

Letter to Proudhon

Jeanne Deroin

January 28, 1849

Monsieur,

I know that, preoccupied most especially with questions of political economy, you have not accepted all the consequences of the principles on which our social future rests.

You are one of the most formidable adversaries of the principle of equality—a principle which does not allow unjust exclusion and privileges of sex.

I know that you do not wish to recognize the right of women to civil and political equality. This right, which contains in it the abolition of all social inequalities, of all oppressive privileges.

But I also know that this opposition on your part is founded on a respectable motive. You fear that the application of this principle seriously undermines the holy laws of morality.

If it was demonstrated to you that you are in error, I believe, Monsieur, in your honesty, in your sincere love for truth, and I do not doubt that you would use all your influence on the minds of the people, to destroy the direst of prejudices which hinder the march of humanity on the road of progress.

You will yourself be the firmest supporter, the most ardent defender that holy cause—that of all the weak, and all the oppressed.

I appeal to you, Monsieur, to examine more seriously all the aspects of this great question, so important in this epoch of transition where our social regeneration is prepared.

Permit me to present to you some observations on this subject. The superiority of your knowledge and intelligence is one more reason for me to hope that they will be received with kindness.

As a Christian socialist, I would say, like you, Monsieur, *rather housewives than courtesans*, if I wasn't certain that a great number of women become courtesans only to escape the necessity of being housewives.

Poor women, who would perhaps be preserved from shame if we found for them a place between the necessity of being housewives or courtesans, which would have favored the right to work over the run of the household

To your dilemma, Monsieur, I will oppose another which is an axiom for me: slave and prostitute, or free and chaste, for woman there is no middle ground.

Prostitution is the result of the slavery of women, of ignorance and poverty.

Do not suppress any more the development of their most noble faculties; promote the free development of their intelligence; give a noble aim to their activity, the weaknesses of the heart and the digressions of the imagination will no longer be anything to fear.

You want to strengthen the links of the family, and you divide it: man in the forum or the workshop, woman at home by the hearth. Separated from their husbands and children, from their father and brothers, women, as in the past, will be consoled in their isolation and servitude by dreaming of the celestial homeland, where they would have the freedom of the city, where there would no longer be inequality or unjust privileges. Abandoned by you to the influence of the confessional, they will entwine you in a mysterious, and all your efforts towards progress will be vain; you will fight without success for liberty like those Polish barons who refused to free their serfs. You will try uselessly to establish equality between citizens: society is based on the family, and if the family remains based on inequality, society will always go back to its rut, and reenter, as you say, *the natural order of things*. Since the origin of the world there have been slaves and masters, oppressed and tyrants, privileges of sex, of race, of birth, caste and fortune, and it always will be as long as you refuse to practice fraternity towards those that God has given you as sisters and companions.

You ask what the mission of woman will be outside of the family? She will come to help you reestablish order in that great, but badly administered household that we call the State, and to substitute a just division of the products for the permanent spoliation of the severe labors of the proletariat. The mother worthy of that name is predisposed to love the weak and suffering, but she is occupied with solicitude to preserve equally all her children from cold and hunger, and to give rise to a mutual sympathy in their heats; she will do for the great social family what she does in her home when she will widen the egoistic circle of domestic affections by rising to the height of humanitarian questions.

I strongly desire, Monsieur, for you to share my profound conviction, that no serious reform can be accomplished in an enduring manner without the application of that great principle of the right of women to civil and political equality, which is the basis of our social redemption.

Please accept, Monsieur, the assurance of my highest consideration.

JEANNE DERGIN.

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Retrieved on 2026-07-25 from libertarian-labyrinth.org
L'Opinion des Femmes. No. 1, Year 1. January 28, 1849.

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