teachings of the more open-minded male family members.

Midwives suffered even more restrictions in this period. They were forbidden to use even *forceps*. Male surgeons began to take over the role of midwives. It was one of those surgeons who is thought to have caused the death of Mary Wollstonecraft when she gave birth to her daughter Mary. The procedure used by the doctor to expel the placenta was so brutal that she bled to death.

Now, I would like to talk about some exceptional women of the time. Some you may have heard of, some not.

Only a few women scientists gained recognition in their *lifetime*. A relatively high number of women managed to practice *astronomy* - In **Germany**, between 1650 and 1710, women made up 14% of all German astronomers - but they could only get professional training and access to observatories as assistants to their fathers, brothers, or husbands.

Maria Winkelmann (1670-1720) worked alongside her astronomer husband *Gottfried Kirch*. She made observations and prepared astronomical calendars. She discovered a comet in 1702 and published three astronomical tracts between 1709 and 1711. But, even though she had been admitted into the Berlin Academy of Sciences as an expert assistant to her husband, she was refused admission by the academy after his death. Neither Winkelmann nor her *daughters*, who were also well-trained astronomers, could get access to the observatories and telescopes.

The most famous female astronomer in Britain was **Caroline Hershel (1750-1848)**. She was taught by her brother **William** to build and to use telescopes, and to study, map, and calculate the movements of the stars. Caroline made numerous discoveries, including *eight comets* between 1786 and 1797. She corrected English astronomer John Flamsteed's star catalogue of 1725, and brought out a new catalogue of Stars in 1798, which was recognised as an improvement, and *published by*

the Royal Society. The Herschel crater on the Moon is named after her. Her most significant contribution to astronomy was the discovery of the periodic comet, which bears her name, *35P/Herschel-Rigollet*.

Nicole Lepaute (1723-1788) was known as one of the best astronomical computers in France. She, too, had a moon crater named in her honour. In 1762 Lepaute calculated the **exact time** of the coming *solar eclipse* of 1764 and published an article in which she mapped the eclipse's extent in 15-minute intervals across *Europe*. She also correctly predicted the return of *Halley's Comet* in 1759.

Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) was a Dutch naturalist, entomologist and scientific illustrator. After spending two years in Dutch Surinam, Maria successfully published her work, the *Metamorphosis of the butterfly*, in 1705. It was a ground-breaking study, as the scholars of the time believed that insects came from "spontaneous generation of rotting mud" Merian, through her notes and illustrations, showed what actually happened in the transformation of caterpillars into butterflies, and the plants on which they fed. Although her work was highly popular among amateur naturalists her work was largely ignored by scientists) of the time because it was written in the vernacular, not Latin or Greek.

Lady Mary Wortley Montague (1689-1762) an aristocrat and wife to the British ambassador to Turkey. She introduced inoculation against smallpox into England on her return from Turkey, where she had seen the procedure practised. In later years, Edward Jenner developed vaccination, which was a safer method. Lady Mary had an acid wit. There is the story of her being told at the opera that her hands were dirty, by someone who did not like her very much, and of her answering: "You should see my feet."

The Russian Princess Yekaterina Dashkova was the first woman in the world to head a national academy when she became the director of the Academy of Sciences of St. Petersburg in 1783. She brought the failing academy to prominence and intellectual respectability. She also launched and contributed to a major achievement — a *6-volume Dictionary of the Russian Languages*. Russia's empress **Catherine the Great** was herself known as an enlightened monarch, as she embraced the principles of the Enlightenment.

Emilie du Châtelet (1706-1749), a French mathematician and physicist, was Voltaire's lover and intellectual companion. *Voltaire* declared that du Chatelet was "a great man whose only fault was being a woman". Her crowning achievement was her translation and commentary on Isaac Newton's work *Principia Mathematica*. She not only translated Newton's work, she expanded it, to include recent progress made in mathematical physics after his death.

In Italy, **Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia (5 June 1646 - 26 July 1684)**, was a 17th century *Venetian philosopher* of noble descent, and the first woman to receive a degree. With her father's help, she entered the *University of Padua*, where she received the Doctorate in Philosophy in 1678.

Laura Bassi was an Italian physicist. She received a PhD from the University of Bologna. She became a professor of anatomy at the age of 21, and in 1733 was given the chair of philosophy. She taught courses on Newtonian physics at the university for 28 years.

Maria Gaetana Agnesi (1718-1789) was an Italian linguist, mathematician and philosopher. She was a child prodigy, and at nine years of age, composed and delivered an hour-long speech in Latin to some of the most distinguished intellectuals of the day. The subject was *Women's right to be educated*

Her father encouraged her studies and engaged tutors for her to learn five languages (Greek, Hebrew, Latin, French and Spanish) as well as philosophy, mathematics and science. By age 13, she could debate in any of those languages with her father's learned guests. She wrote the first mathematics book by a woman that still survives; and was the first woman appointed as a

mathematics professor at Bologna university. When she was only aged 20, she published 190 essays, in Latin, on scientific topics like logic, mechanics, celestial mechanics, Newton's gravitation theory, and elasticity. She developed a mathematical formula

$$y = \frac{8a^3}{(x^2 + 4a^2)}$$

describing the curve, which solved an age-old puzzle. Maria was elected to the faculty of the *Bologna Academy of Sciences*. Sadly, she never took up the position. She was a devout Christian, and decided to devote her life to charity work.

