

## WOMEN'S NETWORK BEHIND FRANCES PERKINS'S APPOINTMENT

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores and analyses a particular group of middle-class social reformers who, sharing a mutual kinship directed towards social welfare during the Progressive era, achieved political prominence during the *New Deal* period, developing powerful networks as a means of transcending and defying the limited domestic sphere, and acquiring a larger voice in the public arena, a male-dominated realm for years. Looking back to the first women's groups from the antebellum period to demonstrate the origin of the first political organization and the outset of a new concept about female friendship, this article maintains the hypothesis that Frances Perkins's unprecedented appointment as the first female Secretary of Labor in 1933 was due to a two-fold reason: the response Florence Kelley aroused in her and the women's web tactics, having Mary Dewson at the center, to deconstruct the politics of the time empowering her in an androcentric world.

### **RESUMEN**

El presente artículo explora un grupo minoritario de mujeres reformistas de clase media, las cuales, unidas por una afinidad mutua basada en el bienestar social durante la época Progresista, lograron alcanzar prominencia política durante el período denominado *New Deal*, desarrollando redes poderosas de mujeres como medio para poder adquirir mayor protagonismo en la esfera pública, para poder así trascender y desafiar la esfera limitada de domesticidad. Remontándose a los primeros grupos de mujeres que se formaron en el período anterior a la Guerra Civil americana para así demostrar cómo, a través de los primeros intentos de organización política, floreció también un nuevo concepto de amistad femenina, este artículo mantiene la hipótesis de que el nombramiento sin precedentes de Frances Perkins como la primera mujer Secretaria de Trabajo en 1933 fue debido a dos razones: la respuesta que la activista Florence Kelley despertó en Perkins y las

diferentes tácticas que las mujeres, dentro de la red, emplearon, orquestadas principalmente por Mary Dewson, para deconstruir la política de la época, empoderándola en un mundo androcéntrico.

## INTRODUCTION

Female friendship has always existed. However, its social and political power has been undervalued and depoliticized. Studying its evolution shows how female friendship was also based on strong patriarchal prescriptions which led to sex-role divisions. In the late eighteenth century society tended to identify women with qualities of the heart and placed them in an inferior position to the superiority of their male counterparts. “A woman’s heart was valued over her mind, the mind being associated with the masculine” (Cruea 189). Through this sex-role distinction men would never respond to women’s feelings, as they were considered superior to these superfluities and, consequently, females would have to seek “truly reciprocal interpersonal relationships only with other women” (Cott 168). During the nineteenth century, due to social and economic transformations, female friendship began to acquire a new sense. Women were empowered by religion: appealing to their moral superiority, they were endowed with a civic mission which freed them from the private sphere of the home, thus taking a more active role in the community and gradually acquiring a voice in public life. Their activism in society aroused a new sense of religious sisterhood, uniting them. Soon, religious commitment and affections would be substituted by secular ties, assuming a new value and, consequently, changing their relations into what is known today as a natural human interaction among equals, “a polity of peers” (Cott 187).<sup>1</sup> This turning point in the significance female friendship went through is also crucial to understand the beginning of group consciousness and gender identification by which women learned to confide in their peers’ views, seeking their companionship and maintaining affective bonds, discovering that among their own sex and in the of security sisterhood they could advance and free themselves from their proclaimed and assumed inferiority.

The evolution and metamorphosis of the meaning of female friendship entailed another important consequence: women’s first attempts to organize as a leading group in their pursuit to achieve social benefits for others. The roots of these first political associations date back to the ante-bellum period, as a response to institutionalized slavery. From that social purpose it reinforced women’s ability and self-sufficiency to work as a unit, setting a precedent on which women during the

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Cott in her book *The Bonds of Womanhood* points out the alteration the term “friend” underwent in usage. In the eighteenth century, friends were considered as “kin”, while later on it was released from familial ties to elective relationships.

Progressive Era could mirror themselves. The establishment of the settlement houses was one of the main illustrations of the empowerment and political advancement women achieved. Nevertheless, the significance of these female colonies in the advancement of women in the public sphere has not received due notice throughout women's history.

This notwithstanding, the present study intends to go further, transcending the merely personal angle female friendship can acquire and focusing more on its political power. The term "gyn-affection" will offer a new perspective to it on the strength these affective ties may have. Taking Janice Raymond's philosophical perspective on "gyn-affection", i.e. female friendship, not just as an attachment or fondness among women, but rather as the "state of influencing, acting upon, moving and impressing" (8), this new vision on female ties may serve to comprehend why a minority and special group of middle-class women gained political prominence during such critical years as the Depression period. To these economic and political circumstances should be added the sociological pressure of a still-solid patriarchal system, and the vestiges still reverberating from the nineteenth-century woman ideal indoctrinated by the "Cult of True Womanhood." Thus, defying and conquering the public terrain became an arduous and tiresome fight for this small cohort of women who broke with precedent by substituting the sanctuary of the house for their usefulness in the "ordinary world of human affairs" (Raymond 231).

