

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT'S PURSUIT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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"I remember little of what my husband did in the legislative process except that he did come out for women's suffrage. I was shocked as I had never given the question serious thought, for I took it for granted that men were superior creatures and knew more about politics than women did, and while I realized that if my husband was a suffragist I probably must be too, I cannot claim to have been a feminist in those early days."¹ This quotation was Eleanor Roosevelt's evaluation of her position concerning women's suffrage in 1912. In the years to follow the same lady would discard most of the traditions and beliefs that had been instilled in her as a child, and become a leader of many causes, women's rights ranking high among them. Eleanor underwent great changes in her life and I feel the most marked one surfaced during World War I. In this paper I will attempt to explain Eleanor's change from apathy to active promotion in women's rights and will focus on what Eleanor wanted for women, and the areas which interested her most.

A brief biographic sketch will be helpful in understanding the motivations which made her shy, introverted, and insecure. Eleanor experienced a very unhappy childhood. Eleanor felt rejected from her mother for not being endowed with the beauty that was characteristic of the Hall women. To compensate for her mother's rejection Eleanor idolized her father, who very affectionately dubbed her "little Nell". Eleanor's mother died when she was eight, her father when she was ten, and Eleanor was sent to New York City to live with her maternal grandmother, Mrs. Hall. Grandmother Hall was determined that the grandchildren who were now under her care should have the discipline that her own children had lacked, and as Eleanor phrased it "we were brought up on the principle that 'no' was easier to say than 'yes'".²

From Grandmother Hall Eleanor received her first instructions in what a woman should be. Society was all important for Grandmother Hall, and for a woman to be successful she had to belong to Society. This was a very difficult task for Eleanor, because although she "belonged" to Society and knew its customs, she was never really a part of it; sadness and loneliness set her apart.³

Grandmother Hall was also convinced that the world she was brought up in was the world that was always going to exist.⁴ It was never suggested to Eleanor that there were any choices to be made in deciding her future. Therefore, it is understandable that when Franklin Delano Roosevelt asked his fifth cousin Eleanor to be his wife, she readily accepted.

Meanwhile, the year before Franklin and Eleanor were married

she had joined two organizations; The Junior League and The Consumers League, to devote her time to doing something more important than the usual social rounds.

There was no clubhouse for the Junior League, just a group of girls anxious to do something helpful in New York. When Eleanor joined she agreed to work with Jean Reid in taking classes of youngsters in the Rivington Street Settlement House. Jean played the piano while Eleanor entertained the children by teaching calisthenics and fancy dancing.⁵ Mrs. Maud Nathans was president of the Consumers League the year Eleanor joined in 1903. As a member of this group Eleanor inspected garment factories and department stores. She was very surprised to find the girls forced to stand all day and were not provided with any seats to rest upon. It may well have been Eleanor's early experience with the Consumers League that triggered her lifelong interest in the welfare of working women.⁶

Marriage may have been an outlet for Eleanor, a chance to finally express her individuality and toss aside the dated traditions Grandmother Hall had taught her, but it was not. Instead of her grandmother supervising all of Eleanor's actions she was now taken over by her mother-in-law, Sarah Delano Roosevelt. Sarah Roosevelt had tried to break up Franklin's engagement to Eleanor, and when that failed she decided to become part of their everyday life. She resented Eleanor for taking Franklin away from her and for many years Sarah made Franklin financially dependent upon her so that she could still retain control.

