Irene Joliot-Curie, an Engaged Feminist?

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Abstract

Was Irène Joliot-Curie an engaged feminist? The question addressed by this article is twofold. As a chemist, physicist and laboratory researcher, she worked in a masculine profession and called herself a feminist. In her scientific work she took on hierarchical responsibilities eventually becoming the head of the Curie Laboratory. With her husband Frédéric Joliot, she acquired notoriety thanks to the Nobel Prize in Chemistry they won in 1935. Her education and commitment to the values of gender equality led her to be active in other areas, notably in the promotion of women’s rights. During the economic crisis of the 1930s she spoke out on issues of economic and social equality, which she considered more important than political rights. Anti-fascism, women’s rights and disarmament were the causes she defended in the name of a science she believed should promote emancipation and human welfare. As Sub-Secretary of State for Scientific Research at the beginning of the Popular Front or as a faithful member of the French Communist Party at the beginning of the Cold War, her political engagements were always on the side of promoting an egalitarian society. She believed in the communist and soviet model despite several hesitations and disillusions.

Keywords:
Irène Joliot-Curie, feminism, women's rights, women scientists, political engagement, Suffragism, anti-fascist, pacifism, Popular Front

Introduction
Irène Joliot-Curie, a Person of Many Talents

Irène Joliot-Curie (1897-1956) is a triply symbolic personality: a Nobel Prize for Science winner as was her mother Marie Curie, one of three women Sub-Secretaries of State for Scientific Research in the Léon Blum (Prime Minister of France) government in June 1936, and an activist for women's rights claiming feminism. In addition, her life experienced three moments in the history of feminism in the twentieth century. She was a teenager during the Suffragette Movement in the late nineteenth century prior to the First World War (WWI); as a girl she was mobilized to the health front during WWI, and then she became an emancipated wife and mother between WWI and WWII and was also engaged as a scientist at the time of the Popular Front. After World War II, she became a pacifist and pro-communist in the Cold War despite having health problems.

Unlike her mother Marie Curie, who was the embodiment of quiet and private, discreet and intimate feminism, Irene espoused more militant protests and feminism. Sensitive to the issue of women's emancipation, thanks to a progressive secular and republican education, she drew on the depths of egalitarian ideas, like her mother or her husband, Frédéric Joliot to defend a reformed feminism. Despite a different positioning, she often evoked the figure of her mother in her talks with women, especially after 1945. And this reference was well beyond personal testimony, meaning to consolidate and legitimize her own actions, her own words, her own commitments. In the article "Marie Curie, my Mother," published in December 1954, Irène confirmed her own actions when she wrote Marie Curie’s life: "There were issues on which my mother had absolute intransigent opinions. For example, she believed that women should have the same rights and the same duties elsewhere as men. With regard to women's suffrage, my mother always strongly supported the need for this reform." And Irène rightly emphasized a few lines later: “I was under the strong influence of my mother."

What feminist stance did Irène Joliot-Curie take? This is what this article analyzes which is primarily based on written sources, mainly those of Irène Joliot-Curie herself. They included letters she had received or sent, articles she had written, the answers to those who interviewed her and testimonials or anniversaries celebrating awards received by her parents.
Advancing the Cause of Women

Ever since her youth, Irène Joliot-Curie affirmed that women's rights are a matter of principle and a major political claim. Born in 1897, daughter of scientists, Irène grew up surrounded by intellectuals and scientists and physicists such as: Paul Langevin, Yves Perrin, André Debierne, mathematicians Paul Appell, Paul Painlevé, Émile Borel, and Henri Poincaré, all of whom were secular Republicans and in support of Dreyfus. Because she belonged to this social segment of an academic and intellectual elite united by "the cause and the cult of science," who believed in women's independence and political commitment, Irène in her youth obtained a life of relative emancipation: a very liberal education, and even joined male and female groups studying together under a cooperative education. In 1914, when she was only 17 years old, she joined the radiology department in the army created by her mother. The professional experience of a scientist in the Curie Laboratory and in a very masculine world made her a woman who had taken a unique route in life compared with most young girls of her generation.

Her mother, Marie Curie, although favorable to women's suffrage, totally refused to take a public position. Only once, in 1921, at the request of her close friend, the British physicist Hertha Ayrton, did she join a protest against the imprisonment of officials leading the suffragette movement in England: "I agree that you may use my name, she wrote to her friend, because I have great confidence in your judgment. [...] I am very touched by what you have told me about the fight for English women’s rights; I admire them a great deal and wish them success." In France, the only time she spoke publicly in 1925, Marie decided to deny the view of Louis Barthou in the Senate who had claimed that she was hostile to women's suffrage by saying: "It is true that I usually abstain from political discussions as well as other issues that are not relative to science. Despite not deciding on questioning procedures for granting political rights to women, I think the principle to assure women’s rights is essentially right and should be recognized.”

