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Women as Spectators and Participants in the French Revolution

Was the French Revolution only concerned with the rights of man? This article explores how women created a space for themselves in revolutionary politics. Some were eyewitnesses who gave perceptive accounts of dramatic moments of the Revolution. Others became active participants, determined that the Revolution should be truly universal and address their own concerns.

Women and Revolutionary ideology

The principles of the French Revolution were set out in the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen' which in theory promised liberty and equality to all sections of society. But how far did the Revolution fulfill this promise? This article traces the participation of women in the French Revolution, both as spectators and as active participants. It shows that women had a very diverse response to revolutionary politics, and that their varied experiences in turn throw new light both on the significance of the Revolution and the extent to which the gains of the Revolution extended beyond the world of affluent white males.

Women's experiences of the French Revolution were as varied as the women themselves. Noble women from the privileged world of Versailles, educated women of the middle classes, peasant women from the Vendée, silk weavers from Lyon, market women from Paris: all had very different responses to the Revolution. Many women were active participants in the Revolution: marching and protesting on the streets, debating in societies, viewing the proceedings of the assemblies and clubs from the public galleries, and writing pamphlets. Liberty, equality and fraternity were the founding principles of the Revolution. But should these principles apply to women as well as men? Some commentators thought they should.

Nevertheless many male revolutionaries were ambivalent about the idea of women playing a prominent role in revolutionary politics. Women achieved a number of social and civil rights during the Revolution, including the right to equal inheritance and the right to divorce on equal terms with men (though the later right was partially dismantled under Napoleon and removed altogether when the monarchy was restored). They were given 'passive' rights as citizens, and the protection of the law. They did not, however, gain political rights, and were never accorded the status of 'active' citizens. The extent to which the active involvement of women in politics was acceptable continued to be a contested subject throughout the period of the Revolution.¹ The different experiences of women in the French Revolution have implications for the very nature of the Revolution, and make us reevaluate what the Revolution was about. Revolutionary ideology was founded on the belief that active participants in the Revolution should be motivated by their political virtue, that is, by their selfless dedication to the public good. Traditionally political virtue was a quality associated with men, but many women, both as observers and as activists, did not accept the idea that they themselves were incapable of political virtue. On the contrary, they saw themselves as virtuous *citoyennes*, with a clear capacity for devotion to the public good. The voices of such women can be particularly illuminating about the nature of revolutionary politics. Men who were active in revolutionary politics were often constrained by their ambitions, by their desire for a career or empowerment in revolutionary politics, and therefore their need to conform to prevailing ideologies and rhetoric. Women observers did not have to toe the line in the way that their ambitious male counterparts were frequently obliged to do. Because women could not hope to be deputies in the assemblies, or to hold official roles in administrative posts, they could be more at liberty to voice their views, to say what they really thought, and even to challenge some of the underlying assumptions of revolutionary politics.

There was a long-standing tradition of hostility towards women participating in politics. This stemmed largely from hostile perceptions of the role of women in old regime court politics. Women at court, such as the

1 On the involvement of women in revolutionary politics, see Dominique Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses: les femmes du peuple à Paris pendant la Révolution française* (Aix: Alinéa, 1988); and Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine, ed., *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

mistresses of Louis XV, Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry, were said to be influencing the king for the benefit of themselves, their families and their faction; and thereby corrupting political virtue.² This idea fostered a profound suspicion of women who were politically active behind the scenes, in private venues such as houses and political salons, a fear that carried over into the Revolution itself.³

Mary Wollstonecraft, the English radical writer and pioneering feminist, in her account of the French Revolution, described the court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette as ‘not only the most dissolute and abandoned that ever displayed the folly of royalty, but audaciously negligent with respect to that attention to decency, which is necessary to delude the vulgar...’⁴ Wollstonecraft never saw the court of Versailles at first hand, and her views owed much to the negative image of the court that circulated in the clandestine and scurrilous press. The same cannot be said, however, of the Marquise de La Tour du Pin, who as a young woman had moved in court circles. She too attributed the onset of the Revolution to the corruption of the court and the contempt for political virtue. ‘The profligate reign of Louis XV had corrupted the nobility and among the Court Nobles could be found instances of every form of vice ... The rot started at the top and spread downwards. Virtue in men and good conduct in women became the object of ridicule and were considered provincial.’⁵

