

# THE EMPOWERMENT OF AMERICAN WOMEN

## During The Great Depression in Comparative Perspective

American women made significant progress in the political and public spheres during the Great Depression in the United States. This was especially evident in the Roosevelt era, a period in which women not only reached key posts in the administration but also, through supporting the advancement of other women too, managed to acquire a new dignity and social status.<sup>1</sup>

Women were appointed to relevant government positions and played key roles in the development of the Roosevelt Administration, mainly during the New Deal.<sup>2</sup> Roosevelt himself and his federal government fostered these expanded roles for women who worked as heads of Federal agencies, as political advisers, in the New Deal's relief programs, etc. Behind these appointments, one has to highlight the support and influence of relevant women such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, Mary Bethune, and Molly Dewson, just to mention some of the most inspiring figures of this era. Women worked in two main areas: Democratic Party politics and social welfare. As Susan Ware points out, there was 'a network of professional contact

*Maria Luz Arroyo  
Vázquez  
Universidad Nacional  
de Educación  
a Distancia  
Spain*

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2 The New Deal was the new policy adopted by the Roosevelt Administration. It was more than a political program; it was a symbol and a powerful idea with supporters and detractors.

and personal friendship that linked the women in top New Deal positions' (Ware, 1985: 459).

The aim of this article is to explore the influence that some of these significant women had across other countries, giving as an example the Spanish case and focusing attention on the kind of news that was conveyed by the Spanish press.

Roosevelt's four terms in office (1933–1945) were a clear example of a time when women participated actively in public life. In the 1930s, American women were incorporated in a progressive way into the professional world. Economic independence played a key role. According to Jane Morse:

[u]ltimately, it was economics, rather than politics, that changed women's roles in American society and created greater momentum for the women's rights movement. As many families moved from farms to cities, the economic role of women diminished. But the Great Depression, which began with the October 1929 stock market crash, compelled more women to seek paid work outside the home in order to aid their families. (Morse, 2007)

However, women suffered from wage discrimination, not only in private enterprise but it also in the Federal Government, as can be seen, for example, in women earning the daily wage of three dollars in comparison to the five dollars that men received in projects of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)<sup>3</sup> (McElvaine, 1993: 183).

This trend of women incorporated into the labor market increased during the Second World War, which 'catapulted up to 38 percent of American women into the workforce to fill the labor shortage left by men serving as soldiers' (Morse, 2007). As it happened during the 1930s, it was not on equal terms because, with some exceptions, the salary which women received was lower than that of men. In addition, women were

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3 The WPA gave a wide range of social benefits to the unemployed and undertook the construction of public works, building bridges, tunnels, highways, and other works of public interest, which provided infrastructure to cities such as New York during the New Deal. However, as Michael E. Parrish points out, the WPA did not receive sufficient funds from Congress to give work to the number of unemployed in the 1930s, and the workers of the WPA could only count on having a job for a year (Parrish, 1992: 349).

also more affected by unemployment, periodic unemployment, and redundancies (Ware, 1982: 199–201).

After the Second World War, returning soldiers displaced many women who would potentially have been able to reenter 'the workforce with the economic expansion of the late 1950s and the 1960s. In addition, as women's contributions to their family's economic well-being grew, they found that discrimination increasingly frustrated their efforts to advance in the workplace' (Morse, 2007).

The period of the greatest participation of women in the field of politics in the Roosevelt's administration was that of the first and second New Deal, because although they continued to work in the government during the war, the New Deal was crucial for their progress in the political sphere.

The New Deal is divided by many authors into two periods, the first from 1933 to 1935 and the second from 1935 to 1938. The first period is identified with recovery and relief, in order to immediately relieve the suffering of the most defenseless social sectors in the economic depression and to simultaneously increase prices in the agriculture and industry sectors. The second period of the New Deal, on the other hand, emphasized the need to reform, increase purchasing power, introduce social security, and create benefits for small business and workers (Rauch, 1944: V).

In summary, this article tries to acknowledge and pay tribute to those women who proved their talent and self-worth, were deeply committed to promoting social reforms, and participated actively in politics and social welfare legislation during Roosevelt's New Deal.

