

Gender Solidarities in Late Eighteenth-Century Urban France: The Example of Rouen

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Largely excluded from what have been accepted as dominant social institutions, both formal and informal, women in the past have established their own structures and networks of relationships and their own institutions of sociability and support. These institutions have generally been neglected by historians who have excluded women from their purview, but even with the rapid growth of women's studies, historians find that a dearth of source materials frequently hampers their efforts to recreate the social life of the mass of women. These restrictions apply less in the case of literate middle-class women,¹ but in order to study the relationships of the mass of illiterate women in earlier times we are often forced to resort to sources which are often *about* women but not written *by* women, and which are therefore open to many distorting influences.

In the context of eighteenth-century France several valuable sources have been exploited in order to describe the lives of working women. Olwen Hufton has drawn particularly on the records of charitable institutions,² while other historians have used the *déclarations de grossesse* in order to reveal the vulnerability of women to male inducement and seduction.³ In this article I wish to introduce another set of sources and to demonstrate their usefulness in helping to reconstitute one dimension of the relationships among women: the relationships among married women at the neighbourhood level.

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¹ See, for example, Carroll SMITH-ROSENBERG, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1 (1975): 1-29.

² Olwen HUFTON, "Women in Revolution 1789-1796", *Past and Present*, 53 (1971): 90-108; "Women and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-Century France", *French Historical Studies*, 9 (1975): 1-22; *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1974).

³ See as examples Richard COBB, *A Sense of Place* (London, 1975), Part III, "A View on the Street: Seduction and Pregnancy in Revolutionary Lyon", pp. 77-135; and Jacques DEPAUW, "Amour illégitime et société à Nantes au XVIII^e siècle", *Annales E. S. C.*, 27 (1972): 1155-82.

In 1790, as part of their reform of France's judicial system, the Revolutionary legislators established *tribunaux de famille* to deal with disputes among family members, especially disputes involving inheritances, separations, and divorces. Unlike other courts, the *tribunaux de famille* were not composed of a professional judiciary but rather of relatives or friends of the parties involved in individual cases. Each party nominated three *arbitres de famille* and the judgement in each case was by majority decision. Since the *tribunaux de famille* were not professional courts, the records which they provide have a spontaneity and intimacy which other judicial records lack. Often taken by the untrained and sometimes barely literate, the minutes of proceedings and the evidence of witnesses lack much of the jargon and formal expression which characterize other judicial documents.⁴

The records of the divorce cases heard by the *tribunaux de famille* provide us with a wealth of information on domestic life under conditions of conjugal stress. As women were the majority of petitioners in divorce and separation actions they provide us with valuable insights into the status of women within the family at this time.

There are, of course, qualifications to the usefulness of the *tribunal de famille* divorce records which must be noted at the outset. Firstly, they are relatively few because not all divorce petitions were heard by the *tribunaux*: under the 1792 divorce law only divorces based on certain matrimonial offences such as violence and adultery needed to be heard by the *tribunaux de famille*. Secondly, these family courts were abolished in 1796 and some of their functions were taken over by the regular courts: the *tribunaux de district* and later the *tribunaux civils*. For the present study, records of 250 divorce petitions have been used, the majority of them (146 petitions) from the *tribunaux de famille*, between 1792 and the year IV (1796), the rest from the *Tribunal de district de Rouen* and the *Tribunal civil de Rouen* from the year IV to the year VIII (1800). The relatively small number of cases (Rouen had a population of 85,000 in 1793) raises the question of the general applicability of the phenomena which this article describes. Although there is no way of demonstrating conclusively that the evidence from the divorce cases can be applied generally, there is an impression that much of it can: wife-beating, for example, seems to have been widespread in the eighteenth century.⁵ As we should expect, though, such personal behaviour did not come to the notice of the official record-keepers in a systematic manner which would permit us to express its extent with anything approaching precision.

⁴ For an institutional study of the *tribunaux de famille*, see James F. TRAER, "The French Family Court", *History*, 196 (1974): 211-28.