Revolution as Inspiration for Women

With the outbreak of the Revolution a new group of women came to prominence. These were the women of the urban lower orders who were often at the forefront of crowd protests. On 5 October 1789, a crowd of six

2 On women and the politics of virtue, see Marisa Linton, ‘Virtue Rewarded? Women and the Politics of Virtue in Eighteenth-Century France’, part I, *History of European Ideas*, 26, 1 (2000): 35-49, and part 2, *History of European Ideas*, 26, 1 (2000): 51-65.

3 On the revolutionaries’ suspicions of women who were politically active behind the scenes, see Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2013).

4 Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794: this edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 302.

5 Madame de La Tour du Pin, *Memoirs of Madame de La Tour du Pin*, ed. and trans. Felice Harcourt (London: Century Publishing, 1985) 26-7.

to seven thousand women seized the initiative and marched on Versailles to demand the king's capitulation to the will of the National Assembly and his acceptance of the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.' These were women from the poorer quarters of Paris and their principal demand was for bread; but they were also marching to defend the political goals of the preceding summer. Several hours later the men of the National Guard arrived to give the women their support. Louis XVI was obliged to capitulate and the royal family was brought back by the crowd to Paris in triumph. This was the first of many occasions when women took an active role in the political struggles of the Revolution.

Such women provoked ambivalent and even hostile responses from many observers of the educated classes, even those sympathetic to women's rights. Wollstonecraft, though a strong supporter of the principles of the Revolution, described the women who marched on Versailles as 'the lowest refuse of the streets, women who had thrown off the virtues of one sex without having power to assume more than the vices of the other.'⁶ In this judgement she sounded surprisingly close to Edmund Burke, whose bleak assessment of the Revolution in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) she had so robustly contested in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790).

After the king's capitulation in the October Days, the traumas of 1789 subsided, and it seemed to most onlookers that the Revolution had succeeded. For many observers the Revolution at this time appeared as the fulfilment of Enlightenment ideas of cosmopolitanism and universal rights, acknowledging no boundaries of wealth, skin colour – or gender. One of these observers was the young English poet, Helen Maria Williams. She went to France to see the Revolution unfold at firsthand, and for the rest of her life made France her home. The first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille was celebrated by the Fête de la Fédération, a vast public festival during which people of all social ranks joined together in a moment of fraternity and fusion. In her letters Williams described the scenes. For her it was a deeply emotional defining moment that fixed her identification with the Revolution:

'You will not suspect that I was an indifferent witness of such a scene. Oh no! this was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered. It was a triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privileges of

6 Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, 343.

his nature; and it required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world. For myself, I acknowledge that my heart caught with enthusiasm the general sympathy; my eyes were filled with tears; and I shall never forget the sensations of that day ...⁷

Williams' English compatriot, Mary Berry, who visited the National Assembly in October 1790, took a much less favourable view. She compared the Assembly with the British Parliament, and was unfavourably impressed by the dishevelled look of the French deputies: 'Their appearance is not more gentlemanlike than their manner of debating – such a set of shabby, ill-dressed, strange-looking people I hardly ever saw together; our House of Commons is not half so bad.'⁸

The early stages of the Revolution were a time of great hope for change and this was reflected in the degree of popular participation and mobilisation. In September 1790, Olympe de Gouges wrote a 'Declaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne'. Why, she reasoned, should the universal rights proclaimed in the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man' not apply to women also?