#### PROFESSIONALS AND STIMULATORS OF EXCEPTION

During the Great Depression, remarkable figures promoted the active participation of women in American political and social life. One of those key women was Eleanor Roosevelt (1886–1962) who, apart from facilitating access to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt also worked tirelessly to persuade her husband and the directors of various government departments to hire highly qualified women (Roosevelt, 1992: 132; Martin et al., 1997: 844).

*Maria Luz Arroyo  
Vázquez  
Universidad Nacional  
de Educación  
a Distancia  
Spain*

Eleanor was an influential woman who possessed the ability to be heard when she gave a piece of advice either when protesting against a fact or pressing to claim justice. According to Eric Foner, Eleanor was able to transform the role of First Lady without formal responsibilities into a basis for political action (Foner, 2005: 834). In the Spanish press, in general, she is often described as a strong woman as one may notice in the example below, which includes a description that Doris Kearns Goodwin makes of Eleanor Roosevelt:

It was the first wife of a President who starred in press conferences, who spoke at the National Convention of a political party, she wrote a column for a newspaper chain—135 newspapers published six times a week—and she was a radio commentator [...] and thus became ‘the woman with most influence of our time’, in the words of Raymond Clapper. (Goodwin, 1994: 16)

Eleanor was not a conventional woman for her time because she was able to develop her full potential. In this sense, one may highlight the support of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. According to Doris Kearns Goodwin:

Franklin was an instrument through which Eleanor was able to develop the most rare qualities [...] She was able to reach thousands of people, influence the life of a nation and, at the same time, reach out to people to develop their skills and passions. From an overall point of view, both used for mutual enrichment and to the national good. (27)

Another key outstanding figure responsible for the expansion of the role of women in the political sphere during the New Deal was Mary Williams Dewson (commonly known as Molly Dewson) (1874–1964), who was considered a great counselor and who was the director of the Women’s Division of the Democratic Committee throughout the 1930s. Dewson worked as secretary of the National Association of Consumer Research from 1925 until 1931, when she became president of the New York Consumer Association.

One of the most important posts of Dewson was her collaboration in the electoral campaigns of the Democratic candidates. She helped Al Smith in the electoral race for the Presidency of the United States in 1928 and participated actively in the govern-

ment campaign of Roosevelt in 1930 as well as in the presidential campaigns of 1932, 1936, and 1940. She became part of the Roosevelt trust team members during the New Deal, which allowed her to incorporate women into public life.

Dewson's work in the government was linked with the close friendship she had with Eleanor Roosevelt, who was one of her most faithful allies. Both collaborated on joint plans to help women, organizing women within the Democratic Party and creating the female section of the Democratic National Committee. According to historian Susan Ware, Dewson accepted the job because she wanted to keep her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt and because she hated to stay on the sidelines (Ware, 1987: 183).

The choice of Dewson as head of the Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee not only gave her satisfaction to be part of Roosevelt's team but also provided an institutional base to search for and provide employment to female workers. Dewson placed some women in senior government positions. For example, it is thought that she was the one who secured the position of Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor. Susan Ware points out that such an appointment was one of the most important political goals for Dewson. It also demonstrated that Roosevelt took seriously the contribution of women to the political power sphere, as he was willing to trust women to take roles that would involve responsibility and power without precedents (Ware, 1987: 176-177).

It was a great challenge to get employment in the various agencies of the New Deal, and Dewson from the Women's Division had to fight for every job. In fact, despite Dewson's efforts in promoting women in the political arena, it should be clarified that women's employment was concentrated in certain sectors, such as the WPA.

Dewson had an important role in the appointment of women qualified for mid-range bureaucratic positions, i.e., women qualified to work as social workers and others who were employed as staff in some government organizations. This was achieved through personal and institutional relations that she had established. Dewson took advantage of the support from key allies like Roosevelt, who took her opinion into account.

