**Eleanor Roosevelt and the National and World Woman's Parties**

**by Paula F. Pfeffer**

Although militant feminists have long criticized Eleanor Roosevelt for her opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, her views regarding equality of men and women were far more complex than partisans in those old arguments would have us believe. In the same letter in which she outlined strategies to "fight the amendment," for example, Roosevelt also argued that women "should, in all but certain very specific cases which are justified by their physical and functional differences, have the same rights as men [[1](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footone)]." While she opposed treating women as a special group with its rights specifically guaranteed, as First Lady, Roosevelt held press conferences exclusively for women reporters to help ensure their jobs during the Depression. Certainly, Roosevelt herself was a model of capable woman exercising decision-making power in the public sphere. How, then, can the long-standing, bitter animosity between Roosevelt and militant feminist members of the National and World Woman's Parties (NWP and WWP), who supported legally mandated equal rights, be explained? The answer lies both in the differences in their fundamental approaches and the personal antipathy that precluded both sides from working together for the benefit of all women. The NWP and WWP advocated an abstract legal equality for women, while Roosevelt operated on the principle of pragmatic but paternalistic protection.

As political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain has pointed out, Roosevelt was a Victorian "lady," and while she was restricted by upper-class notions of propriety, her Victorian concepts of duty and service paradoxically became her means of liberation. Although she advocated a domestic role for the average woman, stating that "...the greatest number of women, must subordinate themselves to the life of the family [[2](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22foottwo)]." Roosevelt also believed it was appropriate for women of her social standing to have careers outside the home, and she used her social status as an entrance to public service and politics. While she argued publicly that calling special attention to gender hurt women politically, privately Roosevelt continued to favor women's patronage networks. Perhaps because of this dichotomous view of a woman's role, Roosevelt never aspired to lead the movement to gain equal rights for American women. Instead, she helped make contacts with influential people and gain positions for women she either knew personally or who were recommended by intimates; women who, like herself, made social welfare reform their first priority. Roosevelt and other reformers worked hard for protective legislation for women in industry. Ironically, the patronage politics they promoted proved more beneficial to upper-middle-class women reformers, who had the credentials to take advantage of the newly opened opportunities, than to the working masses. Rather than true equality across the class chasm, Roosevelt and her cohorts maintained a condescending attitude toward their working-class sisters. While reluctant to pass laws protecting male workers, between the 1890s and the early 1920s the state legislatures and courts alike gave the green light to safety regulations for working women, reasoning that as the future mothers of the nation, they needed special protection. Upper-middle-class reformers and their organizations, including the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and the National Consumer's League (NCL), fought long and hard to pass a variety of laws designed to protect working-class women by prohibiting them from working at night, in certain unsafe occupations or conditions, or beyond a specific number of hours. They achieved such "materialist" legislation as Mothers' Pension laws, the creation of the children's and Women's Bureaus in the Department of Labor, and the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act that provided federal grants-in-aid to states for pre- and post-natal care for mothers and infants [[3](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footthree)].

Roosevelt's ideals were shaped by these Progressive-era reforms. Although she was not an active suffragist, Roosevelt became involved in politics in the 1920s as a result of her husband's illness. Her initial participation came through legislative work with the League of Women Voters (LVW) in New York. Later she worked with the New York State Democratic committee. At the same time, she continued her humanitarian reform work with Rose Schneiderman and Mary Anderson in the WTUL, and Frances Perkins in the NCL, women who later benefited from her patronage as First Lady. These organizations sought to improve the quality of life for all citizens in a variety of ways. By improving society as a while, their reforms ultimately would benefit women as well. Until suffrage was attained in 1920, women reformers were not wed to any particular political party but instead supported the political candidate they considered most likely to back their causes. Once enfranchised, however, women found they needed to work through political parties to achieve their goals [[4](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footfour)]. For Roosevelt, the Democratic Party became the means not only of desired social reforms but of political patronage for women as well.

The leaders of the NWP, on the other hand, sought more direct decision-making power for women. After passage of the 19th Amendment, Alice Paul, head of the NWP, used the Party to press for full and equal rights, reasoning that without legal equality with men, women could not realize social equality. While other women's organizations worked in other areas, Paul argued, "no organization concentrated on raising the position of women as women [[5](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footfive)]." NWP members believed that adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution would end, with one stroke, legal distinctions between men and women in matters pertaining to marriage and divorce, employment, and the possession of property. The NWP rejected any coalition with other groups, and pursued the adoption of the ERA with single-minded, almost religious zeal.

Because of its narrow focus, the NWP remained a small minority group composed largely of highly educated middle-class professional women in the post-suffrage era. As egalitarian feminists, NWP members objected to the protective legislation for women in industry advocated by humanitarian reformers because, they believed, it was based on the supposed biological inferiority of women. Laws that provided for minimum wage, maximum hours, and elimination of night work for women were see as restricting women's opportunities by NWP members, who were willing to give up protection in order to compete with men on as equal basis. In contrast, humanitarian reform groups saw protective laws for women as the first steps extended to all workers, male and female. In the conservative political climate following World War I, often characterized as the nadir of the labor movement, reformers found themselves fighting to maintain gains already made for women in industry with little likelihood of extending them to include men [[6](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footsix)].

