

1930s, America - Feminist Void?

The status of the Equal Rights Movement during the Great Depression

by Mickey Moran

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The 1920s have long been touted as an age of female enlightenment, as women set a course of equality and cracked the foundations of women's sphere. Portraits were drawn of stereotypical '20s femmes; crimson-lipped, bob-haired and befringed flappers peering down their ivory cigarette holders at restrictive Victorian mores; stalwart, placard-toting suffragettes proclaiming the need for female political activism; fresh-faced college coeds donning crisp shirtwaists to tap out office memos on shiny modern typewriters. American women contested traditional views of the female as moral guardian and domestic servant and challenged the nation to accept their egalitarian beliefs.

But after the initial surge of support for women's rights with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, feminist fervor diminished throughout the latter '20s and all but disappeared during the Depression. And with that reduced support for women's rights came a renewed promotion of the traditional belief that women belonged in the home -- not in the workplace. Although the Equal Rights Amendment, which was first introduced to Congress in December, 1923, continued to be bandied about in Congressional committees, opinion magazines rarely gave the issue a positive mention, and it seemed far removed from public concern.

The 1930s brought apple-sellers to city street corners and breadlines to urban charity houses. In a depressed economy, unemployment figures escalated and federal forces concentrated on bringing Americans back to work. Or, more accurately, bringing American men back to work. For society viewed working women as un-American money grubbers, stealing jobs from men who needed them to support their families.

Those who were concerned with feminist issues were further divided on how to concentrate their efforts. Many believed that garnering the right to vote was all the legislative support they needed, so they turned their attention to other concerns, such as the peace and welfare improvement movements. Some demanded protective work legislation, while others remained adamant in pushing for equal treatment in the job market. And still others were swayed by the not-so-subtle proddings of government forces to forget the issue of feminist rights until economic hardship had ended. Gone were the "new women" of the '20s: the '30s women floundered in a decade devoid of significant gains in the struggle for sexual equality.

The League of Women Voters exemplified the notion that the fight for women's rights ended with the passage of the 19th Amendment. In 1931, the league's president went so far as to claim that "nearly all discriminations have been removed." <1> But others noted that women failed to vote in a bloc, and that many failed to even consider women's issues

when casting their ballots. Therefore, many issues concerning women or issues promoted by women reformers simply failed from lack of support. <2> Ironically, the 1930s began with the tenth anniversary of woman's suffrage, but any attention to the matter revealed that in those ten years, women had had little effect on the political world. Josephine McGowan writes in the Commonweal:

The 19th Amendment has wrought no miracle in politics. It has neither brought about dire consequences foretold by the anti-suffragist nor yet produced the millennium of which the pioneers dreamed. <3>

McGowan noted that while women gained the right to vote, many were indifferent to their new privilege and remained uninformed on current issues. Politics was still considered a man's concern, and most women did not have the motivation to challenge this view. <4>

Lacking now the central issue of suffrage to rally around, many feminists turned from lobbying for women's rights to promote other reform efforts. Becoming locked into the "paradigm of morality" role, many women became staunch promoters of the peace movement. Others turned their attention to welfare issues, spurred by the same drive that encouraged prohibitionists of the past. While these efforts were laudable, this divergence had the effect of leading women away from the concept of equal rights into separate channels that would rival each other and diminish any chance of a unified woman's movement. <5>

Such disparity did not bode well for the Equal Rights Amendment. Discussion passed through Senate and House committees, until 1936, when the House Subcommittee favored the ERA for the first time and endorsed the amendment. <6> In 1938, the Senate judiciary Committee reported it onto the floor. During the 1940 presidential race, the ERA became an election issue for the first time when the Republican party offered its support to the cause. But opposition to the idea of equal rights far outweighed the meager support it received. <7>

Even among supporters, differing ideologies clashed. Senate hearings in 1931 revealed that the Women's Party supported the amendment as a protection from the current discrimination against women in salary, hiring and education. Listing approximately 1,000 discriminatory state laws -- including laws in 11 states which gave a husband control over his wife's wages the party argued against those who the ERA would weaken protective legislation. <8> Such legislation often restricted the number of hours a woman could work, or the type of labor she could perform, making her less competitive in the industrial workforce.

Indeed, the split of female opinion on this issue would be divisive, as clear cut" feminists refused protective legislation on the principle that it impeded equal rights for men and women, while other women - perhaps recalling the exploitation of women workers in 19th century sweatshops asked for special legislation to protect women from

unscrupulous employers. <9> Support for male and female differentiation strengthened during the '30s after a decade of decline.