⁵ The common occurrence of wife-beating is discussed in Yves CASTAN, *Honnêteté et relations sociales en Languedoc, 1715-1780* (Paris, 1974), p. 172. Male violence is also discussed in Jean-Louis FLANDRIN, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1979), esp. pp. 122ff; M. SEGALIN, "Le mariage et la femme dans les proverbes du sud de la France", *Annales du Midi*, 123 (1975): 265-88; Richard COBB, *Reactions to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 142-48. Such sources give an impression of widespread male violence directed against women, which must be seen in the context of general male attitudes towards women.

The third point to note in respect of the sources used here relates to the social origins of those described. Women petitioners for divorce in Rouen spanned the social spectrum from nobles, who divorced their *émigré* husbands, to working women. Of women petitioners whose occupation is known, about three-quarters (seventy-two percent) were manual workers, especially in textile and allied occupations. A quarter of the working women were *fileuses* or *trameuses*, a third were *lingères* or *couturières*. In all, women engaged in all levels of textile production — from *dégraissageuses* and *cardeuses de laine*, through *fileuses* and *toilières* to *couturières* — made up a half of all women petitioners for divorce. Other common occupations among working-women petitioners were *blanchisseuses*, *vinai-grières*, *domestiques* and *journalières*. The twenty-eight percent of women petitioners who were not manual workers was composed of two main categories: small retail merchants of all kinds (*marchandes de poisson*, *marchandes bonnetières*, etc.) who accounted for eight percent and women *vivant de leur revenu*, who accounted for fifteen percent. The women whose experiences are described in the *tribunaux de famille* records were even more working-class in profile than the overall composition of women petitioners, since the wealthy wives of *émigrés* were excluded. The generally modest social origins of the women we are concerned with here are demonstrated by their living predominantly in the parishes of St. Maclou and St. Vivien, Rouen's poorest.⁶

With these qualifications in mind, we can proceed to a discussion of the evidence the *tribunaux de famille* records contain for gender-relationships within the family and the neighbourhood. Aspects of wife-husband relationships, notably the subordinate position of married women, have been described and analysed elsewhere,⁷ and the emphasis in this article will be on the extension of these relationships into the wider social context of the neighbourhood. The family was not a closed, domestic society with its own private life, although there is some evidence that some husbands would have preferred that arrangement. Rather the family and the household were open to their social environment, which made them susceptible to social controls and sanctions. What is important from our perspective is that the processes at work in the dynamic relationship between the family and its social environment were differentiated on the basis of gender; that because of the nature of male-female social relationships, gender solidarities emerged which were reflected in the formation of attitudes and in networks of sociability and support. It is the purpose of the present essay to describe and analyse these solidarities, with prime reference to married women's relationships with women neighbours and kin.

⁶ Occupations of the divorced are derived from the registrations of divorces in the *état-civil* of Rouen. A more comprehensive and detailed breakdown is given in Roderick PHILLIPS, "Demographic Aspects of Divorce in Rouen, 1792-1816", *Annales de Démographie Historique* (1976): 429-41.

⁷ Roderick PHILLIPS, "Women and Family Breakdown in Eighteenth-Century France: Rouen 1780-1800", *Social History*, 2 (1976): 197-218.

The responses of outsiders to specifically familial events and activities reflected authority structures and processes within the family itself, so that an elementary understanding of domestic society, and specifically of the relationships between wives and husbands, is necessary before we proceed much further. At the level of legislation, husbands were placed in a position of authority over their wives in eighteenth-century France. The various legal codes — *coutumiers*, royal and ecclesiastical laws — accepted as a principle *puissance maritale*, the generalized authority of a husband over his wife's activities. This included not only the necessity of his consent before she entered into contracts, and his control over her property, but also his legal superiority in areas of personal behaviour. For instance, the husband was generally credited by the power of *correction modérée* with the right to punish his wife physically, but in a "moderate" manner.⁸