Women writers and philosophers

There were plenty of women writers, but few early serious philosophical works. Women were excluded from the academic world, so they had to take an *oblique* approach to get their philosophical writings published. So they wrote novels, letters or poetry, in which their ideas were hidden. They were therefore, not considered serious writers because they were not written in the proper argumentative philosophical form.

Christine de Pizan (1363-1430) is seen by many feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, as an early trailblazer for the Feminist movement. In all her works she strongly challenged *misogyny* and female stereotypes of medieval culture, by writing in allegory. In 1405 she wrote an allegorical book called: **The Book of the City of Ladies**. In her book she chose a wide array of famous females throughout history. These women are "housed" in the City of Ladies - a safe, fortified place where women may seek the truth. As Christine digs the foundation of her city, each basketful of dirt carried away removes another erroneous opinion or traditional misogynist argument, and each famous woman is used as a building block for her *defence of female rights*.

Bathsua Reginald Makin (1600-1675) was a writer and was once described as England's most learned lady. She was middle class, educated, thanks to her father, she was also skilled in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, German, Spanish, French and Italian - 7 languages! She wrote *Musea Virginea*, a book of verse, written in all seven languages, when she was only *sixteen*. In 1673 she wrote and published an essay, which demanded that equal education for women.

Sister Juana Ines de la Cruz (1648-1695) was an early 17th century Mexican nun, a self-taught scholar who taught herself to read by the age of 3. She was dangerously outspoken in a time when the Inquisition was most active. On prostitution, she said, "Who sins more, she who sins for pay? Or he who pays for sin?" She argued with her bishop, saying, "Does not a woman's soul have the same value as a man's?"

Mary Astell (1666-1731) wrote her argument for the education of women. She protested that men blamed women for being irrational, but prevented them from learning. Reason, she said, was a human characteristic, not gender-based. She said, "It is men who speak without Reason, of the Natural inferiority of women. Why, then can a Queen command? Should she be submissive to her butler?"

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was an English Restoration professional writer of plays, fiction and poetry. Interesting woman, worked as a spy, for Charles II, spent time in a debtor's prison, a very outspoken and sexually liberated woman, she wrote racy plays, and is most well-known for her anti-slavery novel, *Oroonoko*, based on her meeting with an enslaved West Indian prince. *Oroonoko* introduced the idea of the noble savage, which Rousseau further developed. A political radical, she often took part in public debates, where she was very outspoken, and once arrested for her comments.

Catherine Macaulay, (1731-1791) English historian, was one of the leading political activists and pamphleteer of her day, who argued for equal education for women. In 1763 she succeeded in

getting published a major work - eight volumes of the *History of England from James I to the Brunswick Line*.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is arguably one of the most influential of women thinkers in history and a pioneer in an age of female repression. In 1792, she wrote her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. In it, she established a solid case in support of emancipation. She challenged the perception by men that women were by nature, inferior, weak and childlike and proposed many social and political changes, ranging from education to civil and political rights, and women's right to be elected political representatives. In the 19th century Frederick Engels would describe marriage as a state where the husband is the bourgeois and the wife the proletariat. *Wollstonecraft* described marriage as "legalised prostitution". She herself led an unconventional lifestyle. Because of this her *Vindication* was suppressed for decades after public revelations about her wicked past.

Women and the arts Few women were admitted to art academies in Europe in this period. Women were restricted to painting portraits, still- life and botanical works. No nudes. No freedom of expression.

Women in general, were often restricted in their musical efforts. One exception was *Elizabeth de la Guerre*, who was the first woman to compose a complete opera in France, in 1694 [*Cephale et Procis*].

Mozart's Sister, Nannerl, evidently had prodigious musical skills, but was forbidden by her father to play the violin or to compose musical scores. She evidently gave up music altogether, burned all her manuscripts, and stayed at home to look after her mother.

There's a book in Wollongong library called, *Written by Mrs Bach*. The author, musicologist Martin Jarvis claims that the **Six Cello Suites** by Johann Sebastian Bach, were written and composed by his wife, Anna. He says they were not just written down or copied in her hand, and he goes about proving that she actually composed them.

There is a correlation between class and the education of women in the Enlightenment period. The lower class women had neither the time, the resources or privacy to educate themselves or their children. With few exceptions, women were almost exclusively from the upper classes. They did not represent the female sex.