Even those women who did manage to break into the political spectrum failed to unite women in a common struggle for equal rights. Caroline O'Day, elected to Congress in 1932, opposed the ERA because of its feared impact on protective legislation. As a social worker and member of the Consumer League, she believed women needed a governmental shield from labor evils. Hattie Caraway of Arkansas became the first woman senator popularly elected to her seat and won re-election in 1938, but though "she broke an important barrier . . . she accomplished little else." <10> President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, praised for seeking the advice of women in his administration, named Frances Perkins as the first woman cabinet member. But she herself asserted that married women ought not shirk their responsibilities to their families by seeking outside employment. <11> McGowan further commented:

In ten years, we have seen the political potentialities of women voters recognized by farseeing politicians who have rather grudgingly in many instances taken them into the councils of their parties, making them vice-chair of this or that local or state national committee; for the time has not yet arrived when men will voluntarily entrust to women the actual dispensation of party authority or patronage. <12>

Feminists who did manage to retain a sense of urgency in stirring enthusiasm and public support for equal rights had to face an antagonistic majority of their society, who felt that a woman put her talents to their best use in the domestic environs of her family. In the Atlantic, Albert Jay Nock pandered to feminine pride in agreeing that women could perform as well as their male counterparts and had demonstrated that fact for centuries. He then fell into the same tired truisms of emphasizing woman's sphere, implying that the female must stand firm in her role as moral model. He stated, "Women can civilize a society and men cannot." <13>

Nock's article remains an interesting mirror of the popular opinion of the day. He upheld the stereotyping of men as children, unburdened by the responsibility of civilization. He expressed the stereotypical view that women needed to concentrate on applying their civilizing skills and avoid centering on the "over-stressed," predominantly "male-oriented" instinct of workmanship. When women expended their energies demanding equal rights in the workplace, Nock argued, they allowed their more spiritual and artistic instincts to deteriorate. <14> He seemed to look upon women in the workforce as acceptable, though unnecessary, additions. "One may easily see how our society, if it had to, might get on without women lawyers, physicians, stockbrokers, aviators, preachers, telephone operators, hijackers, buyers, cooks, dressmakers, bus conductors, architects." <15> He went on to assert that society could not survive, however, without women serving as a civilizing force.

Nock, and the majority of the U.S. population, believed that women could civilize" not through roles as legislators, educators, administrators or preachers, but through the comforting domain of their immediate households. Only in molding their young ones and

prodding their husbands toward responsible action could women serve their natural purpose. He stated:

Our society cannot be civilized through women's attainment of the ends that feminism has hitherto set before them, laudable and excellent as those are. It can be civilized by giving an intelligent direction to the interest and purchasing power of women. <16>

His feminine ideal of woman as intelligent consumer, while insulting to the many who found themselves struggling to produce as well, was well received in 1931.

The key cause of this readiness to accept any excuse to remove women from their quest for equal rights stemmed from the increasing competition in the job market. Economic hardship forced many women into the working world, but the scarcity of jobs made men resent the added number of individuals struggling for positions. Throughout the 1930s, the sexist request that women refrain from entering the realm of the employed to solve the men's unemployment problem came from labor unions, state and federal governments, and employers alike. <17> Efforts were made to remove married women from the workforce. A 1932 American anti-nepotism law for government workers stated that only one spouse could work. While the law did not specifically state that the wife should be the one discharged, three out of every four who were dismissed under the law were female. <18>

Once again, prominent women only enforced these sexist tendencies. Mrs. Samuel Gompers proclaimed, "A home, no matter how small, is large enough to occupy [a wife's] mind and time." <19> She called women working outside the home "unnatural" and chided them (or taking jobs from men who needed them. The Women's Bureau asserted that wives who held outside jobs were destroying the integrity of their families. <20> Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins supported the concept of family wages. Mary Dewson, who organized the Women's Division of the Democratic Party in 1932, believed women possessed specific qualities best suited for the "sanctity and security" of the home. <21>

Protective legislation further carried out such female restriction. Under the guise of looking out for the needs of women, these laws counteracted every effort made toward equal economic rights for men and women. It was almost always assumed that women had different needs arising from their actual or indeed, and this was even more harmful, their potential role as mother, which made the search for equality not only irrelevant but possibly dangerous. <22>

Alma Lutz addressed this problem in her Atlantic article, indicating that the very laws which initially seemed to benefit women were actually menaces. In "protecting" women, they regulated their work and questioned their right to work. <23> She argued that women had proven themselves capable, competent workers, and should therefore enjoy legislation insuring equal pay for equal work, instead of laws that placed them in special classes.

What the Lutz article addressed -- and what few men and women were willing to admit -- was the discriminatory nature of protective legislation. In accepting special privileges, Lutz maintained, women were forced to accept lower wages to remain competitive with men. The alternative was unemployment. Men, who viewed the flood of women in the marketplace with alarm, were the greatest advocates of special legislation for women, hoping that it would curb the hiring of women. Lutz pointed out, however, that such laws would eventually hurt men as well, as they in turn would be forced to accept reduced pay to compete with the women who worked for less. <24> Because women were paid lower wages than men for the same work, employers tended to keep them when cutting down the payrolls. <25>

During the 1930s, the percentage of master's degrees and doctorates earned by women dropped significantly. While female university education increased substantially, those who attended college found the formerly high quality comprehensive education replaced by classes that emphasized training for women's roles in the household. <26> Women's magazines promoted the virtues of motherhood and homemaking, condemning those who became involved in areas outside women's sphere. <27> Without training or public support, the '30s working woman faced numerous obstacles in fighting for a suitable job.