As for Irène Joliot-Curie, she initially criticized those who supported the suffragettes. In 1910 she wrote to her mother about the most violent demonstrations of these movements in London: "I noticed that almost every day that a British minister just missed to be killed by the suffragettes, and it seems to me that this is not a very brilliant way to demonstrate that they are able to vote.”
In the summer of 1912, during her mother’s convalescence with Hertha Ayrton at Highcliffe-on-Sea in Hampshire, Irène became aware of the importance of the issue of political rights for women. Hertha was a well-known scientist and an activist in the National Suffrage League. As a founding member of the International Federation of University Women and the National Union of Scientific Workers, Hertha Ayrton with her daughter Barbara, participated in numerous suffragettes’ rallies between 1906 and 1913. Thanks to her contact with Hertha Ayrton, Irène Curie understood the brutality of the anti-suffrage campaign together to show that discrediting was an injustice with their claims and the violence of the police repression.

Much less conservative than her mother, Irene Joliot-Curie agreed to be a woman of influence to take a public position to advocate and defend her ideals. She thought women's rights were a matter of principle. She returned to the matter several times in the 1930s: "I've never locked myself in on scientific work without continuing to remain concerned and curious about life," she said in June, 1936 to Marie-Jeanne Viel, who wrote for the weekly Journal of the Women. However, after the death of her mother in 1934 Irène cited her mother’s views on feminism to better explain her own engagement and her own commitments. And this became a recurring position that also allowed her to reinforce the myth of "intransigent feminism".

Irène Joliot-Curie emphasized this continuity, especially after WWI. Drawing on the consequences of her education and her personal journey she consistently reiterated the principle of gender equality in order to draw on all the consequences of equal rights. In an article published in Heures Claires in May 1954, based on her interview by Marianne Milhaud on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the acquisition of women’s suffrage, Irène remarked: "For women to achieve equality with men, it is necessary and indispensable for them to have the right to participate in the political life of the country. The right of women to vote is a matter of principle and matters of principle are very important." It was thus claimed that she was both a suffragist and a feminist.

In 1925, after defending her Ph.D. thesis at the Sorbonne, the new Ph.D. physicist was interviewed and congratulated both for her success and her filiations. Denise Moran recalled that Miss Irène Curie was "a girl with a family name of two illustrious predecessors". She was asked
the question, "Is the career you have chosen too difficult for a woman?" Her response was insightful although it was not a common thought: "Not at all. I think the scientific capacity of a man and a woman is exactly the same. “However, she added two more observations showing that the stereotype and traditional gender roles are not far apart. They were: "Sometimes people think that the result of the work of a woman is less, however, not all women understand that they must devote as much time as men do. A female scientist must renounce snobbish obligations", and about family obligations "Women have to accept family duties with the condition that this is their additional charge. It is then a very heavy load, yet it is not impossible to reconcile. As for my part, I consider science as the essential interest of my life." A traditional concept of scientists is more or less likely that of celibacy and a very bourgeois vision of women; they share family tasks, however, not equally. Caring for their families is still the women’s major task.

In 1935, the Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded to Irène Curie and Frédéric Joliot for the discovery of the phenomenon of artificial radioactivity. And Irène Curie took advantage of this new media exposure. "If today’s flattering distinction that the Stockholm Academy of Sciences granted me and placed my name, the name of a woman, to light on this day rather than another then I feel it is my duty to affirm certain ideas that I believe in as a benefit to all French women." Her new fame, her prestigious lineage, personal accomplishments as a wife, a mother, a teacher and a researcher renewed her interest in giving women a place in society. Whether giving a speech or being interviewed, Irène Joliot-Curie knew that it was as difficult to explain her scientific passion along with an introduction to the Curie Laboratory, where she had co-directed with André Debierne since 1934, as it was to demonstrate that science was not sexy. Irène Curie made it clear to journalists and photographers who sought to meet with her and her husband that it was a point of honor to appear fully on a par with men in a renowned scientific profession.

From Je sais tout to Vu, from Excelsior to Regards, from Le Petit Parisien to Le Matin, the press released many articles and photographs of her and her husband working together in the laboratory and popularized their surnames that she chose to adopt after her marriage in 1927: Joliot-Curie. The dubbing of their surname in the scientific community took place on January 11, 1936, when a dinner was held in honor of the couple for receiving the Nobel Prize. The chair of the dinner, Paul Langevin who was a student of Pierre Curie, said: "Pierre and Marie Curie on
the one hand or Irène and Frédéric Joliot-Curie on other hand, are a striking symbol and a
decisive demonstration of collaboration between the two sexes in science that we can consider as
one of the highest."