*Maria Luz Arroyo  
Vázquez  
Universidad Nacional  
de Educación  
a Distancia  
Spain*

In addition, as a result of election campaigns, the question of women's vote acquired relevance. According to Frances Perkins, from 1932 Roosevelt became aware of the power of the female vote and took into consideration the work that Dewson carried out in election campaigns, raising the political awareness of women. As a result, in 1936, the President asked the Democratic National Committee to allocate more money to the Women's Division to carry out the electoral campaign. The high esteem Roosevelt had for the work that Dewson carried out is reflected in the following lines:

In 1932, he discovered anew the power and influence of women's vote. He was much impressed by the political activities of the Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee under Mary Dewson. She proved to be a remarkable organizer and campaign director. She knew the women voter as distinguished from the woman member of the local political party group. She knew that the average woman voter had intellectual curiosity and made up her mind about the basis of principles. Roosevelt, like Farley, was pleased with what she did in making the women of America politically conscious. By 1936 he was insistent that the Democratic Committee should give a generous appropriation to the Women's Division, and he backed the Division in everything it did. (Perkins, 1946: 120-121)

As the Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins states in her memoirs, Molly Dewson achieved a recognition that allowed her to mobilize women so that they could have jobs in politics.

Among the charismatic African-American women who were able to participate in the American political life during the Great Depression was Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955). Bethune was not only a pioneer among women who advocated equal rights in education and employment, but she was also an activist. She was among those who realized that, to put an end to racial discrimination, they had to have access to political power. Throughout her life, Bethune pledged to improve political influence and the economic situation of African American women.

In 1924, Bethune took the helm of the National Association of Colored Women and was very active in supporting the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peo-

ple.<sup>4</sup> In 1935, Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women, an association which did not just report on the activities of the African American women but favored their participation in society. In addition, this association put in contact many African American professionals to address issues of unemployment and minimum wage.

Bethune's work at the National Council of Negro Women gave her the chance to meet Roosevelt's mother, Sara Roosevelt, and Eleanor Roosevelt, with whom she maintained a close friendship and which allowed her to attend the White House and gain access to the Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Lash, 1971: 523).

In the epistolary correspondence of Bethune, one may notice the close relationship that existed between her and Roosevelt, which led her to ask for support in policies to improve the situation of the African American community. For example, in a letter addressed to President Roosevelt, she asked for assistance to find supporters who could help her with the costs of the educational and cultural institution Bethune-Cookman College. She also mentioned that she had the support of Eleanor, who had already organized a small meeting in order to bring together people interested in supporting the cause. For her part, Eleanor Roosevelt used her power to support Bethune in the black minority-related issues, to which she had already shown her empathy and her commitment in the early stage of the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement.

Bethune worked hard in the Roosevelt administration and played a decisive role in the advancement of the rights of the American black community issues. The support of Eleanor Roosevelt was crucial for Franklin D. Roosevelt to appoint Bethune as Director of African American Affairs in the National Youth Administration in 1936 and as Advisor on Minority Affairs,

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4 A multi-racial and multi-religious group of social and political activists founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People on February 12, 1909. 'Its mission is to ensure the political, educational, social and, economic equality of rights for all, and to eliminate radical hatred and racial discrimination'. <<http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-history>> Accessed: June 20, 2013.

a position that she held until 1944 (Cook, 1999: 159–61). These positions gave her the opportunity to monitor and promote the use of African American youth and receive one of the highest wages in the civil service in comparison to other black people and to other government staff, becoming the first black person to receive the best salary from the government (McCluskey et al., 2001: 6). This was a great success; Bethune became the first African American woman to achieve a leadership position in a federal agency.

Bethune was also a prominent figure of the Black Cabinet, a cabinet formed by a group of African American advisors in the Federal Government that had the support of Eleanor Roosevelt. In reality, Bethune was the only African American woman who had a high position in the Cabinet; the leaders of the movement were part of the civil rights leaders, such as Charles H. Houston, Walter White, and A. Philip Randolph.

During the New Deal, the number of black workers tripled in the government, and Roosevelt began to suppress racial segregation in workplaces in different government agencies and hired African Americans so that they could play a role in the New Deal Government. Although the Black Cabinet did not manage to make the New Deal undertake a crusade for civil rights, it made the Federal Government become more aware of the needs of blacks.