The public failed to admit that women composed a large sector of the working class and could not be dismissed with the passage of a few laws. Most were not working for the thrill of a career, but to keep their families sheltered and fed. Lutz encouraged society to accept women in the workplace. <28> Men's wages in industrial sections frequently could not support a modern-sized family, and the increasing percentage of employed married women reflected that problem. <29> Lutz reiterated that many women were no longer supported by their husbands and needed to work to survive the Depression. <30> In some households, in fact, the wife left her husband in charge of caring for the home and children while she worked an outside job. <31>

But while the number of married women in the work force actually increased by 50 percent between 1930 and 1940 - despite the Depression - women found enormous obstacles blocking their entry into certain fields. Most women found work in factory and clerical jobs, as traditional barriers against women in professional fields loomed higher. <32> Instead of "glamorous" professions, 36 percent of working wives entered domestic and personal services, while another 20 percent were in apparel and canning factories. <33> Those who were in lower-level professions, such as elementary and high school teaching, found men displacing them for higher pay. In 1939, the median salary of a male teacher was \$1,953 a year, while female teachers received only \$1,394. <34>

So while large numbers of women worked during the Depression, their status actually decreased. The non-unionization of women was one cause. The American Federation of Labor was established for organized, skilled, craft workers, and most women still held unskilled factory jobs. In addition, most unions continued to view women as temporary workers. But most prevalent were sexist attitudes that blocked women from entering unions and allowing women workers to organize. Samuel Gompers claimed that the AFL

was not prejudiced, "it just wouldn't accept 'any nonassimilable race.'" <35> Lutz encouraged men to recognize the benefits of allowing women to join unions:

If . . . men will encourage women to organize, if together they will work for equal pay for equal work, for an adequate wage for both, they will be able to maintain a higher wage standard.. It is strange that the American Federation of Labor does not see this. <36>

But the AFL did not see a need to include women, and neither did the broad majority of the U.S. population. Suffragists failed to inspire a new generation of women to use the 19th Amendment as a springboard to gaining equal rights. Most seemed to ignore the advances made by the '20s modern women, as attention drifted to reviving the flagging economy. Instead of employment and benefits to male and female alike, women were shuttled back into the home, to be protected and sentimentalized over once again. Albert Jay Nock expressed the popular view:

Hence feminism can no longer get up an argument on the thesis that women can do anything that men can do. All interest in that contention has died out; everybody has stopped thinking in those terms, and our militant feminists are reduced to pushing minor issues, to smoothing out relatively petty inequalities of legal status, and the like. <37>

Interest in feminist thought had waned, and few gave proper attention to those "petty inequalities of legal status" that needed to be ironed out.

The '30s, then, proved to be a decade devoid of equal rights support. After the 1920s fervor of change, the struggle for egalitarian ideals faltered. Some were satisfied with the effects of the 19th Amendment, some turned their attention to other matters of social justice, some felt women could be better aided by protective legislation, but most still believed that women belonged at home. Without making a concentrated push for equal rights, women were forced to accept specialized roles in the domestic sphere or reduced status in the "man's world." Lulled by messages of women's sphere, the American women of the '30s returned to their homes or accepted their low-status jobs with the unsettling notion that they were abandoning their proper responsibilities. Progressive ideals of equality, fine for contemplation during economic boom times, failed to proliferate during a period of economic turmoil.

Notes

1 Barbara Sinclair Deckard, *The Women's Movement: Political, Socioeconomic, and Psychological Issues*. Third Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p.284.

2 Mary Frances Berry, *Why ERA Failed* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 56.

3 Josephine McGowan, "A Decade of Women's Rights," *Commonweal*, 11 February 1931, p. 403.

4 McGowan, p. 403.

5 Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), p. 157.

6 Joan Hoff-Wilson, *Rights of Passage: The Past and Future of the ERA* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 14.

7 Berry, p. 58.

8 Deckard, p. 187.

9 Alma Lutz, "Shall Woman's Work Be Regulated by Law?" *Atlantic*, September 1930, p. 321.

10 Banks, P. 161.

11 Deckard, P. 291.

12 McGowan, p. 402.

13 Albert Jay Nock, "A Word to Women," *Atlantic*, November 1931, p. 551.

14 Nock, p. 553.

15 Nock, p. 553.

16 Nock, p. 554.

17 Deckard, p. 293.

18 John A. Garraty, *The Great Depression* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 116.

19 Deckard, p. 293.

20 Deckard p. 293.

21 Banks, p. 160.

22 Banks, p. 159.

23 Lutz, p. 321.

24 Lutz, p. 322.

25 Garraty, p. 116.

26 Deckard, p. 259.

27 Berry, p. 58.

28 Lutz, p. 321.

29 Helen M. McCadden, "Women Who Work," *Commonweal*, 26 March 1930, p. 580.

30 Lutz, p. 323.

31 Garraty, p. 114.

32 Berry, p. 57.

33 Deckard, p. 293,

34 Deckard, p. 297.

35 Deckard, p. 294.

36 Lutz, p. 321.

37 Nock, p. 457.

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