Women revolutionary activists

Women traditionally took part in rebellions in early modern Europe. In 17th century England, **the Levellers** were the first to encourage women to participate in political activity. So, in **1649, Women Levellers** took action and presented a petition, signed by ten thousand women, to parliament. One of the demands was for "an equal interest with the men of the nation in its liberties and securities." They did not go so far, however, as to ask for woman suffrage.

In revolutionary France, large numbers of women were activists. They joined the "sans culottes" — the radical militant lower classes. Their demonstrations over the high price and scarcity of bread led to revolutionary action for political reforms, and it was the **Women's March on Versailles**, also known as The October March, which led the way, and forced King Louis XVI and his family to move to Paris and recognise a new constitution.

It was Rousseau who said, '*Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains*'. French women said they were not born free, they were without rights, so therefore they too were slaves. Unable to be recognised as free citizens, they became increasingly radicalised. They demanded the right to wear the blue, white and red cockade, the symbol of citizenship worn on men's hats. 'Are we not citizens, too?' they cried.

When the **Declaration of the Rights of Man** was read, **Olympe de Gouges**, a French playwright and political activist, wrote her famous "**Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen**". She took point by point of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and declared that it was a revolution which had been devoted to men only. De Gouges dedicated her Declaration to Marie Antoinette (whom she despised), and declared, "If, under French law, women have the right to die on the guillotine, they must also have the right to mount the speaker's rostrum." \ She herself died on the guillotine in the Reign of Terror.

Rousseau believed that any progress that was made by mankind was inevitably paid for by regression in another area. How right he was! The more things change, the more they stay the same.

When the Jacobins established the first French Republic women's political activities were effectively shut down. Laws that had been changed to their benefit were short-lived. Women's rights suffered even more under **The Napoleonic Code of 1804**. The recent law reforms were rescinded, the divorce laws gave more control to husbands, and advancements in inheritance and property rights were also swept away. French women continued to lack basic political rights for many more decades. It was not until **1944** that they were given the right to vote. Married women had to wait until **1965** before they got equal legal property rights.

America In late 18th century America, women were a key element in the resistance to colonial power. Women American political activists formed patriotic, anti-British groups, like the Daughters of Liberty, and encouraged others to join in the campaign against the British, to boycott British goods, & slave-grown sugar.

Abigail Adams was the wife of John Adams, a leading champion of independence and later second president of the United States. Abigail ran the farm while her husband was away and in one of her frequent letters to him she begged him to not forget women in the new Declaration of Independence, "... otherwise", she wrote, "**we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation**".

John Adams reply April 14, 1776. I cannot but laugh at your extraordinary code of laws. You are too saucy. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bonds of government everywhere; that schools and colleges have grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented".

Were women included in the declaration, with its principle of equality and justice for all? No, they were not.: After the Revolution, none of the new state constitutions granted women the right to vote. Voting rights for women were not recognized by the United States until 1920, 144 years after the Declaration of Independence. It was even longer for African Americans to gain their civil rights.

But women's demonstration of patriotism during the Revolution, brought about the concept of "Republican Motherhood". It was seen after the war as the role of woman in society to raise children who valued patriotism and were ready to sacrifice themselves for the country. In order to fulfil this role, a woman needed to be well educated herself, but, no thanks to Thomas Jefferson and like-thinkers, the desirability of education did not extend to women, blacks or Native Americans. He felt that women should have just enough education to direct that of their sons and daughters.

To Summarise: It is often said that women gained nothing from the Enlightenment. In some ways the position of women was seriously degraded.

Women had truly thought that the American and French revolutions would bring in a general social

transformation. It didn't happen then, but the seed for gender equality had been planted, and an increasing number of women began to agitate for human rights for women too. Progress was painfully slow. There would be other more pressing social and economic changes to be fought for in the next century and a half, and the *structure* of society would have to change before the women's question would be addressed again.

Today, all around us, we see women doing extraordinary things, powerful things. They are prime ministers, Supreme Court judges, CEOs of top companies, excelling in all of the arts and sciences. What is so difficult for women today is the fact that old sexist attitudes are still alive and kicking. We only have to open the newspapers to see examples of sexism that persist in traditionally male-dominated fields. Women in positions of power are constantly being described by their clothes, their weight and their hair styles.

Women in parliament, both here and abroad, are tired of the constant sexist comments that are made - from Silvio Berlusconi's inane remarks, to Liberal Senator Bushby's idiotic 'meow' directed at Minister Penny Wong, and Senator Bill Heffernan's comments on Julia Gillard, that she is 'barren' and single and less of a woman, because she hasn't reproduced. These comments belittle what women do and what they achieve.

Today, women's issues seem to have been dropped from the political agenda. (I need hardly -Mention the extreme forms of oppression in many countries in the Middle East and parts of Africa. But, for the Western world, was the Enlightenment an enlightened age for women, or indeed for any of the oppressed classes?! Or was the Enlightenment followed by the Disillusionment?