Bethune's influence in promoting qualified African American women is illuminated in a writing of 1940 in which Bethune did not only offer her service to President Roosevelt but also asked him to use the services of qualified black women to carry out tasks of 'leadership, administrative and routine', for the type of service needed in a program of national defense (McCluskey et al., 2001: 173–4).

According to sociologist Belinda Robnett, Bethune worked tirelessly so that African Americans had the same type of facilities that whites did, although they were separated. Her efforts were often in vain, because the unemployment rate was so high during the Great Depression that it made Roosevelt slow his civil rights commitment (Robnett, 1997: 47).



In addition, the advances were uneven, especially in the South, as reflected in Mary Bethune's speech 'What does American Democracy Mean to Me?', delivered on November 23, 1939, in which she referred to the inequality of opportunities for blacks, with an emphasis on education, the impossibility to exercise the right to vote, and the lack of civil liberties. This is reflected in the following lines:

The democratic doors of equal opportunity have not been opened wide to Negroes. In the Deep South, Negro youth is offered only one-fifteenth of the educational opportunity of the average American child. The great masses of Negro workers are depressed and unprotected in the lowest levels of agriculture and domestic service, while the black workers in industry are barred from certain unions and generally assigned to the more laborious and poorly paid work. Their housing and living conditions are sordid and unhealthy. They live too often in terror of the lynch mob; are deprived too often of the Constitutional right of suffrage; and are humiliated too often by the denial of civil liberties. We do not believe that justice and common decency will allow these conditions to continue. (Bethune, 1939)

*Maria Luz Arroyo  
Vázquez  
Universidad Nacional  
de Educación  
a Distancia  
Spain*

As it is clear from Bethune's words, at the end of the 1930s, the lack of equal opportunities was prevalent throughout the country, although it was more visible in the South.

In the Great Depression, one needs to highlight another relevant African American woman, Dorothy Height (1912–2010), who carried out very important social work in a very difficult period.

In 1935, the black population suffered the most unemployment in New York City. They were not allowed to work in government jobs, so a revolt began in Harlem. As a result, a biracial committee recommended hiring black professionals in the central office of the Home Relief Bureau. Height was appointed supervisor and, over time, she and her white fellows contributed to the increase of the number of black workers in the district offices. She believed that without a deliberate effort to position and promote workers of colour, little or no progress would occur (Height, 2003: 55–56).

In a few years, Height had a full agenda. In 1937, by the time she resigned from her post in Welfare Administration, she was president of the New York State Christian Youth Council and the Harlem Youth Council, and she represented the United

Christian Youth Movement in the American Youth Congress (Height, 2003: 59). Height also worked at the Harlem Youth Council, where she addressed all kinds of discrimination and, with Juanita Jackson of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, fought against lynching, organizing the United Youth Committee Against Lynching (61).

Height criticized the lack of work and decent wages affecting the African American minority. Referring to the situation that existed in New York in the autumn of 1936, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Congressman from 1945 to 1971, had conducted a survey that revealed that, of the 5,000 people who worked at 125th Street, only 93 were black, and they performed manual labor. As a result of this clear discrepancy, Adam Clayton called for action. The campaign slogan was 'don't buy where you can't work' (Height, 2003: 69). One may only imagine the frustration of Height when she referred to new program and agencies of the New Deal such as the National Recovery Administration. Height stated that people of color were still finding the least desired jobs and receiving lower wages (70).

In 1937 Height met Mary McLeod Bethune, who would be her great mentor. She went to the meeting of National Council of Negro Women with Eleanor Roosevelt, and Bethune invited her to be part of the organization which sought to improve the situation of black women in employment, wages, and education.

Dorothy Height also complained about the discrimination faced by black women who worked in the armed forces because, although they were qualified, they could only aspire to a position as secretaries, and white women were almost always elected to top positions (Height, 2003: 99).