The choice of a double surname, which went against the customs of that time, was intended to
mean a more equal relationship and crowns both scholars instead of one person at a time. The
prestige of the name Curie satisfied Frédéric Joliot’s need for recognition while the combination
of the two names, nonetheless, reflected the aspiration to equality for Irene. It was to give
women full social and political visibility. It also helps a female scientist to exist as a scholar: all
her research papers are signed under the name Irène Curie. So in daily life “Joliot-Curie” was
dedicated to both the scientific reference and the egalitarian feminist reference.

At the end of May, 1936 Irène Joliot-Curie accepted Prime Minister Léon Blum’s proposal to
become one of three women in the Government’s Popular Front together with Suzanne Lacore
and Cécile Brunschvicg. In a letter to her American feminist friend, Miss Meloney, dated June
19, 1936, Irène Joliot-Curie commented about her participation in the government as "a sacrifice
for the feminist cause in France"; she reaffirmed her commitment during a radio interview in
early July 1936. Her appointment as Sub-Secretary of State for Scientific Research on June 4,
1936 (according to the official announcement) surprised her family. However, Frédéric Joliot felt
that the appointment was not acceptable because he felt that she did not have the required
skills. For Léon Blum, the designation made triple sense: the allied politics of a member of the
French Socialist Party, Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO) was close to the
Communists, it was a sign towards emancipation of women (that he was committed to satisfy) and
linking the prestigious name Curie with the policy of the Popular Front.

However, while the appointment of these three women, which meant the approval of the right of
suffrage and eligibility to all women, Léon Blum postponed the project for fear of defection of
Radical Party members, mostly hostile towards the political rights of women. He even went so
far as to force the male ministers not to vote in July 1936. In turn, the Senate refused to
consider the law for women’s right to vote; the law remained a dead letter and created virulent
remarks from French author, journalist, feminist and European politician Louise Weiss: "Three swallows do not make a spring!"\textsuperscript{xxiii}

The aim for Irène Joliot-Curie was to join the government “to serve the cause of women’s work that was being threatened by all countries”.\textsuperscript{xxiii} To this purpose, she got the radical Jean Zay, the minister of education, to make a substantial improvement in the budget for research. She chose to multiply fellowships, increase the salaries for researchers and also to increase and reorganize scientific laboratories, improve their resources and technical means.\textsuperscript{xxiv} In the name of gender equality, she organized higher scientific education for girls beginning with the Sèvres University of Education (Ecole normale supérieure de Sèvres)\textsuperscript{xxv} to improve the position of these female students, to be equal to that of the male students at the Ulm University of Education (Ecole normale supérieure d’Ulm) which was: the right to obtain scholarships and leave to work for a research unit, the right to obtain a bachelors or masters degree and to become an instructor in higher education and high school education, and the right to have wages equal to those of their male colleagues.

However, differing opinions had increased and she needed to rest due to her health condition. This was not consistent with her heavy responsibilities consequently Irène Joliot-Curie left the government on September 28, 1936. Her letter of resignation reflected her disappointment in not being able to carry out the political exercises. Officially, Irène postulated a lectureship. Unofficially, she gave this position to one of her mentors, the physicist Jean Perrin\textsuperscript{xxvi}, and she especially indicated her disagreement with non-intervention in Spain. The press echoed this is an ideological disagreement. She wanted to return to her scientific position, according to the letter of resignation. Irène made a choice that pleased Miss Meloney\textsuperscript{xxvii} who was surprised that France delayed and missed an opportunity for the right of suffrage for women. Nevertheless, according to the French newspaper \textit{La Française} that published her letter of resignation; Irène Joliot-Curie was satisfied by being able to open the door “to facilitate the entry of other women in government.”
Antifascist Struggle and Economic Rights of Women: Priorities of Irène Joliot-Curie in the 1930s

The political climate of the 1930s led Irène Joliot-Curie to change her opinion on women’s right to vote. At first, she remained faithful to the path of reform and supported the idea that republican equality can only be achieved with the extension of civil and political rights ... however, after years of difficulty she came to the realization that the economic rights of women was the priority.

