

Women and the Great Depression

by Susan Ware



An Oklahoma migrant family in California, 1935, by Dorothea Lange. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

In 1933 Eleanor Roosevelt's *It's Up to the Women* exhorted American women to help pull the country through its current economic crisis, the gravest it had ever faced: "The women know that life must go on and that the needs of life must be met and it is their courage and determination which, time and again, have pulled us through worse crises than the present one." While women as a group could not end the Depression (mobilization for World War II deserves that credit), the country could never have survived the crisis without women's contributions.

"We didn't go hungry, but we lived lean." That expression sums up the experiences of many American families during the 1930s: they avoided stark deprivation but still struggled to get by. The typical woman in the 1930s had a husband who was still employed, although he had probably taken a pay cut to keep his job; if the man lost his job, the family often had enough resources to survive without going on relief or losing all its possessions. Still, Eleanor Roosevelt noted, "Practically every woman, whether she is rich or poor, is facing today a reduction of income." In 1935–1936 the median family income was \$1160, which translated into \$20–25 a week to cover all their expenses, including food, shelter, clothing, and perhaps an occasional treat like going to the movies. Women "made do" by substituting their own labor for something that previously had been bought with cash or by practicing petty economies like buying day-old bread or warming several dishes in the oven to save gas. Living so close to the edge, women prayed that no catastrophic accident or illness would swamp their tight budgets. "We had no choice," remembered one housewife. "We just did what had to be done one day at a time."

In many ways men and women experienced the Depression differently. Men were socialized to think of themselves as breadwinners; when they lost their jobs or saw their incomes reduced, they felt like failures because they couldn't take care of their families. Women, on the other hand, saw their roles in the household enhanced as they juggled to make ends meet. Sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd noticed this trend in a study of Muncie, Indiana, published in 1937: "The men, cut adrift from their usual routine, lost much of their sense of time and dawdled helplessly and dully about the streets; while in the

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homes the women's world remained largely intact and the round of cooking, housecleaning, and mending became if anything more absorbing." To put it another way, no housewife lost her job in the Depression.

Those traditional gender roles assumed that all women were members of families with a male breadwinner at its head, but that description did not always match reality. Women who were widowed or divorced, or whose husbands had deserted them, struggled to keep their families afloat; single women had to fend for themselves. These women were truly on the margins, practically invisible. The iconic image of the Depression is "The Forgotten Man": the newly poor, downwardly mobile, unemployed worker, often standing in a breadline or selling apples on a street corner. Women who found themselves in similar dire straits rarely turned up in public spaces like breadlines or street corners; instead they often tried to cope quietly on their own. "I've lived in cities for many months broke, without help, too timid to get in breadlines," remembered the writer Meridel LeSueur. "I've known many women to live like this until they simply faint on the street from privations, without saying a word to anyone. A woman will shut herself up in a room until it is taken away from her, and eat a cracker a day and be as quiet as a mouse."

Women who sought relief or paid employment risked public scorn or worse for supposedly taking jobs and money away from more deserving men. When Norman Cousins realized that the number of gainfully employed women in 1939 roughly equaled the national unemployment total, he offered this flippant remedy: "Simply fire the women, who shouldn't be working anyway, and hire the men. Presto! No unemployment. No relief rolls. No depression." Yet this attempt to make women scapegoats for the Depression rested on shaky grounds. Many women had no choice but to work, providing the sole source of support for themselves or their families. Plus, given the segmentation of the workforce by gender, it was not so simple—or even desired—for men to move into women's jobs, as a sociologist realized: "Few of the people who opposed married women's employment seem to realize that a coal miner or steel worker cannot very well fill the jobs of nursemaids, cleaning women, or the factory and clerical jobs now filled by women." Since traditionally male fields like heavy industry and manufacturing were the hardest hit by the Depression, while clerical and sales fields populated by women were somewhat less affected, this division of labor gave women workers a slight edge. Unfortunately it came with a price: reinforcing traditional stereotypes of what constituted women's work. Still, even the terrible economic crisis could not derail the overarching twentieth-century trend of women increasingly working for pay outside the home. According to census figures, the percentage of employed women fourteen and older actually rose during the Depression from 24.3 percent in 1930 to 25.4 percent in 1940, a gain of two million jobs. Even more dramatically, the number of married women working doubled during the decade.