Another woman who deserves to be remembered as reaching one of the most important posts of the American political sphere in Roosevelt's administration is Frances Perkins (1880-1965). When President Roosevelt appointed Perkins for the post of Secretary of Labor, she became the first female member of a US federal cabinet and held this position for twelve years, from 1933 until the end of 1945. Perkins was one of the most socially committed women in Roosevelt's administration and actively promoted social and labor legislation.

Previously, Perkins had a wide range of work experience. After graduating in social economy, she worked as executive secretary in the New York Consumers League and industrial factories of the State Investigating Commission, formed by the Senator Robert F. Wagner. In 1911, Perkins was a witness to an event that had a profound influence on her—the terrible fire that took place in the building of a factory, in the Triangle Shirtwaist Workers Building, where 150 workers lost their lives, among whom almost all were girls and young women. Perkins decided to investigate the working conditions that existed in the factories to prevent episodes as tragic as the one she witnessed.

Regarding her political career, Perkins worked for seven years in the government of Al Smith and sixteen years with Roosevelt. In 1919, Smith named her member of the Industrial Commission of the State of New York. In 1921, she became executive secretary of the Council on Immigrant Education (Council on Education of the Immigrants) and, in 1922, she was elected commissioner of the New York State Industrial Board.

At the same time that Roosevelt was Governor of New York, specifically on January 14, 1929, Perkins was again named New York State Industrial Commissioner. Roosevelt had promised to support various programs, and Frances Perkins accepted the position of commissioner, becoming the first female member of Cabinet in the State of New York (Colman, 1993: 26, 48, 50). With Al Smith, that post had a judicial character, while with Roosevelt it had a more executive nature (Perkins, 1946: 48).

When Roosevelt agreed to run for the Presidency, he thought of Perkins for the post of Secretary of Labor. She had the great support of Eleanor Roosevelt and Molly Dewson. This appointment took place on February 28, 1933, and was a precedent that caught people's attention, since the rest of the Cabinet was formed by nine men.

William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, did not support the election of Frances Perkins, and the business world was clearly against it (Schindler, 1987: 343). However, Roosevelt pressed Frances Perkins to accept the position, not only because he was aware of her worth, but also because the American President believed that election would be popu-

*Maria Luz Arroyo  
Vázquez  
Universidad Nacional  
de Educación  
a Distancia  
Spain*

lar among women (Ware, 1981: 46–47). Perkins' election had a considerable impact on American public opinion and the rest of the world, since it took place at a time when few women played an important role in the political sphere. Her commitment was reflected in the New Deal social legislation, since she worked on fundamental laws that sought to improve the conditions of workers, such as the Social Security Act (1935), which represented a cornerstone in Roosevelt's first presidential term (Perkins, 1946: 302) and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), which set a minimum wage limit and maximum working hours and included the payment of overtime.

Perkins was a fighter who was determined to face new challenges. Penny Colman, the author of a biography of Frances Perkins, describes her as a woman without fear who was determined to put an end to the crisis (Colman, 1993: 2, 67).

The Spanish press applauded the appointment of US Secretary of Labor in 1933. In Spain, in the 1930s, reading the press was the most common means of getting information. The Spanish press played a very important role as a cultural institution. There were numerous factions in the Spanish press (the liberal left wing press, the conservative press, the socialist press, the communist press, and the anarchist press) that tended to defend ideas of parties that held similar ideological stances to those of their own.

The arrival of the Second Spanish Republic took place on April 14, 1931. This democratic political régime was welcomed with joy by a large part of the Spanish people and with rejection by some monarchical and right-wing groups. We can distinguish three main periods in the evolution of the governments in the Second Spanish Republic: the provisional government and Azañist Biennium (from April 14, 1931, to September 1933); the Rectifying Biennium (from November 19 to December 29, 1935); and the Popular Front (from February 16, 1936). On July 18, 1936, the Spanish Civil War started, sadly ending a period of immense democratic aspirations.

The great majority of the Spanish press during the Second Republic attentively observed the development of the democratic program adopted in the United States, reflected upon it, and related America's democratic experience to Spain. It is

remarkable to see the way in which the Spanish press reacted to the American model and referred to reforms and proposals that were taking place in the United States.