Until divorce was legalized in 1792 the broad limits to a husband's authority were indicated by the circumstances under which a woman could apply for a separation. Under the customary law of Normandy a woman could obtain a separation only if her husband's violence was so severe as to endanger her life. Similarly, the double standard of morality operated: a wife could seek a separation on the ground of her husband's adultery only if he committed adultery in the marital dwelling.⁹ The final point to note about *puissance maritale* was the husband's right to control his wife's residence. Under eighteenth-century French law a married woman could not leave her husband's dwelling without his permission, and if she deserted him he could obtain a court order for her recovery. On the other hand the husband was able to obtain a *lettre de cachet* (an arrest warrant) and have his wife imprisoned for various reasons, and ecclesiastical law provided that a wife convicted of adultery could be imprisoned in a convent for two years. Finally, the husband's position as master of the household gave him the power to evict his wife at will.

These were the legal powers which were vested in the husband in respect of his wife, and as such they tell us only about legal prescription and permission, not about social practice.¹⁰ But the evidence of women seeking divorces indicates that the powers described above had not fallen into disuse. The divorce evidence chronicles widespread violence against women, cruelty of all kinds (notably against pregnant women), threats of violence and murder, and the eviction of women (together with their chil-

⁸ The right of *correction modérée* has been noted in such studies as PHILLIPS, "Women and Family Breakdown", and Nicole CASTAN, "La criminalité familiale dans le ressort du Parlement de Toulouse, 1690-1730", in *Crimes et criminalité en France, XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles*, eds: A. ABBIADECI et al. (Paris, 1971), pp. 91-107. The husband's right of "moderate correction" in English law and practice is discussed in Kathleen M. DAVIES, "'The sacred condition of equality' — how original were Puritan doctrines of marriage?", *Social History*, 5 (1977): 563-80.

⁹ David HOUARD, *Dictionnaire analytique, historique, étymologique, critique et interprétatif de la Coutume de Normandie*, 4 vols (Rouen, 1780-82), III: 259.

¹⁰ Family legislation varied in France, not only regionally but also as between royal and ecclesiastical laws. What has been outlined here is a bald generalization as to the substance of legal prescriptions of the conjugal relationship.

dren) at all times of day and night and in all conditions. Such domestic circumstances have been described elsewhere,¹¹ and there is no need to detail them here, but it is necessary to recognize that the superiority and *puissance* of the husband was a social fact as well as a legal possibility. Only in this context does the dominant resort to divorce by women in Revolutionary France make sense. Divorce was first legalized in France in 1792 by an extremely liberal law which made divorce available for virtually any reason, at little expense, and, importantly, equally available to women and men. In Rouen between 1792 and 1800, seventy-one percent of unilateral divorces (as distinct from divorces by the mutual consent of both spouses) were sought by women,¹² and the percentage was even greater in respect of particular offences. For example, ninety-six percent of divorces based on cruelty or ill-treatment were decreed at the request of women. It is this familial context of oppression of married women which also explains the network of relationships which women established around them, independently of the family; clearly, in their socially and legally subordinate familial position, women needed external assistance far more frequently than their husbands.

The legal status of women was such that under the *ancien régime* and even during the Revolution, when the law was more liberal, there were few avenues of legal or institutional redress in the face of oppression from her husband. As far as the Revolutionary period was concerned, a beaten woman could in principle prosecute her husband for assault under Article 14 of the *Loi de la police correctionnelle* of 1791, which provided more severe penalties for assaults on women than on men. Yet despite the apparent concern which this law indicates, the judiciary was reluctant to apply the penalties when the complainant and defendant were wife and husband respectively. In almost all cases the courts refused to hear the complaint on the ground that, as it was expressed in one decision, "il ne s'agit d'une altercation entre mari et femme".¹³ In several cases the court explicitly upheld the husband's right to violence against his wife because "elle est sous la puissance de son mari, qu'elle n'est pas divorcée".¹⁴ It is hardly surprising, in view of such decisions, that so many women resorted to divorce. Though the reluctance of the courts to intervene judicially in domestic disputes might be understandable from the point of view of conciliation, it is clear that it worked to the disadvantage of women by implicitly or explicitly accepting their husbands' right to beat them while they remained married.