For the next ten years and more Eleanor was a dutiful wife, a docile daughter-in-law, and a constant mother bearing five children. She was forced to be content to live in houses her mother-in-law owned, built, or rented, in cities where Franklin's law practices or political activities took him; New York, Albany, and Washington. When Franklin became Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1913, Eleanor accepted what she called the slavery of the Washington Social System without question.⁷ Although she did not enjoy paying social calls on the wives of other public officials, Eleanor felt it was her duty so she obliged. But in 1917 with the advent of World War I, the world that Eleanor had been born into, ended. For Eleanor however, the end of her old world, a world in which she belonged but was never a part of, meant the beginning of a new world. In this new world Eleanor found that for the first time in her life she could belong. One can almost name the day of that realization. She had driven over to Saint Elizabeth's, the Federal Insane Asylum, where her husband's department, the Navy, had taken over a block of buildings for shell-shocked sailors and marines. What Eleanor saw as she drove through the grounds horrified her; "Poor demented creatures", she said, "with apparently very little attention being paid to them, gazing from behind bars and walking up and down on enclosed porches."⁸ Before the war she

would have kept her horror to herself, acquiescing to the world the way it was. Now she acted. Eleanor went to the Secretary of the Interior whose department was responsible for Saint Elizabeth's, and told him to inspect the hospital. Eleanor kept after him until he persuaded the Congress to increase the hospital's appropriations; got a charitable organization to contribute five hundred dollars for occupational therapy, and founded the Red Cross Canteens and the Navy Red Cross.

Franklin's affair with Lucy Mercer; her social secretary, beginning about 1916 may also have influenced Eleanor's decision to change her life style.¹⁰ Eleanor had been hurt, and as she began to grow in self confidence she may have decided to build a life without Franklin. She had devoted many years to pleasing Franklin; such a discovery may have encouraged Eleanor to get into activities and organizations away from him.

Eleanor's new involvements expanded in 1921 when Franklin contracted infantile paralysis; polio. On the advice of Franklin's close friend and political adviser, Louis Howe, Eleanor was urged to become more active in politics to keep Franklin's interest and political career alive. It was in this arena that her involvement in the promotion of women's rights came to the fore and will be the primary focus of this paper.

What Eleanor basically wanted for women was for them to realize that they could think for themselves and had many choices to make concerning their lives. Women were not limited to marriage and childbearing as Eleanor had believed when she was younger, although in no way did she oppose women who decided that this was what they wanted. Women could go into higher education and/or obtain a job. In other words, Eleanor wanted women to become aware of the choices open to them.

To make women aware of opportunities open to them, Eleanor worked in many women's organizations and through the government to secure rights for women legally, and to socially pursue their interests. One area of special concern to Eleanor was unions for working women and she became involved in the Women's Trade Union League in 1921, where she worked at fund raising campaigns, contributing part of her own earnings, and attending weekly meetings.

Politics was another area that interested Eleanor very much, and in 1920 she joined the League of Women Voters. Mrs. Frank Vanderlip was president of the League when Eleanor joined, and it was the League's responsibility to develop civic consciousness in women, to educate them to their new position, and to bridge the gap between legal rights and social-political reality.¹¹

The following year as Eleanor increased in independence and in her position, she was asked to preside at a luncheon to raise

funds for the Women's Division of the Democratic State Committee. She soon became chairman of the Division's Finance Committee and offered her services to the Women's Democratic News; the monthly paper of the Women's Divisions of the Democratic Committee in New York.

At the 1924 Democratic National Convention, Eleanor was asked to take charge of the Committee which would present to the Resolutions Committee planks of interest to women. Unfortunately, Eleanor wound up spending the whole night waiting outside the meeting room of the Platform Committee because, as a woman, Eleanor was not permitted to enter and present the planks that women requested.

In 1926 the Women's Division of the New York Democratic Committee was dissolved and incorporated into the General Committee. In a celebration speech Eleanor warned the audience that this was a victory in principle only, and pointed out that women continued to have a secondary role in politics. She believed that the acceptance of qualified women on a par with men was still in the remote future. She charged that women were not given representation on local committees and stressed that the only time professional politicians took them into consideration was when counting votes at elections.¹²

Eleanor addressed the Democratic Junior League in 1927 and continued to criticize party leaders for their complacency and discrimination against women. She stressed the value of "sustained organization" and year round political activity. Eleanor was convinced that this would help educate citizens toward their responsibility, maintain their interest, and prove that politics was not just a "passing interest" among women.

