



HIS 477 - WOMEN IN AMERICA

**The Great Depression and Life in the
1930s**

Lecture 8

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- The years between the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 and the end of World War II in 1945 were trying ones.
- When the stock market crashed in October and November 1929, the crash brought an end to fads, fashions, American prosperity and some individual lives.
- For women of color, the depression hit fast and hard. In 1929, nearly 40 percent of black women and girls were in the workforce, almost two-thirds in domestic service and agriculture.
- By 1931, more than one quarter of these black wage-earning women had lost their jobs.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- As the depression worsened, over half of black women lost their jobs, while three out of ten white women did.
- Many domestics service jobs, once reserved for black women, were taken by unemployed white women.
- Aid and welfare programs designed to aid males often excluded black women workers.
- Rural black women migrated to urban areas in search of employment and urban black women had to resort to so-called “slave markets” to get day labor for as little as ten cents an hour.
- By 1933, the year Roosevelt was inaugurated as President of the United States, over 25 percent of American workers were unemployed.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- People still believed that women worked for “pin-money” rather than to support themselves or their families.
- Some feared role reversal where men got marginal jobs while women worked and provided for the family’s primary support.
- Public hostility resulted in laws effectively barring married female workers from certain jobs.
- Under the Economy Act of 1933 two members of the same family could no longer hold positions in federal government service.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- State and local governments also refused to employ married women.
- In 1931, three out of four school boards prohibited the hiring of married female teachers.
- Despite such opposition, the number of wage-earning married women increased during the 1930s. In 1930s, 11.7 percent of married women held jobs; by 1940, 15.3 percent did so.
- As job opportunities tighten, men expressed interest in entering fields, such as teaching, where women were in the majority.
- At the beginning of the 1930s men accounted for 19 percent of all teachers, by the end of the decade they were 24.3 percent of teachers.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Women lost ground in medicine, law, science, and university teaching.
- In nursing, social work, and librarianship, the trend toward feminization halted.
- The proportion of women in the nation's college enrollment dropped from 43.7 percent in 1930 to 40.2 percent by 1940.
- After Roosevelt assumed the presidency, his “New Deal” created new agencies such as
 - National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA)
 - Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA)
 - Works Progress Administration (WPA)
 - Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Twelve percent of women benefited from the funds distributed by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA)
- Before its termination in March 1934, the Civil Work Administration (CWA) hired approximately 300,000 women in light industrial and clerical positions.
- In 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired women in research, health and nutrition, clerical and library positions. Some 400,000 benefited from WPA programs.
- The NIRA established maximum hours and minimum wage guidelines for men and women. This legislation was declared unconstitutional in 1935. It was replaced by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- The program aimed directly at women was the Social Security Act of 1935 which included the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program.
- Women of color fared less well with the New Deal programs. WPA hired women of color but in far smaller numbers than white women.



THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Besides beneficial legislation, President Roosevelt helped women challenge gender expectations in three additional ways:
 - His favorable attitude toward women in public service
 - Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor
 - Ellen Sullivan Woodward, Women and Professional projects for the WPA
 - Josephine Roche, Assistant Secretary of Treasury
 - Nellie Tayloe Ross, Director of the Mint
 - Marion Glass Banister, Assistant Treasurer of the U.S.
 - Lucille Foster McMillin, Civil Service Commissioner
 - Ruth Bryan Owen, Minister to Denmark, 1933-1936
 - Florence Jaffray Harriman, Ambassador to Norway, 1937-1941

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Francis Perkins was a social reformer and the first female cabinet member in the nation's history. As Secretary of Labor, she helped draft legislation for the Federal Emergency Relief Act, Social Security Act, and the National Labor Relations Act.



"Famous People Selected Portraits From the
Collections of the Library of Congress,"
"PERKINS, FRANCES. Photograph. Ca. 1932.
Location: Biographical File,"
<http://www.loc.gov/r/print/235_pop.html>



THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Ellen S. Woodward, director of women's work under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. In 1935, she became the director of Women's and Professional Projects for the WPA. Woodward was viewed as Roosevelt's most important non-cabinet female appointment.