¹¹ PHILLIPS, "Women and Family Breakdown".

¹² All local studies of divorce show a majority of women's petitions among unilateral divorces: in Paris they accounted for seventy-four percent, in Toulouse sixty-five percent, in Metz seventy-three percent. Sources respectively: Elaine Kuehn (Ph.D. candidate, University of Iowa), personal communication; Simone MARAVAL, "L'Introduction du divorce en Haute-Garonne (1792-1816): étude de mœurs révolutionnaires" (Mémoire de D.E.S., Toulouse, 1951); Jean L'HOTE, "Le divorce à Metz sous la Révolution et l'Empire", *Annales de l'Est*, 5^e série, III (1952): 175.

¹³ Archives départementales de la Seine-Maritime, Rouen (hereafter referred to as ADSM), LP 7716, Tribunal de la police correctionnelle.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The other avenue of judicial or quasi-judicial redress available to women was recourse to a *juge de paix* (another Revolutionary innovation) who was competent to try to conciliate disputes. Unfortunately, the records of the activities of the *juges de paix* in Rouen are missing, and they are mentioned only incidentally in three divorce actions before the *tribunaux de famille*. In one case the husband refused to see the *juge de paix* while in another it was the *juge de paix* himself who was recalcitrant. In the divorce action against *citoyen* Stroubler a neighbour gave the following evidence:

La fille aînée du dit Stroubler âgée d'environ 9 à 10 ans fut chez elle déposante environ sur les trois heures après midy et que cette petite fille qui était les pieds nus et qui pleurait lui dit qu'elle allait chercher le juge de paix parce que son père battait sa mère depuis dix heures du matin, qu'il luy portait des coups de pied et des coups de poings et que personne n'avait voulu venir à son secours, que la petite fille en revenant dit à la déposante qu'elle avait rencontré le juge de paix mais qu'il n'avait voulu pas venir.¹⁵

The third case involving a *juge de paix* demonstrates the potentially dangerous consequences of a woman's resorting to official agencies for help. In 1804, at her mother's insistence, Henriette Villon complained to a *juge de paix* that her husband, Pierre Leclerc, had beaten her excessively and evicted her from his house. As a result the *juge de paix* summoned Leclerc before him, where the husband "reconnaît ses torts et consentit recevoir son épouse". But after Henriette Villon returned home, her husband

la reçut très froidement et luy jetta au nez les clefs de sa chambre qu'elle aurait reçues dans la figure si elle ne se fut penchée ... Leclerc luy reprocha à travers la porte de l'avoir cité devant le juge de paix, qu'il était décidé à luy payer cela, qu'il avait été chirurgien qu'il savait l'endroit sensible et qu'elle n'avait pas 24 heures à vivre. Ces propos déterminèrent l'exposante à ne point ouvrir.¹⁶

External agencies of redress or conciliation thus seemed ineffective in dealing with the situations in which women were victimized. The main reason was that they dealt (when they tried at all) with the symptoms, rather than with the root cause of the situations, namely the different statuses of wife and husband in both law and social practice. The only effective remedy in such circumstances, as many women discovered, was the dissolution of marriage, and hence the imbalance in the ratio of petitions by wives and husbands. Divorce was available only from 1792 and separations were difficult and expensive to obtain under the *ancien régime*. We can assume that all women did not simply resign themselves to being beaten, ill-treated, and evicted from their homes, and it is the purpose of the remainder of this essay to show how, in the absence of institutional avenues of assistance, women coped in such circumstances.

The systems of social support most frequently cited in the material deriving from the *tribunaux de famille* were those involving neighbours,

¹⁵ ADSM, LP 6734, Tribunal civil.