Such vigorous and stimulating speechmaking such as Eleanor's gradually and continually made many women aware of their new position in politics which the nineteenth amendment granted them. She encouraged women to become active in politics and hoped that as women saw new fields open to them politically, they would work to make more areas open to them within society.

Eleanor continued to work for women's rights in politics, and in 1933 she served as chairman of the National Women's Committee of the Mobilization and wrote the guidebook in 1934. The Mobilization was officially entitled the Mobilization For Human Needs and was based on rational consolidation of Community Chests for a bridge between temporary government aid and local welfare agencies. With the help of Newton D. Baker, Dave Adams, and Ida Tarbell, Eleanor turned the Mobilization into a crusade. In 1934 she counted two hundred and fifty five communities in forty states in which local selfare organizations conducted active campaigns. She emphasized the Mobilization's relief effort as well as it's lasting contribution in acquainting people with the problems and needs in their

own communities. Emergency work would revitalize local services and would leave a sounder base for community welfare, even after the Depression was over. For this purpose Eleanor organized a National Women's Committee that was designed to cooperate with Community Chests in preparing their campaigns. Setting a personal example in her active interest in her own community, Eleanor participated in several meetings of the Town of Hyde Park Association.¹³

During the Depression Eleanor worked very hard for the "forgotten women"; those unfortunate women who roamed the streets and parks and slept in the subways at night. Because many of the New Deal programs only aided men, Eleanor fought for programs for women, and through her efforts she encouraged women to believe they were first class citizens and did not have to settle for second class treatment. Eleanor tried to secure employment for these women through the Federal Emergency Relief Association.

As her crusade continued she began earning money through teaching, writing, and radio work. In 1933 much of Eleanor's money was spent establishing two places where women who were unemployed and looking for work could have lunch and a place to rest. One was the Women's Trade Union Clubhouse, and the other was in the Girls Service League Headquarters on Madison Avenue. There, girls were given a hot lunch and snacks, and were also provided with facilities for sewing and mending.¹⁴

The next area Eleanor decided to work in was securing equality in Unemployment Relief Funds for women. After Harry Hopkins, a militant social worker whom Franklin selected to lead the State's Program of Unemployment Relief promised Eleanor equality for women on relief, Eleanor called the White House Conference on Emergency Needs for Women. The purpose of this conference was to define women's problems and needs, and suggestions for constructive employment were offered. The delegates to this conference represented various ranges of experience and areas of activity in social work, education, and governmental service.¹⁵ Eleanor fought for the state administrators to be required to employ a minimal number of women, and even though this suggestion was not immediately followed first attempts were made. As Eleanor was not easily dissuaded she continued her fight by issuing a call to each state to arrange meetings for representatives from national and state agencies to discuss immediately the steps for the employment of women. Subsequently, the states called conferences, and by December 17, 1933 about one hundred thousand women were among the 2,610,451 workers under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Civil Works Administration.¹⁶ In addition Harry Hopkins planned the employment of an additional three hundred thousand women, and Mrs. Woodward, who was in charge of the women's projects in both the CWA and FERA, reported at a press conference that thirty five states had appointed women directors to head work programs for women. At Eleanor's request Hopkins issued recommendations to also include women

wherever possible in the Re-employment Program.

The next project was a White House Conference on resident school for unemployed women. Representatives from Government and organizations in charge of women's works outlined their plans. Between two and five thousand women were to spend the summer in forty resident schools and educational camps planned as joint Federal and State projects. The first twenty eight camps were established in the summer of 1934, and under the direction of Hilda Smith, eight hundred women, ranging in age from twenty five to forty five, passed through them the first year. By May, 1936 a total of six thousand four hundred women from thirty five states had benefitted from the eighty camps established.¹⁷ These camps came close to Eleanor's idea of combining relief with education. The girls admitted were required to prove they had no source of income. Each girl earned fifty cents a week in addition to maintenance, medical care, and travel expenses. The girls spent their mornings working in the installations servicing the camps, and at various handicrafts. The major part of the day was devoted to education. The curriculum included workers education vocational guidance, training in home economics, and health education. In addition the girls were also engaged in various other recreational projects.¹⁸