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When talking about women as a group, it is always important to ask “which women?” when generalizations are offered. Women experienced the Depression differently based on their age, marital status, geographical location, race and ethnicity, and a host of other factors. For example, the 1930s urban housewife had access to electricity and running water, while her rural equivalent usually struggled with the burdens of domesticity without such modern conveniences. (Only one in ten farm families in 1935 had electricity.) Farm families also struggled with declining agricultural prices, foreclosures, and in the Midwest, a terrible drought that contributed to the Dust Bowl migrations of that decade.

African Americans, long subject to discrimination and prejudice, often viewed the Depression differently from whites. Times had always been hard, and suddenly they just got a lot harder. The novelist and poet Maya Angelou, who grew up in Stamps, Arkansas, recalled, “The country had been in the throes of the Depression for two years before the Negroes in Stamps knew it. I think that everyone thought the Depression, like everything else, was for the white folks.” In 1930 nine out of ten African American women worked in agriculture or domestic service, both areas hard hit by the depression. Housewives who previously hired servants began to do their own housework; sometimes white women competed for jobs previously abandoned as too undesirable to black women. In the South and West, Mexican American women on the bottom rung of the economic ladder faced similar conditions, but with an added dimension: the threat of deportation back to Mexico because of fears about competition for jobs and relief. In the depths of the Depression, perhaps one-third of the Mexican American population returned to Mexico, straining family ties and causing extreme financial hardship.

Herbert Hoover’s initial response to the onset of the Depression in 1929 had been to turn to business, private charity, and state and local welfare councils to address the problem, but those resources quickly proved inadequate. When Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, his New Deal forged new ground in expanding the presence of the federal government in the economy and making concrete connections between federal programs and the lives of everyday citizens.

And yet women struggled to be treated as equal citizens when trying to qualify for these new federal programs. One-quarter of National Recovery Administration codes set lower minimum wages for women than men performing the same jobs, and New Deal agencies like the Civil Works Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps gave jobs almost exclusively to men. Not considered suitable for heavy construction jobs, women on relief were shunted into sewing rooms; black and Mexican American women faced racial discrimination as well. The Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Acts did not initially cover major areas of women’s employment such as agricultural work or domestic service. Furthermore, social security benefits were structured around a traditional model

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of a male breadwinner and dependent female housewife, which disadvantaged women who didn't fit that profile and implied that women deserved economic rights only in relation to men. The Wagner Act of 1935 fueled a dramatic growth in organized labor, and woman workers participated in major CIO strikes and union organizing drives, but few women held leadership positions.

The needs of women might have been forgotten entirely were it not for the efforts of an informal network of woman administrators who held important positions in the New Deal. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first woman in the Cabinet, oversaw many of the social welfare initiatives and Ellen Sullivan Woodward supervised women's relief projects for the Works Progress Administration, while Molly Dewson promoted an issue-oriented reform agenda from her position at the Democratic National Committee. Their effectiveness was dramatically enhanced by access to Eleanor Roosevelt, who used her position as First Lady to advance the causes of women, blacks, and other marginalized groups. Besides serving as a symbol of public-spirited womanhood in a time of national crisis, Eleanor Roosevelt served as the conscience of the New Deal.

According to writer Caroline Bird, the Depression left "an invisible scar" on those who lived through it, including the nation's women. Forced to take on even more important roles in their homes and families, women played often unrecognized roles in helping the country through the Great Depression. Hard times worked to reinforce traditional gender roles, not subvert them. Ironically, women's Depression-era contributions and strong identification with home and family may have helped lay the foundation for the so-called feminine mystique of the 1950s.

*From 1997 to 2005 **Susan Ware** served as editor of volume five of the biographical dictionary *Notable American Women at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study*, Harvard University. Her research interests include twentieth-century American history and the history of American women, as well as biography. She has published books on women in the New Deal and the 1930s; biographies of Molly Dewson, Amelia Earhart, and Mary Margaret McBride; and a women's history anthology.*