¹⁶ ADSM, unclassified, Tribunal de première instance (10 November 1804).

and this raises one question which ought to be dealt with right away, namely why neighbours should have been involved more prominently than kin. The explanation must be simply that neighbours, by their very definition, were more likely to be available in emergencies than were relatives who might live anywhere in the city, if they lived in the same city at all. As we shall see, relatives were involved in domestic disputes, but they tended to provide a secondary level of assistance, leaving it to the neighbours to provide the immediate aid and to attend to the urgent needs of a woman in distress. The most frequently encountered examples of women neighbours helping other women in domestic strife were attempts to stop a husband from ill-treating his wife, and giving refuge to a woman who had either fled from her husband or been evicted by him from the house. Men also rendered assistance in these ways, but differences existed between the attitudes and actions of women on the one hand and men on the other.

As we have seen, eighteenth-century French law and male social practice accepted that a husband could exercise *correction modérée* against his wife. Clearly, the definition of *modérée* in this context is culturally-influenced, and there is strong evidence that gender was one of the prime influences. It is to be expected that those who administered the punishment allowed themselves greater latitude in their definition of *modérée*; those who were on the receiving end would place the upper limits of moderation somewhat lower. In the context of the family power relationship, the categories punisher/punished were gender-specific, so that what a man/husband might regard as *correction modérée* might well have been regarded by a woman/wife as immoderate or excessive. There are numerous references by women to "excessive" violence, which might suggest that some women, at least, had internalized prevailing male values, and were prepared to tolerate a degree of ill-treatment. What is proposed here is a gender-specific difference of understanding about the degree of violence which a woman ought to tolerate. A husband who beat his wife thought that he was within his rights to do so, as some men claimed before the divorce courts, while women's petitions are evidence that they considered such violence improper and intolerable.

Parallel gender-differentiated attitudes are found among outsiders, those not immediately involved in the conjugal violence. Although it is impossible to measure the degree of violence in each case described in the court records, there is a strong impression that men were less likely to intervene in marital disputes than were women, and that men intervened only when the violence had reached a level at which the wife might be seriously injured. The case of Charles Levacher is illustrative.

Vers la fin de décembre [1791] ... le citoyen Levacher ayant engagé les citoyens Lami et Huchy ses amis à souper, à la fin du repas ledit citoyen Levacher cherchant querelle à sa femme et l'injuriant comme son ordinaire, lui porta plusieurs coups sur les bras, cequi l'obligea de changer de place, que le citoyen Levacher ... continuant de l'injurier, la traitant de sacrée garce, sacrée putain, sacrée matine, lui porta plusieurs coups de poing dans la poitrine, qu'il l'a saisi à la gorge et lui porta encore plusieurs coups dans l'estomac et la poitrine, s'arma même d'un couteau dont il fut pour la fraper, en disant qu'il falloit qu'elle périt ou lui. Mais les citoyens Lami et Huchy l'empêchèrent.¹⁷

¹⁷ ADSM, LP 7098, Tribunal de famille.

In their evidence, Lami and Huchy confirmed the impression that they sat by and did not interfere until Levacher seized the knife. Until that point their sole sign of disapproval seems to have been the comment that "il n'était pas propre de maltraiter une épouse devant des amis". Other cases, too, showed men standing by and intervening to stop a husband only when he was on the verge of using a knife, sword, pistol, or other potentially lethal weapon. Women, on the other hand, seem to have intervened at a lower level of violence or threatened violence, and it is interesting to note that when women did refuse to intervene they justified their refusal in terms of fear of the husband, while the only explicit refusals to intervene on principle were made by men. Similarly, male employees were reluctant to involve themselves in disputes between their employer spouses, while female workers and domestic servants appear readily to have come to the aid of their mistresses.

These gender-differentiated reactions to conjugal violence suggest gender solidarities. Men were unwilling to challenge another man's, and by implication their own, right to administer *correction modérée*, and were for this reason willing to grant great latitude in the definition of *modérée*. Women, on the other hand, intervened far more readily, indicating a lower level of tolerance and a less liberal definition of *modérée*. It is possible that we find women intervening more frequently because they were more often at hand, but their readiness to intervene doubtless can be explained by the empathy of women towards another woman being ill-treated. Put simply, the difference in attitudes towards wife-beating is evidence of solidarities created among women and men respectively by the gender definition of subordinates and superordinates in the context of domestic authority.