'Man alone (in nature) has raised his exceptional circumstances to a principle. Bizarre, blind, bloated with science and degenerated – in a century of enlightenment and wisdom – into the crassest ignorance, he wants to command as a despot a sex which is in full possession of its intellectual faculties; he pretends to enjoy the Revolution and to claim his rights to equality in order to say nothing more about it.'⁹

This argument met with little response; most revolutionary women did not take a specifically feminist perspective of their situation but were content to put their energies into the broader revolutionary initiative. Some of the popular societies and clubs set up in Paris and other towns to promote education and political discussion admitted women. These women were avid to learn; here they were taking their first steps towards political experience. Some male revolutionaries eyed this transformation

7 Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France*, eds. Neil Fraistat and Susan S. Lanser (this edition: Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), 69.

8 J. M. Thompson (ed.), *English Witnesses of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1938), 98.

9 Cited and translated in Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson (eds), *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795: Selected Documents* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 89.

with alarm. In January 1793 the journalist Prudhomme described the activities of women in Lyon:

‘What do they think they are doing, the club of Lyon women, teaching young girl citizens entire chapters of J.J. Rousseau’s *Contrat Social*? In the name of the fatherland whose love they carry in their hearts, in the name of nature from which we must never, never stray, in the name of good domestic reality, of which women’s clubs are the scourge ... we implore the good citizenesses of Lyon to stay home, to look after their households ... without claiming to understand the *Contrat Social*.’¹⁰

Wollstonecraft’s account of the early years of the Revolution was derived at second hand as she watched events unfold from across the Channel. Following the publication of her pioneering work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, however, she determined to see the Revolution at first hand. In December 1792 she travelled France at a time when the tensions were increasing and, under the shadow of war, the position of foreigners becoming parlous. She arrived in Paris to find a city unsettled from the effects of war, the overthrow of the monarchy and the prison massacres of the previous September. She stayed in the large Parisian house of her absent friend, Aline Fillietaz, alone but for the servants. In those first weeks she felt painfully isolated, able to read French but unable to communicate verbally. In a letter to her publisher, Joseph Johnson, she described her impressions on the day that she saw the king pass by her window in his carriage, on his way to his trial:

‘About nine o’clock this morning, the king passed by my window, moving silently along (excepting now and then a few strokes on the drum, which rendered the stillness more awful) through empty streets, surrounded by the national guards, who, clustering round the carriage, seemed to deserve their name. The inhabitants flocked to their windows, but the casements were all shut, not a voice was heard, nor did I see any thing like an insulting gesture. – For the first time since I entered France, I bowed to the majesty of the people ... an association of ideas made the tears flow insensibly from my eyes, when I saw Louis sitting, with more dignity than I expected from his character, in a hackney coach going to meet death, where so many of

10 Cited in Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 69-70.

his race have triumphed.¹¹

Despite her ideological opposition to the principle of hereditary monarchy, she found herself pitying the king in his plight. She was a courageous woman, but the experience shook her:

‘I cannot dismiss the lively images that have filled my imagination all the day ... once or twice, lifting my eyes from the paper, I have seen eyes glare through a glass-door opposite my chair, and bloody hands shook at me. ... My apartments are remote from those of the servants ... I wish I had kept even the cat with me! – I want to see something alive; death in so many frightful shapes has taken hold of my fancy. – I am going to bed – and, for the first time in my life, I cannot put out the candle.’¹²

The outbreak of war between Britain and France in February 1793 made the position of British nationals such as Wollstonecraft and Williams more precarious. Though Wollstonecraft stayed in France throughout the period of the Terror, she left Paris and kept a low profile, away from the tumultuous events in the capital.

Revolutionary Politics Through the Eyes of Madame Roland

Madame Roland played a leading role in revolutionary politics, both as the wife of the Minister of the Interior, Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière, and as the hostess of a political salon.¹³ She first founded this salon as a meeting place for the radical Jacobins; and later, when she and her husband had fallen out with Robespierre and his group, as a salon for the rival faction, which became known as the Girondins. We know a great deal about Madame Roland’s experiences and observations thanks to the many letters she wrote and the *Memoirs* that she composed in secret during the long months in 1793 when she was imprisoned as a ‘conspirator’ on behalf of the Girondins; an ordeal that ended with her execution on 8 November 1793. As her *Memoirs* testify, she was articulate, clever, and opinionated, and more politically astute than most of the men around her. Yet she herself,

11 Cited in Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), 206.

12 *Ibid.*, 207.