As a woman of the Left with progressive opinions, Irène displayed her views in the innermost circle of the Arcouest physicist and mathematician groups, Frédéric Joliot her future spouse at the time, and her socialist friends. She petitioned against the arrest of Sacco et Vanzetti and was happy to see that André Marty the famous rebel of the Black Sea battleship, Mutiny, was elected while in prison. She also denounced "le mur d'argent" (the wall of money) ["le mur d'argent" is used by Edouard Herriot, a leader of the Left in France during the period 1924-1928. It is used again by the medias in 1946 and in 1981, for the elections.] indicating those of the Right who were against the succession to power of the Left in 1924 which the Left alliance (Cartel des Gauches) faced in 1924. This is probably when Irène and Frédéric adhered to a French socialist political party founded in 1905 (SFIO); they joined the allies because they were committed to Human Rights (Ligue des Droits de l’Homme) and the Rationalist Union. The influence of her academic colleagues from the Left, (Paul Langevin, Jean Perrin and André Debierne) and professionals (Georges Fournier, an active socialist member in the Curie Laboratory and Frédéric Joliot all joined in on political discussions) is what explains Irène’s transition from political awareness to intellectual activism; nothing can make one think otherwise.

It was the anti-fascist mobilization which became the main vector for the public actions of Irène Joliot-Curie: she adhered and contributed to the Committee of Anti-fascist Vigilance in 1934 through her university contacts and professional friendships. She also joined anti-fascist female feminists under the benevolent auspices of Eugenie Cotton who was close to the Communist Party and Gabrielle Duchêne, co-founder of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 1915. Gabrielle Duchêne was also procommunist in the late twenties and the president of the French Union continuously from 1919 until her death in 1954. Irène spoke at the
League congress held August 4-6, 1934 at the Mutualité Hall, on behalf of the World Women's Committee against War and Fascism and thus she represented the entire prestige of a female Nobel winner and the Curie name. She hobnobbed with Bernadette Cattaneo, Maria Rabaté, Luce Langevin, and Lucie Prenant... who were her communist-movement companions and derived from either the teachers trade union or the circle of scientists of Sainte Geneviève Mountain.

Economic crisis and growing unemployment were pressing the Laval government to strengthen deflationary measures taken since 1932 despite strong social tensions, while the international climate darkened with the expansion of fascism in Germany and Central Europe. In such a context, Irène Joliot-Curie reacted more strongly to the expansion of a latent xenophobia and the unstable status of female employees, which she encountered right within her Laboratories.xxxi many young foreign researchers arrived in France which also included the refugees fleeing Italy, Poland and Germany; many female researchers or technicians and a number of academic couples directly affected by the decrees of Laval in 1935 ordering a limit to the employment of couples which was a disadvantage to women or it reduced the couple’s benefits.xxxii

From that time on Irène Joliot-Curie defended the right to work for women and considered it as a prerequisite to the right of suffrage. Her stance was echoed by several groups of socialist militants, especially among intellectuals and academics. The groups felt that the changing line of International Communism in 1935 opened the door to reformed perspectives and national solutions to the crisis of mass unemployment. Her husband, Frédéric, shared this evolution yet people could not detect whether this common vision was discussed by both or whether one influenced the other.

Combining anti-fascism and feminism, Irène celebrated the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as an ideological and political model. She said to the Les Femmes dans l’Action mondiale Magazine in January 1935, "The countries least affected by the campaign against working women are France and England, the countries where fascism does not have too much influence. I only dare to repeat that the USSR is where unemployment does not arise, where the employment of both men and women is not only a right but an obligation and where the rights of
equality are achieved”. The magazine subsequently honored her as “a scholar who learned to fulfill her duties as wife, mother and citizen at a time.”

This was also what she meant when she spoke to Hélène Gosset, a journalist of L’Œuvre in August, 1935 when the Laval decrees were passed, which forced working women back in their homes. Irène said that "As a feminist I cannot help worrying about the social status of women. [...] I raise an indisputable issue, the right to work for women. Reducing or limiting women's work is an injustice which only benefits stupid or lazy women, for others, this is becoming a tragedy." And she continued on about the political rights: "I want women’s right to vote. Initially, I accepted the women’s right to vote at the municipal level because it looked less frightening to men, however, with conditions to move forward." In her opinion, the right of suffrage for women was a political requirement; it is nevertheless also considered as secondary to economic rights and the right to work.

This position became her public “leitmotiv”. On October 25, 1935, at the Mutualité, she chaired a meeting against the deflationary policy of Prime Minister, Pierre Laval, whose motto was "For women's right to work." The danger came from the economic crisis and she wrote for France Vivante as follows: "In France, the economic situation of women is much greater than their unfavorable civil and political situations, however, new laws threaten to change this state of affairs. These days the laws directed against married women and female officers would soon extend to women's work in general, and this has already happened in other countries - referring to Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany. Irène Joliot-Curie further added: "Of the achievements of feminism there is nothing more important than the right of women to obtain jobs for which they are qualified by their knowledge and skills. The feminism move fought hard to have the right to work in positions that are paid enough to ensure its economic independence." It was clear that it now was the time for her to withdraw the political rights and especially the right of suffrage for women.