This paper aims to study and show how, behind Frances Perkins's groundbreaking appointment, there was a powerful and influential network of women who, through different maneuvers, laid the ground to placing her in a prominent government position as the first woman Secretary of Labor. Two figures are essential to fully comprehend the relevance of such an accomplishment: Mary Dewson, who propelled Perkins's designation, and Florence Kelley, the seminal force who –using Raymond's words– "stimulated and moved" not just Perkins but a whole generation of women reformers to take social action. Shedding some light on this eminent figure results inevitably in a cascade effect, for Kelley's political achievements were also the result of the support from another female pioneering community, originating during the Progressive era and incarnated in the figure of Jane Addams.

## **PATRIARCHY STRICTURES**

In her book *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet refers to politics as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another." She expands this definition further by saying that "it is a set of stratagems designed to maintain a system" (23), thus connecting politics with the perennial existence of the patriarchal system. Patriarchy, a "historic creation" (Lerner 212), the "institutionalized system of male dominance over women in

society” (Lerner 239), has contributed to and advanced men’s control over all the institutions of the public spectrum, discriminating and relegating women to the domestic sphere of the house. Thus, this tyrannical system has constricted and veiled women’s basic rights, subordinating them under the false umbrella of security and protection obtained from this paternalistic dominance<sup>2</sup>.

For nearly four thousand years women have shaped their lives and acted under the fallacy of patriarchy (Lerner 217). The indoctrination and demagogic arguments concerning the inferiority of their sex have enslaved them in a childlike state, blurring their vision and denying them the most powerful means to attain leadership: education. By not giving them access to this source of power, men ensured a secure means of silencing their voice and participation in any other domain than the private sphere of the house, thus reinforcing male hegemony for millennia. Depriving woman from education and withdrawing her from reality led to a complete “dissociation” from the wider world, contributing to “an apathy toward political, intellectual and financial existence” (Raymond 154).

This deliberate system to cast out women to the private domain of the home reached its height during the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, this was the period when a domestic philosophy based on the principles set by the “Cult of True Womanhood” became the authoritative creed around which middle-class white women based their lives, a fabricated myth which turned women into “hostages in the home” (Welter 151) and barred them from the public domain for decades.

The “Cult of True Womanhood”<sup>3</sup> flourished and spread through different means of popular culture as the authoritarian ideology to deceive women with the false idea that the home was the safest refuge for them, in contradistinction with the competitive and restless world which was emerging as a consequence of social and political changes at the time. This new philosophy equaled a new ideal of womanhood which again helped to undermine male hegemony and the preservation of the patriarchal family ideal, its chief institution, in an unprecedented way. A new canon of domesticity sprang out, applying a concise division between the private and public spheres, which meant confining women into the realm of the house, as it was the sacred place away from the hectic and restless world. Marriage, the ultimate goal of a true woman, and the main restraint to subjugate her, implied the confinement from the working world and her implicit “civil death” (Millet 67), with the subsequent economic dependence upon her husband. Women assumed their imposed gendered role as the vital guardians of the household as a moral and social vocation, which would lead them to self-realization and happiness, for they were

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<sup>2</sup> Gerda Lerner in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* includes paternalism or paternalistic dominance as a “subset of patriarchal relations.”

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Welter explained in her essay “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” the four cardinal virtues a true woman had to be in possession of: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, considering domesticity the most valued virtue.

empowered through the false belief that by inhabiting the “shady green lanes of domestic life” (Cott 67) they were in total control of this terrain, while their husbands, the “actor, the mover, the doer” (Welter 159) had to enter the corrupted and rough world.

The idealization of the home was thus perceived as a place of security and salvation from the world of work. Business and politics were depicted by many female authors of domestic literature as “arenas of selfishness, exertion, embarrassment and degradation of the soul” (Cott 67). These authors even advised other women to carry an antidote against the world’s poisonous air, and the most effective remedy a true and delicate lady should seek had to be the voluntary withdrawal from the wicked world. It seemed highly unfeasible for women under these unfavorable circumstances to find a loophole and struggle against this oppression but, ironically enough, it was through the religious and moral empowerment American civil society conferred them that they found a platform to advocate for the community’s welfare.

## **FIRST WOMEN’S NETWORKS**

The Abolition Movement is considered the beginning of political action and group-consciousness among ante-bellum women, the first timid attempt to challenge civil society, vindicating the end of the institution of slavery. The Philadelphia Female Anti-slavery Society remains as an illustration of these first voluntary associations and it allowed women to have “their first opportunity for political action and organization” (Millet 80). Their public responsibility justified their public intervention, and liberated women gradually from the private spectrum of the household. Gender consciousness was aroused and women relied on women’s networks for the first time, creating bonds of sisterhood which ultimately served for their winning the franchise in the 1920s.