THE GREAT DEPRESSION



- Josephine Roche was born into a wealthy family from Neligh, Nebraska. As a Progressive Era woman, Roche sought to remedy the ills of industrialization by aiding the welfare of women, children and immigrants who labored in harsh working environments. Educated at Vassar and at Columbia University, Roche received a master's degree in social work.



THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Nellie Tayloe Ross served as the first female governor of the state of Wyoming. She was nominated by the Democratic Party to complete the term of her late husband, William. She served from January 1925 to 1927. She lost her bid for reelection and was called to serve the Roosevelt administration as Director of the Mint.



THE GREAT DEPRESSION



- **RUTH BRYAN OWEN**, first Democratic woman from Deep South and Florida elected to Congress (1928-32). Daughter of perennial Democratic presidential aspirant William Jennings Bryan. Roosevelt named her minister to Denmark in mid-'30s, first woman to represent U.S. overseas.



THE GREAT DEPRESSION



- Mary McLeod Bethune played a critical role between 1935 and 1943 as director of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration. She was a member of Roosevelt's so-called "Black cabinet"-advisers who assisted in implementing black programs in New Deal projects.
- The New Deal --
 - Expanded government services and initiated a wide variety of social welfare programs that needed trained social workers to administer them
 - Introducing his wife Eleanor to the Washington scene



THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Eleanor Roosevelt was born in 1884 to a wealthy New York couple who died before she was ten years old. Raised by her maternal grandmother, she lived a lonely life. She committed her life to social reform at age 18 when she joined the National Consumers' League. She married a distant cousin, Franklin, in 1905.



THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Eleanor Roosevelt was a conservative feminist who had not believed in suffrage at the time of her marriage.
- She initiated press conferences for women only as First Lady and many of the reporters became her closest friends, particularly Lorena Hickok who scholars believe was Eleanor's long-term companion and lover.
- Eleanor Roosevelt supported the appointment of hundreds of women to official positions.
- She helped organize the White House Conference on the Emergency Needs of Women.
- She also emerged as an outstanding advocate for African Americans during the New Deal –
 - Championed the cause of the NAACP; esp. legislation defining lynching as a federal crime
 - Argued for the inclusion of black men and women in the WPA and CCC

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- During the 1930s, a new labor union was formed. Led by John L. Lewis, in November 1935, the Committee for Industrial Organization, a splinter group of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) formed to organize workers without regard to gender, race, or skills.
- In 1938, the group changed its name to Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) and focused on all workers in a particular industry, such as automobiles, steel, and textiles, in which 40 percent of the workers were women.
- Increasingly union women, as well as wives and daughters of male union workers participated in strikes as marchers, picketers, and providers of support services.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Women's efforts were especially important in the Flint, MI Auto Workers' Strike between December 1936 and February 1937 – a 'sit-down' strike.
- Women protested and supported the men but also formed a Women's Emergency Brigade to act as a buffer between the male strikers and the police.
- During a 'Women's Day' protest, a woman announced over the loudspeaker "We don't want any violence; we don't want any trouble . . . But we are going to protect our husbands."
- The Flint Auto Workers' Strike succeeded in getting General Motors to recognize unions and agree to negotiate with their representatives.
- For women, it meant the coming of age as labor activists.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- The Pecan-shellers' Strike of 1938 in San Antonio marked another turning point for women.
- The United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America, a CIO-chartered union, had begun organizing these women.
- Employers and police used tear gas and beatings to halt the strike, and arrested hundreds of picketers.
- Some of the plants hired other workers and other plants closed, but women recognized the power of unity.
- By 1938, an estimated 800,000 women, a 300 percent increase, had joined unions. Yet women remained underrepresented because the idea that women belonged in the home continued to carry weight among male union leaders.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

- Few unions existed for white rural women laborers in the South and West, or for American Indian women workers.
- Black women were another group which unions largely overlooked. In 1930, 90 percent of black women workers performed domestic or farm labor, areas of employment seldom covered by labor organizations.
- Black women developed cohesion among themselves. In 1934, Dora Jones helped organize household workers in New York into the Domestic Workers' Union.
- In 1937, the National Negro Congress sponsored a Domestic Workers' Association in New York.