On November 23, 1935, Irène Joliot-Curie restated her position to George Sinclair, a journalist for the Journal de la Femme, after being nominated for the Nobel: "I know that there are theorists, female soldiers, as people know whom I greatly respect, who want to first achieve
political rights for women. Definitely, in a logical manner, they should attack political rights first, and then civil rights. However, I found out that in some countries where women had won political rights, they had too often been powerless to save their right to work. Also, I would prefer a campaign that would be concerned with ensuring civil rights first, which are the real conditions of freedom for women.”

Irène Joliot-Curie reaffirmed the priorities of a feminism agenda in June 1936 in the *Journal de la Femme* after she entered the Popular Front government: “in defense of women's work, fighting for civil rights; these were "the real conditions of women's freedom!"” And Andrée Viollis explained in the French newspaper, *Le Petit Parisien* on June 13, 1936 under the title "Ms. Joliot-Curie," that she joined the government to "serve the cause of women's work, which has been currently threatened in all countries." This confirmed the reversal of priorities: political rights were merged with civil rights. Now she felt closer to the Communist Party, the choice of feminist movements, both the CGT [CGT – la Confédération Générale du Travail which is socialist – and the CGTU – la Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire which is communist – result of the division of the trade union in 1920] and Female Trade Union, which reinforced her orientation. Without being under the flags of these organizations (never adhering to them), Irène believed in their guidelines. She never joined the Communist Party, yet she sympathized enough to identify with it. Therefore, in May 1938, with no hesitation she chaired the Union of Intellectuals for Freedom, Justice and Peace to denounce the Munich Agreement, its consequences (the expansion of German’s border during Hitler’s time), and to protect Jewish and foreign scholars. In 1940, she joined the French resistance against Nazism and from 1942 on, she belonged to the Communist resistance, with which Frédéric also sided.

Thus, in the 1930s Irène Joliot-Curie leaned towards the political rights of women with a cautious reformism that related to her anti-fascist engagement and her analysis of the situation that she summarized in the newspaper *Femmes Françaises* on November 30, 1944: "The only argument that is not anti-feminist though against the women's right to vote as far as I know it: in some countries, women have significantly contributed to the election of candidates who are more likely to be conservative and who quickly reduce the civil and economic rights of their female electors." Irène remarked: "Did women in the Weimar Republic who had won the right to vote
on November 12, 1918, vote for Hitler and, therefore, ensure a victory for Nazism in 1933?” To be imbrued with egalitarian principles, Irène increasingly approved the French Communist Party and a small unit of the Left under the SFIO to defend Marxist ideals. This Left movement is named ‘Gauche Révolutionnaire’ and his leader is Marceau Pivert. Uncompromising on the issue of the right for women to work and being more moderate with the women’s right to vote, being convinced that class struggle would resolve feminism claims, she considered the Soviet model as the solution. After WWII, she supported the solution despite some reservations.

Supporting the Communist Solution

In 1945, Irène Joliot-Curie was increasingly convinced that the society that she dreamed about was de facto and did not solve the issue of women's emancipation once the right to work - and the right for women’s choice to work or not - was recognized. When France was liberated from the territory occupied by the Nazis late in WWII, she joined the Union of French Women and their first Congress was held on November 18, 1944 highlighting family protection, liberation, and the reconstruction of France. It was a mass movement of feminism and education. Irène Joliot–Curie, as co-founder, was invited by the new President, Eugénie Cotton to speak. Her scientific reputation, her past politics, her feminist commitment and her support for the communist resistance, all combined made up Irene Joliot-Curie’s status as a rookie. This also responded to the strategy of the Communist Party toward multiplying their movements to increase its audience and supporters. And it was also a good way to give women, who just obtained the right to vote, new directions and a new rank. So Irène celebrated the achievements and evoked preparations for the next election ballots in the Constitutional Restoration of the Republic: "We need that all women are educated and prepared in politics because they have the finesse, the generosity, and common sense.”

Although Irène had never joined the Communist Party, she was known rather for her public speaking and her many articles in communist and pro-communist newspapers. What she said was highly regarded. Her nimbus on intellectuality and scientific position added credibility to her denouncement of the dangers of a nuclear arms race. However, Irène Joliot-Curie was also an exemplary woman: she exercised her profession, she was a wife and mother, and she defended the value of a democratic education. So naturally she was also concerned with the economic and
social rights of women and their status after the war. As to any statements she made, whether it was on education, economics, women's rights or science, she always followed the guidelines that science must contribute to the benefit of humanity and that women are the guarantors of peace.

