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As the current revolutions in the Middle East exemplify, the securing of rights for all people continues to be a process today as it was over 200 years ago and the events surrounding the French Revolution make this clear as well. The French Revolution illustrates that historically revolutions and the social, economic and political changes that they create are necessary to initially secure rights. However, the rights secured are often not intended for all socioeconomic groups and also the rights can easily be taken away. When looking at the goals achieved by the French Revolution, one can see that the political, economic and social rights of the common Frenchmen were secured and that the revolution was necessary to secure those rights; however the revolution did not secure the rights of all citizens as it did not ensure equivalent rights for women and slaves despite the fact that they proved to be very powerful figures during the revolution.

The French Revolution was necessary and successful in securing rights for a special class of French citizens: white males who owned property. The Enlightenment ideals of the time were very fixated on reason, and inspired many in France to question the monarchy and how it ruled. The Enlightenment ultimately led to the French Revolution, which grew out of a belief in reason. Much of this reason was focused on the idea of national rights, and citizens’ desire to have more representation in the political life of France. Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, published in 1791, states that if citizens are to be led by a government “the person so set up is not hereditary, but selected and appointed; and the generation who sets him up, does not live under a hereditary government, but under a government of its own choice and establishment” (Paine, 1). Thomas Paine was a major advocate for the French Revolution, and believed the citizens’ happiness should be the dominant focus of a government. Meaning the rights of citizens must be guaranteed by the institution in order for happiness to be possible. The formation of the National assembly was the first leap towards a greater white, male representation in the government. Louis XVI wanted a set of reforms to be passed, but first the Estates General had to approve it. However, the third estate, which represented 95% of the population, was allowed only one vote. They therefore broke off, and on June 17, 1789, they named themselves the national assembly thus allowing each member to be counted as one vote. Soon following was the clergy and the nobility, and on August 26, 1789 they passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man. They declared all men free and equal, however the word “men” was defined as white men who owned property. These men were given what was known as “active citizenship,” meaning they could vote and be represented in the government. The creation of the National assembly exhibits how the French Revolution did in fact secure political rights for men. However, The French Revolution granted more political rights, but only to a select few, whereas the majority of citizens were recognized as passive citizens throughout and after the revolution.

The French Revolution was not as successful in securing equal rights for half of its citizens; women’s rights were not achieved at that time and movements to try to gain these equivalent rights were helpful, but ultimately did not change the status of rights for women at the time. Women were somewhat included in what was thought of as a “passive citizen.” Passive citizenship meant they were recognized as citizens, but were not given the right to political participation. Women were very powerful figures in the French revolution, however power does not obtain rights. On October 5, 1789, thousands of women took the grain dispute into their own hands, and marched to Versailles, the city center of Paris. The king was forced to comply by moving to Paris. The French monarchy, a dominant and stable government, actually acknowledged its citizens and faced a new fear: the power its own citizens, women citizens, could generate. The march allowed women to prove themselves and that they in fact could inspire change, however once the Declaration of the Rights of Man was written, women were overlooked. Nonetheless this did not stop women from fighting for the same political rights as men. In 1789, after the march to Versailles, women created the Women’s Petition to the National assembly. This was a petition signed by thousands of women requesting equal political representation. This petition was ultimately ignored, and demonstrates how the French Revolution failed to grant women’s rights. In response to this, Olympe De Gouges, a political activist, wrote up a new declaration, The Declaration of The Rights Of Women of 1791 which included women's rights to vote, hold office, own property rights, have equal tax duties, and equal punishments. This highlighted a weakness of the French Revolution, which is that of equality of rights among all citizens. The French women of the time, despite their power and activism, did not secure rights through revolution.

Women did not see a great improvement in political rights, and slavery also remained prevalent during the time of the French Revolution. Olaudah Equiano wrote a memoir of his life in slavery in 1789, the beginning days of the French Revolution. He advocated for slavery to end, and believed no one benefited from slavery: “Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire and every noble sentiment? But, above all, what advantages do not a refined people possess over those who are rude and uncultivated” (Equiano, 16). Enlightenment philosophies pushed for equality among all, unfortunately when it came to the French Revolution slaves were completely overlooked in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Caribbean colonies were an essential factor in the French economy, yet were ignored when it came to equal rights. They produced substantially more than the British colonies, and were much larger in size as well. St. Dominique was the most vital colony for France. Regardless of the power that these colonies held, many revolutionaries did not see anything wrong with slavery. In August 1791, the northern slaves of St. Dominique participated in a revolt. This is known as the first successful slave revolt. Free Blacks were actually given civil political rights, and in February 1794, Black men in the colonies received full rights. Napoleon tried to re-implement slavery, but he was defeated in 1804 and St. Dominique became the Republic of Haiti. Although male slaves were granted rights, proving again that revolutions are necessary to secure rights, these very rights were then taken away during the time of Napoleon’s rule. This illustrates that revolutions do not guarantee a permanence of equal political rights, even after a political group first achieves those rights.

When looking closely at the rights gained by French citizens during the French Revolution, it’s very clear that men were the main priority. Men who owned property were given much more political representation in the government, whereas women who fought fiercely for greater political rights were discounted. Slavery in the Caribbean colonies, a crucial aspect of the French economy, continued to be accepted throughout France, and the colonists had to take matters in their own hands in order to obtain rights. What was obtained was later taken away by Napoleon. Men mainly reaped the benefits from the French Revolution compared to women and slaves who struggled to gain equal rights throughout the revolution. The French Revolution, like most revolutions, started the ball rolling in the right direction to securing rights for French citizens, however, the mixed results make it clear that revolutions and the securing of rights is a long process that does not affect all citizens equally.

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