Social reformers in the LWV, the NCL, and the WTUL thus became violently opposed to the NWP because they feared the ERA would invalidate the gender-based protective legislation for which they had fought so hard. Their hostility extended to the publicity-seeking tactics employed by NWP feminists as well; "ladies" did not picket international conventions the way NWP members did to promote their cause. Personal antipathies became so pronounced that social reformers came to perceive the equal rights feminists as their arch enemies. The quarrel soon degenerated into name-calling, with the NWP insisting it alone embodies the tenets of feminism and derisively labeling women working on behalf of other causes "humanitarians," to them a derogatory term implying weakness on women's issues [[7](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footseven)]. The reformers, on the other hand, accused the militants of exhibiting outrageous, "unladylike" behavior. Once the stigma became firmly attached, the NWP leadership had little reason to curb the radical methods they had honed in the suffrage struggle. From the period following the First World War until after the Second World War, the American women's movement was rent asunder by these ideological and personal clashes. The antagonism between Eleanor Roosevelt and the NWP can be understood only in the context of the background. By the early 1930s, the entire world was suffering from the effects of depression. In the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to power in 1933 on the strength of his pledge to end the Depression and aid the common people. Roosevelt's victory brought together two women closely associated with the drive for protective legislation for women workers, Eleanor Roosevelt and the first female cabinet member, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, with whom the First Lady had worked in the NCL. When she accompanied her husband to the White House in 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt was already a personality in her own right. In addition to her work with reform organizations and the Women' Division of the Democratic party, Roosevelt had managed the Democratic National Committee headquarters for the Al Smith campaign in 1928. She had also taught at the Todhunter School, lectured extensively and published articles in national magazines. Although she gave up teaching after assuming her duties as First Lady, Roosevelt expanded her other activities to include holding weekly press conferences for women reporters, constant traveling to act as her crippled husband's eyes and ears, writing a daily newspaper column entitled "My Day," lecturing, and publishing several books. In her autobiography, Roosevelt confessed, "My own work had to go on regardless of anything else [[8](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footeight)]."…

…If Roosevelt's only concern had been to safeguard working women, she most likely would have withdrawn her opposition to the ERA, as did other organizations less personally involved in the conflict such as the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the Business and Professional Women's Clubs. Roosevelt, however, maintained her anti-ERA position and sent what was to become her standard public statement on the issue to the Convention: “...until women are unionized to a far greater extent than they are at present, an equal rights amendment will work great hardship on the industrial group, which is after all, the largest group of wage-earning women [[34](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footthirtyfour)]. Roosevelt's efforts were rewarded; the Democratic platform favored “equality of opportunity for men and women, without impairing the social legislation which promotes true equality by safeguarding the health, safety, and economic welfare of women workers [[35](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footthirtyfive)]."

With the United States' entry into the Second World War, women's groups temporarily set aside their bickering. Women were employed in unprecedented numbers during the war; because of the need for their labor, industrial conditions were nearly equalized, and even the unions began to look favorably upon women as members. Since unionization was the condition she had set for her support of the ERA, Roosevelt might have been expected to change her position on the Amendment, but she continued to oppose it [[36](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footthirtysix)]."…

…After their victory in the Charter, feminists pressed for the creation of a special committee on the status of women to ensure that the equality principles would actually be implemented. This proposal aroused the humanitarian reformers, including Roosevelt, who was expected to become the chair of the Human Rights Commission. She maintained that women's rights could not be considered apart from human rights. Objecting to the treatment of women as a distinct group, Roosevelt argued that 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.” [[43](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footfortythree)] Despite her disapproval, the U.N. Economic and Social Council created a Sub-commission on the Status of Women, under the jurisdiction of the Human Rights commission, at the First Assembly in London in early 1946. When the Sub-commission issued its report calling for equality regardless of sex, Emma Guffey Miller, one of the few activists who belonged to both the NWP and the Women's Division of the Democratic Party, congratulated Roosevelt on the step forward for women. Clearly displeased about the growing feminist influence in the U.N., Roosevelt responded that if Miller studied the report carefully she would see that it recognized the need for protection of women [[44](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footfortyfour)]…

Both humanitarian reformers and feminists were bound by shared backgrounds and their attitudes toward the working classes; it was behavior that separated them. Although Roosevelt accused the NWP of being composed of “a very limited, high type group of women,” both groups came from the upper and upper-middle classes and had difficulty accepting true equality across the class divide. Both groups consequently acted in a paternalistic fashion toward working women even as they claimed to speak for their interests. Perkins, for example, accused the NWP of taking “this doctrinaire position which makes more difficult the passage and maintenance of legislation aimed to improve the condition of their working sisters... [[52](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footfiftytwo)]" Although both humanitarians and feminists claimed to represent equality for women, neither faction believed in equality that transcended social class.

The primary difference between the groups lay in their conception of power. Because their political position was based on their Democratic ties, Roosevelt and Perkins thought as Democrats and social reformers first and women second, and refused to exercise their authority on behalf of women as a class. Instead, they used their personal influence to secure leadership positions for women of their choice [[55](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footfiftyfive)]. While their patronage benefited capable, elite women, such tactics made it difficult for the humanitarians to institutionalize their innovations. Consequently, at the end of decades of struggle, despite temporary victories the reformers had accomplished little permanence. The FLSA obviated much of the need for protective legislation, and even the women's Division of the Democratic Party lost its autonomy in 1953. Eleanor Roosevelt believed the primary contribution of women in politics had been to make the government take cognizance of humanitarian issues, and certainly the New Deal accomplished many of the reformers' goals. But reliance on humanitarian platform without formal political organization meant that when interest in social reform waned, as it did during the Second World War and subsequent Cold War, the fortunes of women in government and public life also ebbed [[56](http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22footfiftysix)]. A reactivated women's movement in the 1960s, like its NWP predecessor, again sought lasting change through legislated equality of opportunity for women.