13 See the recent in-depth study by Siân Reynolds, *Marriage and Revolution: Monsieur and Madame Roland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

well aware of the hostility towards politically active women, was wary of appearing in the spotlight. Paradoxically, she agreed with Rousseau that such activities were not suitable for a woman. For her salon and for the dinners she held when her husband became a minister, she provided the venue, the sociability, the refreshments, and then sat back to let the men talk politics. She did not invite other women to the ministerial dinners, and she herself avoiding speaking as much as possible. As a consequence, she claimed, the male guests did not hold back from discussing political business. She herself occupied the smallest salon, using it as her bureau where friends could find her for political business and to ask her to speak to the Minister on their behalf.¹⁴ She kept up a similar tactic during Roland's second ministry of giving regular dinners, which she organised with care:

'Two days a week only I gave a dinner: one for the colleagues of my husband along with whom would be several deputies; the other for a variety of people, either deputies, or high-ranking officials, or others connected with public life or preoccupied with public affairs. Good taste and neatness reigned at my table, without profusion, and luxurious ornaments were never seen there; people were relaxed there, without consecrating a lot of time to the meal, because I served only one course and I never let anyone but myself do the honours. Fifteen was the usual number of guests, on rare occasions eighteen and once only twenty.'¹⁵

Nevertheless, her participation inevitably brought her more into the political forefront. Despite the fact that Madame Roland was from a fairly modest bourgeois background, her manner of doing politics was characterised by opponents of the Girondins as 'aristocratic', recalling the machinations of women courtiers under the old regime. Her *Memoirs* show that she was highly indignant at the way the Jacobin press represented her dinners as scenes of aristocratic opulence and conspiratorial politics, and furious at being characterised by Jacobin journalists such as Desmoulins and Hébert as a 'Circe' who had corrupted the Girondin leaders:

'Such were the dinners that the popular orators at the Jacobins transformed into sumptuous feasts where I, a new Circe, corrupted all those who had the misfortune to attend. After the dinner we would talk for a while in the

14 Marie-Jeanne Roland, *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, ed. Paul de Roux (Paris: Mercure de France, 1966), 72.

15 *Ibid.*, 168; see also 66, 72.

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salon, and afterwards everyone would return to his own business. We sat down to dinner at around five o'clock, by nine everyone had left; such was the court of which they say I was the queen, this nest of conspiracy...'¹⁶

Madame Roland was caught up in the 'politicians' terror' – the internecine struggle that broke out in 1793/4 between rival factions of Jacobins and former Jacobins.¹⁷ Many of the Jacobin and Girondin leaders perished themselves as a consequence of the terror that they directed against one another. Few writers could convey such a sense of what it was like to be at the centre of the maelstrom of revolutionary politics as Madame Roland did in her *Memoirs*. As she showed, the Revolution was not only about ideology; it was also about profound emotion; not only patriotic fervour, but also, increasingly, fear, suspicion and hate:

'It is very difficult to make a revolution without becoming passionate about it; no one has ever made a revolution without that emotion; there are great obstacles to overcome: you can only achieve it by means of a sort of frenzy, a devotion which comes from exaltation or which produces it. But then you avidly seize on anything which can help your cause, and you lose the ability to foresee whether these things could be harmful.'¹⁸

Women as Witnesses of Robespierre: Man of Virtue or Conspirator?