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- In 1930, journalist Paul W. White reported that women spent two billion dollars a year on cosmetics.
- In their pursuit of femininity, White said, women consumed 52,500 tons of cleansing cream, 6,562 tons of bath powder, and 2,375 tons of rouge each year.
- Fashion advertisements emphasized long, flowing skirts, defined bustlines, tiny waistlines, and a modernized version of the corset.
- The 1930 Sear Roebuck catalogue explained that “the new mode calls for a definitely higher indented waistline, long tapering hips, and the molded bust.”

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- Movie stars and the characters they created set and reinforced these trends.
- Jean Harlow, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis and Greta Garbo became models of steamy sensuality.
- Mae West carried the style to new heights. She was not only sexy but loved in a “masculine” way by not committing herself to one man or to the idea of marriage.



Jean Harlow



Marlene Dietrich



Bette Davis



Greta Garbo



Mae West



Ethel Waters



Hattie McDaniel

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- Relationships between women and men continued to alter. The traditional customs of a man “calling” upon a woman in her family home for the purpose of courting virtually disappeared.
- Continuing the pattern that emerged during the 1920s, men invited women to accompany them to public places such as amusement parks and bowling alleys with the understanding that men would pay the cost of entertainment.
- Hundreds of articles and books appeared spelling out the new etiquette of dating.
- The prevailing ideal was that an individual should “date” as many people as possible, both to demonstrate his/her popularity and to search out the perfect mate.
- No one discussed the changing power relationship between men and women.

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- In the day of the formal “call,” women had controlled courting by inviting men to their homes and exposing them to their families assessment.
- Now, men invited women to share their company away from family homes, out of sight of family members, and in situations funded by men.
- Women, who felt they could do what they pleased or indebted to their suitors, increasingly participated in premarital sexual activity.
- Many expected to marry but many ended up pregnant and unwed instead.
- The Florence Crittenton Home for Unwed Mothers established additional branches all over the United States.

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- Crittenton homes offered pregnant women vocational training so they could find employment as domestics and in other jobs.
- The Crittenton policy allowed the mother and child to remain together.
- Given such changes in society, educators and social scientists came to believe that Americans required practical training in courtship, marriage, and family life.
- Since they believed that parents could no longer cope, educators and social scientists decided that young people needed to be brought under the guidance of experts.

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- During the 1930s, colleges and universities, as well as some high schools, introduced “marriage and family” courses.
- Unfortunately, teachers tailored their ideas to the needs of white middle and upper class students and researchers interviewed white middle class subjects.
- Therefore the information dispensed and societal norms established reinforced gender differences traditional to the white middle class and of little use to the majority of Americans.
- For the majority of the American population economic times dictated family lifestyles.
- The slogan “Use it up, wear it out, make it do or go without” became words to live by.
- Women put aside their pride, sought welfare for their families, and took whatever jobs they could find to help keep themselves and their families afloat.

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- Under the tight economic times, divorce was an expensive luxury for most dissatisfied couples. The divorce rate fell approximately 43 percent between 1929 and 1933. The desertion rates, however, increased.
- At the same time, the marriage and birth rates fell as well. By the mid-1930s, the birthrate dropped below the replacement level for the first time in the nation's history.
- The climate of the depression era promoted economic and political reforms.
- Women reformers turned away from social evils to more immediate concerns – food, clothing, and shelter

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- As early as November 1930, the Young Women's Christian Association reordered its priorities and began to offer food, shelter, clothing, medical care, job skills classes, and an employment service.
- The YWCA routinely assisted single women who were denied relief and tried to help homeless women who lived in city streets or on the road as hobos.
- Despite the trend toward economic rather than social reform, black women refused to abandon their anti-lynching campaign.
- White southern women also exerted efforts to stop lynching. In 1930, Texas reformer Jessie Daniel Ames founded the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching.

LIFE DURING THE 1930S

- Ames's group issued a public statement disclaiming any connection with lynchings: "Women dare no longer allow themselves to be the cloak behind which those bent upon personal revenge and savagery commit acts of violence and lawlessness."