On November 30, 1944 in the pro-communist newspaper, Femmes Françaises, Irène Joliot-Curie talked about the granting of voting rights for women via the Algiers decree of April 21, 1944 under the title "What do the French women think of suffrage?" xliii. First, she stressed that it was an indisputable right: "I think the decision to grant women the right to vote and run for election is a measure of justice that had been long delayed." However, she also emphasized the need to educate and guide women by bringing attention to the fact that German women voted for the conservative party that helped Hitler's rise to power. xliv In her second argument, she arranged priorities: “[ thanks to certain allowances the married women were able to remain in their homes, I believe the majority of them were happy because most of them were not obligated to seek employment outside the home.] Others preferred a profession of their choice although they had children." Thus, to the mothers at home, the reference emerged that raising their children, in accordance with the policy of many parties, especially the French Communist Party, had a positive effect on increasing the birth rate and the nurturing role of women.xlv

In the following year, September 1945, she published an article "Impressions of the USSR" in Femmes Françaises relating that she was enthusiastic about this new social model. xlvii In March of 1946 as a representative for the Union of French Women in London, she commented as follows: "As for women, communism should be fully appreciated. Many female claims that were presented yesterday by various delegates no longer matter in the USSR. There is no difference between the rights of men and women and women are actually occupying high positions in all sectors of society. The family, including women with children, is protected even in the countryside and facilitated to work." xlvii For Irène, it was a great society implementing gender equality and, therefore, feminism was no longer an object to pursue!

Irène Joliot-Curie joined the Cold War and the ideological struggle between progress and conservatism. She stated that "Those who have this morbid fear of communism are those who will always try to stifle new ideas. You will find among them the enemies against sincere
international cooperation, the enemies against true democracies and the enemies against
feminism and peace." Many intellectuals and engaged scientists shared this radical stance; it
came from disappointment during the postwar period along with renouncement of politicians
with "revolutionary" ideals who were in training during the resistance, liberation and
reinforcement during East-West tensions. Gradually, because she was exhausted by illness, Irène
barely had time to suspect the limitations and ambiguities of her stance.

Irène Joliot-Curie was very concerned about the freedom of choice given to women, however,
she reaffirmed the preponderance of their civil and economic rights in comparison with their
political rights as well as supported national reconstruction based on family foundation; she
favored the Communist society. Thus, according to Yvonne Dumont, the General Secretary of
the Union of French Women, Irène publicly pronounced that she was in favor of "the freedom of
female reproduction". However, from 1954 onward, under the strict leadership of the puritan
Jeannette Thorez-Vermeersch, the rejection of birth control imposed on all women was a
delusion for the masses and Irène chose to support making it a maternalistic choice. Then, there
was some distance between Irène and the Communist Party. Up until her death in 1956, between
her research work, management of a new project in Orsay and taking several days of rest
when her health status was not good, Irène threw her last strength in to the struggle for universal
peace and called for women to be the best defense against the arms race. On March 11, 1951, to
commendorate the International Women's Day of March 8 at the National Assembly of Women
for Disarmament in Gennevilliers, a commune in the northwestern suburbs of Paris, she placed
her hopes on the March 1950 Stockholm Appeal for Peace. Subsequently, on July 1955, Irène
signed the Russell-Einstein Call for Peace of Scientists. She died of leukemia on March 17,
1956.

Conclusion
Irène Joliot-Curie was more of a feminist than her mother Marie Curie. In a more difficult
context, she searched through her education and socialism the equality principles that
corresponded to her ideals. Therefore, she was convinced that the end of class domination would
solve the issue of gender equality. Personally, whether serving science or society, she was
engaged as a militant and action person. And her quest for "radioactivity", for “transuranic
elements”, or "nuclear fission" was consistent with her quest for progress - or even for happiness – in society and in women’s liberation because science aims to bring benefits to human kind. On the one hand, she honored the purposes of science and rejected any non-peaceful purposes; on the other hand, she considered democracy as the alpha and omega of universal values. Feminism became an expression for her social commitment and that of a scientist who was steeped in republican values.

Irène Joliot-Curie idealized what she believed in and understood what had been shown to her about the USSR. As a woman and as a mother, Irène never departed from an asymmetric and "natural" idea for both sexes. Within her own family and her marriage, it was the intellectual equality between men and women and the division of responsibilities which she focused on and gradually achieved. Here was her reaction on December 28, 1942 when her husband Frédéric decided to spend two days every week taking care of their two children: "I think it is great for them, first because I’m not at home and second because you can take far better care of our children than I can. To educate our children is also a collaboration in which we each contribute our part. Unfortunately at this time, my poor darling, I leave it all on your shoulders, the scientific work, children, finances, etc.; hopefully this will change soon.[…] In the meantime, I have gained two pounds. […] I want to be with you, and be able to help you instead of placing the burden on you before I leave." Due to her illness and resting in Haute-Savoie or in the Swiss Alps, which required her to be absent from home, Irène Joliot-Curie and probably rethought the division of labor between the two. However, the term "collaboration" meant complementary rather than equality.

