Although the leading figures of the Enlightenment were all men, the social context was the highly-civilized "salon", usually presided over by a woman with some independent wealth.

On Julie de Lespinasse

From Memoir of Baron de Grimm

Her circle met daily from five o'clock until nine in the evening. There we were sure to find choice men of all orders in the State, the Church, the Court, military men, foreigners, and the most distinguished men of letters. Every one agrees that though the name of M. d'Alembert may have drawn them thither, it was she alone who kept them there. Devoted wholly to the care of preserving that society, of which she was the soul and the charm, she subordinated to this purpose all her tastes and all her personal intimacies. She seldom went to the theatre or into the country, and when she did make an exception to this rule it was an event of which all Paris was notified in advance.... Politics, religion, philosophy, anecdotes, news, nothing was excluded from the conversation, and, thanks to her care, the most trivial little narrative gained, as naturally as possible, the place and notice it deserved. News of all kinds was gathered there in its first freshness.

From Memoir of Marmontel

The circle was formed of persons who were not bound together. She had taken them here and there in society, but so well assorted were they that once there they fell into harmony like the strings of an instrument touched by an able hand. Following out that comparison, I may say that she played the instrument with an art that came of genius; she seemed to know what tone each string would yield before she touched it; I mean to say that our minds and our natures were so well known to her that in order to bring them into play she had but to say a word. Nowhere was conversation more lively, more brilliant, or better regulated than at her house. It was a rare phenomenon indeed, the degree of tempered, equable heat which she knew so well how to maintain, sometimes by moderating it, sometimes by quickening it. The continual activity of her soul was communicated to our souls, but measurably; her imagination was the mainspring, her reason the regulator. Remark that the brains she stirred at will were neither feeble nor frivolous: the Coudillacs and Turgots were among them; d'Alembert
was like a simple, docile child beside her. Her talent for casting out a thought and giving it for discussion to men of that class, her own talent in discussing it with precision, sometimes with eloquence, her talent for bringing forward new ideas and varying the topic-always with the facility and ease of a fairy, who, with one touch of her wand, can change the scene of her enchantment-these talents, I say, were not those of an ordinary woman. It was not with the follies of fashion and vanity that daily, during four hours of conversation, without languor and without vacuum, she knew how to make herself interesting to a wide circle of strong minds.

From Letter of Julie de Lespinasse to the Comte de Guibert.

I love you too well to impose the least restraint upon myself; I prefer to have to ask your pardon rather than commit no faults. I have no selflove with you; I do not comprehend those rules of conduct that make us so content with self and so cold to those we love. I detest prudence; I even hate (suffer me to say so) those "duties of friendship" which substitute propriety for interest, and circumspection for feeling. How shall I say it? I love the abandonment to impulse, I act from impulse only, and I love to madness that others do the same by me.

Ah! mon Dieu! how far I am from being equal to you! I have not your virtues, I know no duties with my friend; I am closer to the state of nature; savages do not love with more simplicity and good faith.

The world, misfortunes, evils, nothing has corrupted my heart. I shall never be on my guard against you; I shall never suspect you. You say that you have friendship for me; you are virtuous; what can I fear? I will let you see the trouble, the agitation of my soul, and I shall not blush to seem to you weak and inconsistent. I have already told that I do not seek to please you; I do not wish to usurp your esteem. I prefer to deserve your indulgence-in short, I want to love you with all my heart and to place in you a confidence without reserve....


On Madame Geoffrin

Madame Geoffrin was married to a rich man. His money seems to have been the main benefit she found in the marriage. She used it to help her philosophique friends.

From Memoir of d'Alembert
Much has been said respecting Madame Geoffrin's goodness, to what a point it was active, restless, obstinate. But it has not been added, and which reflects the greatest honour upon her, that, as she advanced in years, this habit constantly increased. For the misfortune of society, it too often happens that age and experience produce a directly contrary effect, even in very virtuous characters, if virtue be not in them a powerful sentiment indeed, and of no common stamp. The more disposed they have been at first to feel kindness towards their fellow creatures, the more, finding daily their ingratitude, do they repent of having served them, and even consider it almost as a reproach to themselves to have loved them. Madame Geoffrin had learnt, from a more reflected study of mankind, from taking a view of them more enlightened by reason and justice, that they are more weak and vain than wicked; that we ought to compassionate their weakness, and bear with their vanity, that they may bear with ours....

The passion of giving, which was an absolute necessity to her seemed born with her, and tormented her, if I may say so, even from her earliest years. While yet a child, if she saw from the window any poor creature asking alms, she would throw whatever she could lay her hands upon to them; her bread, her linen, and even her clothes. She was often scolded for this intemperance of charity, sometimes even punished, but nothing could alter the disposition, she would do the same the very next day....

Always occupied with those whom she loved, always anxious about them, she even anticipated every thing which might interrupt their happiness. A young man, [note: this young man was d'Alembert himself] for whom she interested herself very much, who had till that moment been wholly absorbed in his studies, was suddenly seized with an unfortunate passion, which rendered study, and even life itself insupportable to him. She succeeded in curing him. Some time after she observed that the same young man, mentioned to her, with great interest, an amiable woman with whom he had recently become acquainted. Madame Geoffrin, who knew the lady, went to her.

"I am come," she said, "to intreat a favour of you. Do not evince too much friendship for * * * * or too much desire to see him, he will be soon in love with you, he will be unhappy, and I shall be no less so to see him suffer; nay, you yourself will be a sufferer, from consciousness, of the sufferings you occasion him." This woman, who was truly amiable, promised what Madame Geoffrin desired, and kept her word.

As she had always among the circle of her society persons of the highest rank and birth, as she appeared even to seek an acquaintance with them, it was supposed that this flattered her vanity. But here a very erroneous opinion was formed of her; she was in no respect the dupe of such prejudices, but she thought that by managing the humours of these people, she could render them useful to her friends. "You think," said she, to one of the latter, for whom she had a particular regard, "that it is for my
own sake I frequent ministers and great people. Undeceive yourself,-it is for the sake of you, and those like you who may have occasion for them...."

**From Memoir of Baron de Grimm**

Whether from malice or inattention, one who was in the habit of lending books to the husband of Madame Geoffrin, sent him several times in succession the first volume of the *Travels of Father Labbat*. M. Geoffrin with all the composure possible, always read the book over again without perceiving the mistake. "*How do you like these Travels, Sir?*"-"*They are very interesting, but the author seems to me somewhat given to repetition.*"-He read Bayle's Dictionary with great attention, following the line with his finger along the two columns. "*What an excellent work, he said, if it were only a little less abstruse.*"-"*You were at the play this evening, M. Geoffrin, said one, pray what was the performance?*"-"*I really cannot say, I was in a great hurry to get in and had no time to look at the bill.*"- However deficient the poor man was, he was permitted to sit down to dinner, at the end of the table, upon condition that he never attempted to join in conversation. A foreigner who was very assiduous in his visits to Madame Geoffrin, one day, not seeing him as usual at table, enquired after him: "*What have you done, Madam, with the poor man whom I always used to see here, and who never spoke a word?*"-"*Oh, that was my husbandl-he is dead.*"