A leading figure in the politicians' terror was Robespierre, who dominated the Jacobin Club in 1793/4. He became a resolute opponent of the Girondin faction during the politicians' terror, yet in the early years of the Revolution there had been much common ground and friendship between many of the individuals who were later to choose opposing sides. Madame Roland's letters written in 1791 show that at this time she thought highly of Robespierre and his courage in the Assembly, and considered him to be a friend.¹⁹ Her *Memoirs*, written two years later, gave a very different account of her attitude towards Robespierre, one coloured by her experience of imprisonment, and by her conviction that Robespierre had tried to have her husband murdered in the September Massacres. On 25 April 1792

16 Ibid., 168, 255, and 404, note.

17 On the politicians' terror, see Linton, *Choosing Terror*.

18 Madame Roland, *Mémoires*, 134.

19 Letter to Bancal, 15 March 1791; Letter to Brissot, 28 April 1791, in Marie-Jeanne

Madame Roland wrote a letter to Robespierre, taking him to task for his self-righteous assumption that anyone 'who thought differently to him about the war was not a good citizen.' (Robespierre had opposed the drive to war, spear-headed by the Girondin faction). According to Madame Roland, he was not the only one who 'has good intentions, who is without any personal motives, without any hidden ambitions...' She defended her friends, denied that they were his 'mortal enemies,' and denied that she 'received them in on intimate terms in her home.' She finished by saying that her frank criticism of him was a sign of her own authenticity: '...I never know how to seem otherwise than whom I am.' We do not know if he replied to her. They were equally strong-minded people, each convinced of the authenticity of their own virtue. This letter, repudiating the friendship that had existed between them, marked the moment of the open breach between the Jacobin and Girondin factions.²⁰

Other women, those who sympathised with Jacobin politics, saw Robespierre very differently, as a paragon of domestic virtue, whose modest home life indicated the integrity of his politics. One of these was Madame de Chalabre, at whose home Robespierre occasionally dined. Another was Madame Jullien, who described the home life of Robespierre and his sister as 'all openness and simplicity'.²¹ Since 1791 Robespierre had lived as a lodger at the home of the master carpenter, Maurice Duplay, whose family was devoted to Robespierre. Many years later Elizabeth Le Bas, one of the four daughters of Maurice, provided descriptions of life in the Duplay household that are the principal source for Robespierre's private life during the Revolution. The Duplay women ministered to Robespierre's domestic comfort, providing simple family meals. Elizabeth described how he joined the family in the day to day pleasures of family life: walks in the

Roland, *Lettres de Madame Roland*, Claude Perroud (ed.), 2 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902) 2: 244; 270. In Madame Roland's letter to Bancal of 22 June 1791 she recounted approvingly Robespierre's courage in saying in the Assembly what she herself was thinking. See *Ibid.*, 2: 304.

20 *Letter to Robespierre*, 25 April 1792, *Ibid.*, 2: 418-20.

21 Robespierre accepted invitations to dinner from Madame de Chalabre, his political admirer, who became his friend. They seem to have been simple meals. Her letters to him are in *Papiers inédits trouvés chez Robespierre, Saint-Just, Payan, etc., supprimés ou omis par Courtois*, 3 vols (1828; republished Geneva: Baudouin Frères, 1978) 1: 171-8. Madame Jullien's account of a dinner she had with Robespierre and his sister in February 1793 is cited in R.R. Palmer, *From Jacobin to Liberal: Marc-Antoine Jullien, 1775-1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 28.

country, impromptu singing and making music, and discussions about the daily matters of family life; love and suitors, and family disagreements.²² In Elizabeth's eyes Robespierre was a man of private virtue and sensibility, 'we loved him like a good brother!'²³

By contrast, Williams' portrait of Robespierre and the Jacobin faction of 1793/4 was unremittingly hostile. Shortly after the execution of the king, she wrote:

'At the head of this band of conspirators is Robespierre – gloomy and saturnine in his disposition, with a countenance of such dark aspect as seems the index of no ordinary guilt – fanatical and exaggerated in his avowed principles of liberty, possessing that species of eloquence which gives him power over the passions, and that cool determined temper which regulates the most ferocious designs with the most calm and temperate prudence. His crimes do not appear to be the result of passion, but of some deep and extraordinary malignity, and he seems formed to subvert and to destroy.'²⁴

Williams, though she was more sympathetic to the struggles of the urban poor and to ensuing revolutionary violence than Wollstonecraft, saw the Jacobins as unmitigated villains.²⁵ Williams' had close friends in the Girondin group, a fact that undoubtedly coloured her views. She preferred to overlook the fact that the Girondins had played a considerable part in initiating the politicians' terror.