In the scientific world, Irène faced several bastions of antifeminism such as the Academy of Sciences in France. Tenaciously, she ran the Academy of Sciences four times between 1950 and 1954 and did not lose hope to achieve her ends. This is an institution considered as the highest stage of science intelligentsia and the peak of the fulfillment of an academic career which gives its co-opted members a national and international reputation. Since the late nineteenth century, the institution has become a refuge for conformism and an exclusive anti-feminist group. As Irène Joliot-Curie wrote in 1954: “In 1910, Marie Curie presented herself as a candidate at the Academy of Sciences and failed. Anti-feminist and clerical groups waged a violent campaign
against her.” Irène concluded that: "The Academy of Sciences still maintains old ideas. I myself have made several reprises and I have not been admitted. As a brilliant scientist, she was at a disadvantage to be a woman. It was not until 1962 that the Academy of Sciences admitted Marguerite Perey (1903-1975), not as an "academician" but only as a "corresponding member.

Unlike Marie Curie who stayed away from the political arena, Irène Joliot-Curie belonged to the generation that involved itself with the crisis, politics and war that was facing the defense of democracy and the hope of communism. While differentiating from her husband, Frédéric Joliot, in action as well as in thoughts, Irène Joliot-Curie always pursued the political goal for advancing the cause of women.

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**Electronic References**

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Articles published at anniversaries of the Nobel Prize, and especially on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Marie Curie’s death.

The Declaration of Irène Joliot-Curie on Paris Radio on July 4, 1936. She had to obtain agreement from Jean Zay, her minister, for this interview. A radio recording of the Curie Archives.


Her real name is Phoebe Marks (1854-1923), a physicist like her husband (and former professor), and she was a specialist in electrical arcs, invented in 1915, an anti-gas toxic fan but failed to be adopted by the British armies.

Hertha Ayrton had hosted Christabel Pankhurst, the leader of the movement when the latter was released from prison.
Archives Curie – Revue de presse Boîte n°1, n°5631, titre : « La vie des femmes va changer. » referring to the electoral victory of the Popular Front.

Archives Curie, « Hommage à madame et monsieur Joliot-Curie, prix Nobel 1935 », plaquette imprimée.

Archives Curie, dossier I-16, liasse 53.


Témoignages de Jean Perrin et de la fille d’Irène Joliot-Curie, Hélène Langevin-Joliot.

Banquet speech at the National Council of French Women: "The day my party came to power, I was personally committed to appoint a woman as minister, although at that time the French women did not have the right to vote." In Georges Lhermitte, The Women's Rights, 1936, p. 81.

On July 30, 1936, a final proposal for granting citizenship to women was adopted (by claiming the existence of “three female ministers) by the National Assembly, except one vote. However, 19 members of the Government did not vote, and Leon Blum did not intervene strictly following the program of the People's Front not promising to vote for women. Thus, the Senate refused to deliberate and cancelled the decision of the congressmen.

Ironic and probably envious, Louise Weiss seems to be tough on this measure and considers it being entire symbolic and would not advance the cause of suffrage for women. She is even tougher with Cécile Brunschvicg accused of betraying feminism by agreeing to join the government, in Mémoires d'une Européenne, tome III: Combats pour les Femmes 1934-1939, Paris, Albin Michel, 1980, p. 123.

xxiv Where from satisfaction of Frédéric Joliot’s Laboratory for finally obtaining a cyclotron.

xxv Archives Curie, dossier I-15, liasse 39. « I am happy for being able to help when I was sub-secretary of the State for Scientific Research. »

xxvi Irène Joliot-Curie accepts her appointment to the government for a few months to record the prestige of the Curies in the creation of a Ministry of Scientific Research which has been wanted for a long time.

xxvii Archives Curie, dossier I-46, Lettre du 14 octobre 1936 signée Miss William Brown Meloney: « I couldn’t bear the thoughts of your being torn by that unescapable machine for which there seems to be no substitute politics. » (« Je ne pouvais pas supporter l'idée de vous savoir déchirée par ce système incapable de mettre en place une autre politique »).