World War II expanded Eleanor's vistas. She felt that women should pitch in and help fight the war, if not on the battlefields than in factories to increase war production. The Mobilization For Civilian Efforts was just as important as the Military effort and she urged citizens to join. She advised men and women to register and be organized according to their skills. They could continue in their regular jobs until they were needed; registration would serve only for direction and information to give communities an idea of available manpower in case they were called upon. Eleanor also requested that arrangements be made to secure the rights of 2,300,000 women employed in war industries. She urged that labor-management committees be set up to hear women's grievance and wanted arrangements to be made to enable women to fulfill their family responsibilities while working in factories. She suggested that day nurseries be located near residential areas so that women would not have to travel with young children before and after work.¹⁹ Evening shopping services were also suggested for working mothers.

During the later part of Eleanor's life she remained active, and continued to fight for women's rights. She was involved in the Nuclear Commission of Human Rights; a subcommittee of the Economic and Social Council. In 1946 she became a permanent member of the Commission on Human Rights (serving as chairman until 1948) and her work with the United Nations was extensive. In 1962 Eleanor was appointed to the United States delegation to the United Nations, serving on the advisory committee of the Peace Corps and became

chairman of the President's Commission on the Status of Women.

Ironically Eleanor Roosevelt was against the Equal Rights Amendment - her main concern was for protective legislation for women in industry. She feared that the Equal Rights Amendment would provide business interests with an excuse to press for the repeal of special protective legislation for women. Eleanor also believed that a separate clause in the constitution would imply that women were not included under "people" and a special article "would imply a silent recognition of the idea that women are to be regarded on a different level and that rights are to be given to them out of charity."²⁰

Eleanor Roosevelt was a remarkable person and an ardent fighter for women's rights. Because she was approaching middle age when she became an active public figure, her record for involvement in activities and, especially, in furthering Women's Rights is impressive indeed. To women of all ages Eleanor offered a sense of purpose. She clearly demonstrated the potentialities of the emancipated woman and the varieties of contributions she could make without necessarily being a professional or denying her traditional role.

Looking from a different perspective however, one can almost say that because Eleanor was in the limelight so often and so long her own family suffered. The Roosevelt children, Elliot and Anna especially, criticized their mother extensively, and I feel that it would be correct to evaluate Eleanor as winning the war for the pursuit of public causes but losing her battle at home. In the words of Representative Neil Staebler of Michigan, she made us all aware of what a woman thinks and what a woman does are important to herself, her family, and to the whole community. In the rest of the world, especially in those areas where women are still treated as chattels, she became a symbol of hope for women who are reaching out for recognition as human beings."

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Footnotes

¹The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt, Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York, 1958. p. 68.

²Ibid. p. 612.

³Archibald MacLeish, The Eleanor Roosevelt Story, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1965. p. 10.

⁴Ibid. p. 12.

⁵The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt, Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York, 1958. p. 40.

- ⁶Tamara K. Harevan, Eleanor Roosevelt: An American Conscience, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1968. p. 15.
- ⁷Archibald MacLeish, The Eleanor Roosevelt Story, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1965. p. 26.
- ⁸Ibid. p. 29.
- ⁹Ibid. p. 30.
- ¹⁰Joseph Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, Norton, 1971. p. 306.
- ¹¹Tamara K. Harevan, Eleanor Roosevelt: An American Conscience, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1968. p. 29.
- ¹²Ibid. p. 30.
- ¹³Ibid. p. 55.
- ¹⁴The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt, Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York, 1958. p. 136.
- ¹⁵Tamara K. Harevan, Eleanor Roosevelt: An American Conscience, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1968. p. 64.
- ¹⁶Ibid. p. 64.
- ¹⁷Ibid. p. 66.
- ¹⁸Ibid. p. 67.
- ¹⁹Ibid. p. 173.
- ²⁰Ibid. p. 234.