In May 1795 Williams visited the Revolutionary Tribunal to see the former public prosecutor, Fouquier-Tinville and a number of the jurors, on trial for their lives in the same place where they themselves had judged many others. Williams, who had herself been imprisoned for a while during the Terror as a British national, recalled that several of her friends, including Madame Roland, had been tried and sentenced to death by these same men. She expected to find their faces 'impressed with the savage character of their

22 Elizabeth Le Bas (née Duplay) is the source for much of what is known about Robespierre's private life in this period, see 'Manuscrit de Mme Le Bas', in Stéfane-Pol (ed.), *Autour de Robespierre: le Conventionnel Le Bas, d'après des documents inédits et les mémoires de sa veuve* (Paris: Earnest Flammarion, 1901), 102-50.

23 Ibid., 104.

24 Williams, *Letters Written in France*, 160.

25 On Williams' negative view of the Jacobins at the time of the Terror, and especially of Robespierre, see Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005), 95-137, esp. 108-9.

souls.' She was, however, surprised to see 'faces that indicated no marks of villainy, and some that bore the traces of the better feelings of our nature, and bespoke minds that only extraordinary circumstances and temptation had rendered wicked.'²⁶

For her part, Elizabeth Le Bas recalled the events of Thermidor (July 1794) that saw the overthrow and execution of Robespierre and his supporters, as a personal and political tragedy. Her family suffered cruelly for their loyalty to Robespierre. She lost her husband (who committed suicide) and her mother (who was murdered in prison) during those traumatic days; whilst she herself was thrown into prison along with her six-week-old baby. As an old lady, confiding her memories to the poet and political radical Lamartine, she was still defiant, remembering the Robespierrists as men of virtue:

'...one must speak the truth when one writes history ... they were the true friends of liberty; they lived only for the people, for their patrie; but the monsters, in a single day, destroyed everything; in a single day they assassinated liberty. Yes, monsieur, a republican like you would have been happy to know these men who were so virtuous in every respect; they all died poor.'²⁷

For Elizabeth Le Bas the integrity and good faith of Robespierre, Saint-Just and their group was demonstrated by the incontrovertible fact that none of them had profited personally from their time in power. It is a testimony to the longevity of the devotion of the Elizabeth Le Bas, her son, and their descendants, that it was only in 2011 that several manuscripts by Robespierre (including drafts of his final speech on 8 Thermidor) were put on sale; these documents had been kept hidden in the family since July 1794.

In conclusion, the importance of the role women played in the French Revolution has been underestimated by generations of historians. Whilst the women we have discussed here who were spectators of the Revolution represent a wide array of perspectives, they share a common factor that has sufficient gravity to make contemporary historians reevaluate the very nature of the French Revolution. From the radical feminist Mary Wollstonecraft

26 Williams, *Letters Written in France*, 187.

27 Elizabeth Le Bas, 'Manuscrit de Mme Le Bas', 147.

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to the more socially conventional Madame Roland, and from the written words of the elite to the crowd protests of lower class women, there is one recurring theme: the French Revolution should not merely be seen as a single movement that fought against the lack of equality, freedom and brotherhood endured under the class system of the old regime – which implies that other social inequalities were less of a priority. These women, in their different ways, showed their desire that the Revolution should also address the concerns of women. For these women there was a keen expectation that if the Revolution was to fulfill its promise to promote universal rights then it should not only give its attention to ‘brotherhood’ but, in a very real sense, it must also be about ‘sisterhood’.