The circumstances of violence frequently meant that a woman had to be rescued and removed from her husband's reach, and here neighbourhood assistance was vital. When *citoyen* Parent beat his wife Adelaide Lefebvre to such an extent that "un grand nombre de gens" gathered outside their home, she escaped to a neighbour's dwelling. The neighbour, a *toilière*, told the *tribunal de famille* that Adelaide Lefebvre's

bouche [était] pleine de sang et la joue gauche très inflammée, ayant la jupe déchirée, qu'elle déposante lui donna un verre d'eau pour se gargariser la bouche, que viron une heure après, la déposante et une autre voisine la couvrirent d'un matelat pour éviter la furie dudit Parent dans le cas de le rencontrer, et la conduisaient chez le Citoyen Lefebvre son frère.¹⁸

Other examples of women administering first aid are scattered through the divorce court records, ranging from providing butter to rub on bruises, the bathing of more serious injuries, to giving "un verre de vin pour lui remettre le sens" in the case of a woman stunned by her husband's blows.¹⁹ In the case of one woman, whose husband was so feared that her neighbours would not shelter her when, bloodied, she came to their doors,

¹⁸ ADSM, LP 7103, Tribunal de famille.

¹⁹ ADSM, LP 7098, Tribunal de famille.

the women of the neighbourhood put her up at the *Auberge du Chapeau Rouge* "où elle resta environ quinze jours pour se rétablir, recevant les secours de ses voisines".²⁰

Like attitudes to wife-beating, the question of giving shelter to a distressed woman attested to gender solidarities. It was noted earlier that a married woman was legally obliged to live with her husband, and the only refusals on principle to give a woman refuge came from men, who apparently respected that aspect of *puissance maritale* which enabled a husband to control his wife's residence. For instance when one woman, her face and hands bruised black, came to François Paul to ask for a room, he told her (according to his own evidence) "qu'il ne pouvait pas la recevoir sans le consentement de son mari".²¹ Similarly, when Charles Levacher forced his wife to flee to a neighbour's home, the male neighbour was careful to seek Levacher's consent to his wife's staying overnight, asking him

s'il consentait que sa femme couche avec la sienne, le citoyen Levacher répondit qu'il ne le voulait pas, et que si sa femme ne voulait pas rentrer qu'il n'y avait qu'à la conduire dans sa famille, ce qui fut effectivement fait.²²

The reaction of women neighbours to a terrorized woman on their door-steps varied, but only one refused to grant shelter, and, as in the case of intervening in violence, it was for fear of the husband's reaction. Fifty-five year old *veuve* Guiton described her neighbour Louis Marie as "un furieux" who frequently beat his wife, and said that when Marie's wife came to her door with her children at eleven o'clock one evening,

pour me prier de luy donner asile dans le lieu où je demeure, cherchant à se soustraire aux mauvais traitements de son mary, je m'y suis refusée par la seule crainte de m'exposer à la colère de son mary, et j'ignore où elle s'est retirée. Ledit Marie est redouté par tous ses voisins.²³

But this was a unique reaction among those documented. Women were normally given shelter and assistance by their *voisines* when they needed it, even though their hosts were subjected to verbal abuse and even physical violence by angry husbands in some cases.

The evidence in divorce actions thus leaves the strong impression of significant differences between men's and women's attitudes towards domestic conflict and specifically towards a woman in need of assistance. It is not likely that women are mentioned more frequently in these records because they were more likely to be in the neighbourhood at any given time; although domestic violence occurred at all hours of the day and night, it most frequently occurred in the late evening (between nine and

²⁰ ADSM, LP 6734, Tribunal civil. In many cases court records refer to neighbours as *voisins*, the masculine form which may include women when referring to neighbours in general terms. It is significant that in many of the cases under discussion, such as that presently cited, the word used is the feminine form, *voisines*, which excludes male neighbours.

²¹ Ibid.

²² ADSM, LP 7098, Tribunal de famille.