In the context of the Azañist Biennium, which was a reformist period, the appointment of a woman to a post in a government cabinet in the American sphere was a big sensation in Spain, where some papers only had a picture of her and not the rest of the Ministers of State appointed by Roosevelt.<sup>5</sup>

This drew attention to the fact that a woman had been chosen to play this role<sup>6</sup> and highlighted her efficacy and her great work in the Government of New York State, where she showed signs of her 'organizing zeal, her skill as director of an important office and the soundness of her recommendations in the field of social security and other reforms by the style'.<sup>7</sup> Others described Frances Perkins as a 'woman of great mentality and long political experience'.<sup>8</sup>

There are allusions to the work of Frances Perkins in playing a key role in mediating the labor disputes, as shown in the Spanish newspaper *Heraldo de Madrid*.<sup>9</sup> In addition, an image of Frances Perkins as a Secretary concerned with improving the level of the American worker is given.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, sometimes, references found on the Secretary of Labor tend to be misleading for the Spanish reader, because, above all, it is said in the headlines: 'Ministro de Trabajo'; probably, if the reader does not read the text of the news,

5 'El futuro gabinete norteamericano—El presidente, míster Roosevelt, ha ultimado la lista de su Gobierno', *El Sol*. Madrid, February 26, 1933, front page.

6 'Ministra de trabajo: señorita Perkins', *ABC*. Madrid, X 1-3-1933: 36; 'La mujer en la administración Roosevelt', *La Vanguardia*. Barcelona, February 10, 1933, p. 24; 'La nueva Secretaria yanqui del Trabajo', *El Socialista*. Madrid, May 2, 1933: 3.

7 'El presidente Roosevelt, míster Roosevelt, ha ultimado la lista de su Gobierno', *El Sol*. Madrid, February 26, 1933, front page.

8 'El licenciamiento de Moley—El *Trust* de los cerebros y las potencias capitalistas', *El Liberal*. Madrid, September 1, 1933: 7.

9 'La secretaria de estado de trabajo y la huelga textil en Norteamérica', *Heraldo de Madrid*. September 4, 1934: 3.

10 'De la capacidad de compra del obrero—La crisis económica y el plan de reconstrucción nacional de los Estados Unidos—Lo que afirma aquel ministro del trabajo', *La Voz*. Madrid, September 29, 1933, front page.

he or she can infer that the person who plays this role in United States is a male,<sup>11</sup> as in Spain during the Second Republic, very few women reached a key political position.

As far as information in the Spanish press is concerned about other major appointments of women, apart from Frances Perkins, not much is known of the appointments of other women who had also reached relevant posts in Roosevelt's administration. When news appeared, it often alluded to the importance that it was a woman who was elected to such a post.<sup>12</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The advancement of women in the American public sphere was really remarkable during the Great Depression. Reference has been made to some of the women who actively participated in the political scene and the great commitment that these influential women expressed in helping other women to join public life has been emphasized. Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary Bethune, Dorothy Height, Molly Dewson, and Frances Perkins are part of that group of leading figures who have been a source of inspiration for many other women. In Spain, one may find some articles about a few of these women emphasizing the importance of the fact that American women could reach positions of great responsibility in the political and social fields. In this way, these women can be seen not only as extraordinary leaders, but even as possible models to be followed in other countries such as Spain.

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11 These words, noun and adjective, refer to a male. In Spanish nouns can be masculine and feminine.

12 See 'Mrs. Blair Barrister ha sido nombrada por el Presidente Roosevelt Tesorera de los Estados Unidos. Es la primera mujer que desempeña un cargo de esta importancia', *El Debate*. Madrid, August 18, 1933, p. 3; 'La señora Bryan Owen, ministro en Dinamarca (sic.embajadora) y el Sr. Mac-Curley, alcalde de Boston, embajador en Polonia', *El Sol*. Madrid, April 13, 1933, front page.

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Maria Luz Arroyo  
Vázquez  
Universidad Nacional  
de Educación  
a Distancia  
Spain

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