xxviii The resort in Bretagne, not far from Paimpol, brings together the generation of physicists and mathematicians supporting Dreyfus (Borel, Chavannes, the Maurain, the Pages, the Perrin, the Urban, the Curia, the Auger, the Gricouroff the Stodel ) around the historian Charles Seignobos and physiologist Charles Lapicque ... for sporting on holidays and for lively discussions. The writer Camille Marbo devotes an entire chapter of her memoirs to this place called Sorbonne-Plage or Fort la Science and these intellectuals, convalescence and sporting events. See Michel Pinault, " Portrait of Parisian group of academics in their Breton resort: Arcouest in the first half of the twentieth century", *Histoire et Sociétés - Revue européenne d'histoire sociale*, No. 25-26, April 2008, p. 136-157.

xxix Irène Joliot-Curie figure comme signataire de l’ « Appel des intellectuels contre le fascisme » dans le journal de la SFIO *Le Populaire* du 12 mars 1934.

xxx Feytis Eugenie (1881-1967) was a student of Marie Curie in Sèvres. Through Marie Curie, she later became the most favorite babysitter of Irène Curie between 1902 and 1904. First, having passed the masters of physics in 1904 and PhD in 1925, she was appointed the president of the École Normale Supérieure for female in Sèvres in 1936. In 1927, she
approached the Communist Party and adhered to the party in 1935. She is the wife of physicist Aimé Cotton who she met at Curie’s. She founded the Union of the French Women in 1944 and became the chair of the International Democratic Federation of Women from 1945 to her death.


Archives Curie – Revue de presse, boîte n° 1, n° 5581, sous le titre : « L’opinion d’une femme de sciences : Irène Joliot-Curie ».

Decrees-laws passed in 1935 which plan the suppression of compensation for housing for the wife of a couple of government officers and the reservation of numbers of posts so far mixt (for men and women) for men only.


It is mostly Louise Weiss and Maria Vérone.


*Femmes Françaises* du 30 novembre 1944, article signé I. Joliot-Curie, Archives Curie – Revue de presse, boîte n° 1, n° 5730.

Indeed, on November 18, 1944, the 185 committees of Resistant Women (under communist influence) were merged into French Women Union, in charge of politically promoting new female citizens. Voir Sandra Fayolle, *L'Union des Femmes Françaises : une organisation féminine de masse du parti communiste français (1945-1965)*, thèse de l’Université Paris I – Panthéon Sorbonne, 2005.

Speech referring to the decree of April 21, 1944 issued in Algiers by De Gaulle and the Provisional Government of the Republic, decree which provides women with the rights to vote and to eligibility and applicable from the next elections on, after the liberation of France.

*Femmes Françaises* du 30 novembre 1944, article signé I. Joliot-Curie, Archives Curie – Revue de presse, boîte n° 1, n° 5730.

Curious amnesia: the division of the Left, especially Communists refused to support the Socialists (tactics confronting the Third International communist until 1935), which largely explained the reactionary majority of the Reichstag.
Irene called this “the extreme vitality of impression.” "And how surprised when we saw a
team of military men and women, removing streetcar tracks (in Moscow). [...] Then we see
there, as everywhere in the USSR, the participation of women in all works, even the work
required strong force. [...] The young Soviet girls give us an impression of health and
strength that it is not very surprised to see them doing such work”, "including the army."
“Besides, I hasten to say that USSR do not confine women in professions that have little
influence and responsibility”, She adds. Curie Archives I-14, bundle 14 Femmes
Françaises, September 1945.

Archives Curie, dossier JC-14, 5 pages du discours d’Irène Joliot-Curie à Londres ; cité par
Michel Pinault, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2000, p. 395.

Michel Pinault, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2000, p. 536 (entretien d’Yvonne
Dumont avec Michel Pinault le 20 septembre 1994).

Sur le dosage du carbone dans les aciers avec de l’azote 13, voir Pierre Radvanyi, Les Curie,

A new laboratory of nuclear physic was installed.

Lettre d’Irène à Frédéric, Archives Curie BnF, citée par Rosalynd Pflum, Marie Curie et sa

Between Edouard Branly and Marie Curie, academicians chose the very Catholic specialist
radio conductors preferably a woman, a stranger. The right-wing press took up the case and
orchestrates a campaign against Marie Curie and her friends, ironically on the risk of "« le
boudoir s’installer sous la Coupole.” Marie Curie loses the election, just because of two
votes. Angrily, she no longer reruns for election. See Janine Trotereau, *Marie Curie*, Paris, Gallimard Folio, 2011, p. 180-191. Irène Joliot- Curie has tried her luck in vain for four times. It was not until May 14, 1979 a female physicist, Yvonne Choquet- Bruhat (born 1923) is an elected member of the Academy of Sciences (she was "correspondent member since 1978). In 2013, there are only two women of the Academy of Sciences.