²³ ADSM, LP 6734, Tribunal civil.

eleven o'clock), often after the husband returned home, the worse for drink, from the local *estaminet*. One cannot escape the conclusion that moral solidarities existed which reflected the gender-specific division of power in the family.

Yet it would be misleading to leave the impression that relatives were not useful to a woman in need of support and assistance. Rather it is the case that the sheer proximity of neighbours made them the prime agents of help, and that women who sought immediate refuge with a neighbour often went later to stay with a relative in another part of the city. The divorce documents indicate that a minimum of thirty percent of married women who left home during the no doubt stressful period of divorce proceedings, went to live with a relative, usually with a mother and/or father. Frequently the assistance rendered by the woman's parents created or exacerbated tension between them and their son-in-law, and there are examples of conflict and violence. Marie Heurtault, for instance, complained to a court that her husband had beaten both her and her mother at various times,²⁴ while another case contained a description of various acts of violence between Jacques Benoit and his mother-in-law. On one occasion *la femme* Boisel, Benoit's mother-in-law, kicked him twice "et luy porta un coup de poing dans les dents d'où il a eu la lèvre inférieure sanglante cequi lui a fait sortir le sang de la bouche".²⁵

Although the evidence relating to the involvement of relatives is sketchy, it is clear that the parents of the wife were more likely to intervene in marital disputes than the parents of the husband. No doubt this imbalance arises from the fact that it was more likely to be the wife who required external assistance in these circumstances. Of the wife's parents, her mother was the more likely to impinge on the marriage, either by giving her daughter advice, assistance, or refuge, and there are several explanations for this.

In the first place there is an alluringly simple demographic explanation. Of the parents likely to survive long enough to see their children married, mothers had the best chance, and the mother of the bride had the best chance of all. This was because women (mothers, in this case) had a greater life expectancy than men (fathers). For the same reasons, the father of the groom was the least likely to be alive at the time of a marriage. The table below illustrates this pattern of parental survival in respect of parents of women and men married in Rouen and Caen.²⁶

²⁴ ADSM, LP 7098, Tribunal de famille.

²⁵ ADSM, LP 6760, Tribunal de famille.

²⁶ The figures for Rouen refer to parents of women and men who were married in Rouen and subsequently divorced. The figures for Caen refer to the parish of St. Gilles in that city between 1775 and 1789, and are taken from Jean-Claude PERROT, *Genèse d'une ville moderne. Caen au XVIII^e siècle*, 2 vols (Paris, La Haye, 1975), I: 314.

Table 1. — PARENTAL SURVIVAL IN ROUEN AND CAEN.

Relationship	Percentage Surviving at Child's Marriage	
	Rouen	Caen
Bride's mother	65.2	62.3
Groom's mother	62.8	58.1
Bride's father	55.5	48.2
Groom's father	49.2	40.4

In simple proportional terms, then, mothers of married women had a more frequent physical presence and were thus more often able to intervene in their daughter's marriages. This would account for a greater involvement by mothers-in-law even if they and fathers-in-law were equally prone to intervene.

But there are compelling social reasons why the mother of the wife should have intervened more than other parents-in-law. In the first place a married woman was more likely to need outside help against her husband than vice versa. Secondly — and here the gender solidarities described earlier come into play — when she needed help it was more likely to come from her mother, who could empathize with her plight, than from a male, albeit her father, who would be reluctant to challenge another man's *puissance maritale*. From this perspective, the archetypal mother-in-law should be considered not as an interfering busybody to be scorned and made fun of, but as an important structural element in a process (also involving neighbours) which sought to ensure that the inequality of power within marriage did not become tyrannical. This was the best women could hope for before the legalization of divorce: under the *ancien régime* judicial separations were designed solely to ensure that "sous prétexte de l'indissolubilité du mariage, l'une des deux parties ne devienne la victime des fureurs de l'autre".²⁷

What is clear so far is that women were subject to the oppressive actions of their husbands within the family, and that, deprived of reliable legal and judicial redress, they depended instead upon the intervention of outsiders, notably neighbours and relatives, and especially women neighbours and women relatives. It is conceivable that under these conditions men and women developed different attitudes towards the privacy of the family. Women, it might be argued, had an interest in ensuring that the family remained open to social scrutiny and social control, since on the neighbourhood level this was their guarantee of assistance in times of crisis. Men, on the other hand, might well have preferred that their familial activities be insulated from public observation, so that they could exercise their domestic authority without hindrance.

²⁷ HOUARD, *Dictionnaire*, II: 275.

The dichotomy of open and closed families has frequently been noted in historical writing, as has the movement from the open family of traditional society to the ethic of private domesticity epitomized by the nineteenth-century middle-class family.²⁸ To a large extent the openness of the traditional family was a result of the multifunctional nature of the household: the use of the dwelling as a place of business necessitated the presence of outsiders, for example. But with the separation of dwelling from work-place under the processes of urbanization and industrialization, the imperative to social openness declined, and families developed the potential for privacy and its associated ethic of domesticity. If this hypothesis holds true, however, we should expect women to have resisted the privatization of the family household, and men to have favoured it, for the reason set out above. In fact the evidence from divorces in Revolutionary Rouen demonstrates ambivalence in respect of the privacy or publicity of domestic events. In itself this ambivalence does not necessarily indicate a movement of attitudes in either direction, but in the light of the notion that change took place in the direction of privacy, the evidence presented here complements the hypothesis that the late eighteenth century was a period of transition as the family moved from an open to a closed society.

There is evidence, first, of a willingness to play out family dramas and conflicts in the open, in the streets, where they were susceptible to social controls of various kinds: public opinion and active intervention, for example. On the other hand there are examples of husbands attempting to ensure that their neighbours did not know about conjugal conflict, and of husbands who denied the right of neighbours to intervene when their attempts at concealment failed. What is significant from our perspective is that all those who sought privacy were men. Time and time again in the records of the divorce courts husbands attempted to conceal their ill-treatment of their wives from their neighbours by trying to silence the cries of fear and pain. One husband threatened to "casser un de ses bras et une jambe si elle avait le malheur de crier",²⁹ while in another case a husband threw his wife out of her bed and beat her while threatening to cut her throat if she dared to cry out.³⁰ Another couple rushed about the house, he closing the windows so that the neighbours would not hear his violence, she opening the windows so that they could. In yet another instance of concealment, the wife complained that "les huit premiers jours de son mariage il l'a maltraitée la nuit, et lorsqu'elle pleurait il affectait de rire pour faire croire aux voisins qu'ils étaient dans l'union".³¹ When outsiders intervened in disputes within the household they were sometimes met with what amounted to declarations of family privacy, such as Jacques Fortin's statement to a neighbour that "il n'avait pas le droit de se

²⁸ See as an example Edward SHORTER, "Différences de classe et sentiment depuis 1750. L'exemple de la France", *Annales E. S. C.*, 29 (1974), esp. 1046-47. See also Lawrence STONE, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London, 1977).

²⁹ ADSM, LP 7098, Tribunal de famille.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

mêler dans son mariage".³² The wish for privacy expressed by men only, though not by all men, is in stark contrast with the appeals made by women for neighbourly intervention and help.

The implications of the material presented here are wide, but the data base is limited and it is important not to push the evidence beyond its limits. It is clear that the gender definitions of power within the family in the eighteenth century had ramifications beyond the family itself, in the formation of moral solidarities among women and among men.³³ What is suggested is that in some respects these solidarities were more important than family ties. How else do we explain, for example, the apparent reluctance of fathers actively to come to the assistance of their beleaguered daughters with the same frequency as their mothers, unless by appeal to the proposition that men were more defensive of the principle of *puissance maritale* than they were of their daughters' well-being? If the general trend of these suggestions holds true, then new perspectives on the development of the family, and of gender-specific conceptions of the family and its relationships to its social environment, are open to historians.

³² Ibid.

³³ Close relationships among women have been noted by COBB, *A Sense of Place*, and by FLANDRIN, *Families*, pp. 34-37.