Within this group of women, there was a particular person connected to Florence Kelley’s ancestry who deserves mentioning as she highly influenced Kelley’s path in life, providing that empowering with the emotional and political effect Janice Raymond refers to. This person was her aunt Sara Pugh, her grandfather’s sister and a pivotal reference in her life. She was a model from whom young Kelley learnt the power gained among the sisterhood established by women to achieve political participation. The significance of taking action in public life intermixed with personal friendship was an early value that made Kelley appreciate women’s private sphere as a secure retreat from men’s world. She witnessed many times the strength and reliance both shared by Sara Pugh and her friend Lucretia Mott through small gestures of affection and support between them. Examples of such affection were shown when Pugh regularly accompanied her friend Lucretia Mott to speak before women’s rights conventions, or when she visited her friend

every Sunday, knitting on the front porch in protest against “the prevailing rigid Sabbatarianism of their neighbors” (Kelley 54). Sara Pugh embodied the stirring force and social conscience<sup>4</sup> that would make Florence Kelley commit the rest of her life to social work.

Another decisive turning point in Kelley’s life would be the moving into one of the most innovative social projects ran by an all-female community, a settlement house modeled on Toynbee Hall in East London. Jane Addams, an activist leader, founded Hull House<sup>5</sup> settlement in a deprived area in Chicago with the help of her friend Ellen Gates Starr with one sole ethical purpose: “to bridge the gap between the government and the poor” (Gabrielle 405). This house was formed by a community of women who shared a very unusual aspect which distanced them from the regular traditional values they had been brought up on: all of them had decided not to marry, breaking with precedent and turning their spinsterhood into an independent entity, in which they did not need a “protector” to take care of them (Weller 159). Breaking with the social norm of marriage and motherhood was very significant at a time in which this institution nurtured and justified the patriarchal society in which they were born. Definitely by defying this norm they were “destabilizing both their class and their gender identity” (Kish 187). Another important aspect about these settlement associations was their gradual participation and moving into the public life, working on established gender stereotypes. Settlement women used those stereotypes as their main argument to enter the public realm, so in this way they could exercise their moral authority to alleviate the emerging industrial ills.

When Kelley moved to this settlement, she underwent a personal and political transformation for, in the company of these pioneering coworkers, she learnt to construct a happy and steady life. Within the group she joined, she felt “closely drawn first of all to Jane Addams and second to Julia Lathrop” (Goldmark 29).<sup>6</sup> During the seven years Kelley lived at Hull house, she maintained a loyal and lifelong friendship with Jane Addams for she was a woman who unselfishly helped her at a personal and political level. Indeed, during her early years at the house, Jane paid for Kelley’s board and room and helped her find a secure place for her three children out of the reach of her ex-husband Lazare Wischnewetzky as he was trying

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that her Great-Aunt Sara Pugh rebelled against the social situation of her times by not using sugar or not wearing cotton because these products were obtained from bondage left a mark on Kelley, arousing in her a lifelong moral conscience and setting the basis to understand her influential post as general Secretary of the National Consumers’ League, which aimed to educate consumers in their responsibility to purchase goods applying fair trade.

<sup>5</sup> For further information, see the book written by James Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* in which the deplorable conditions of this deprived urban area, the Nineteenth Ward, were uncovered. This house served also as a substantial training ground for later leading women reformers, such as Frances Perkins.

<sup>6</sup> Josephine Goldmark wrote Mrs. Kelley’s life story in 1950, *Impatient Crusader*. She was Kelley’s co-worker in the National Consumers’ League and a close friend.

to gain custody of them.<sup>7</sup> At a political level, Hull House's social environment gave Kelley the opportunity to do formal research into the slums of Chicago area, uncovering the dreadful conditions of the tenement housings, in which underage children and women were forced to work as a means to survive. Her reports and investigations on the sweatshop system were published under the name of *Hull House Maps and Papers*. The publication stirred public interest, inducing the Illinois State Legislature to take action by appointing a joint committee of the House and Senate to conduct immediate investigations and recommending the first factory law for Illinois. Here was proposed, for the first time in the United States, an eight-hour law, the prohibition of work for children under fourteen years of age, the control of sweatshop work and the creation of an Illinois State Factory Inspection Department. Many residents at Hull House championed a campaign for the passing of this bill led by Florence Kelley and backed by her friend Jane Addams, who every Sunday invited a "large and enthusiastic Eight-Hour Club of working women to read the literature on the subject" (Addams 185-188). Finally, the revolutionary bill was passed and Kelley was appointed chief inspector by Governor Altgeld, thus becoming the first woman chief inspector of factories in Illinois,<sup>8</sup> an unprecedented appointment which was considered very radical at the time, when women did not usually enter the public life of politics.

Florence kept this official position for three years and her achievements and investigations to end with sweatshop work were crucial in the history of American social reform. Nevertheless, and despite Kelley's efforts to report on flagrant and regular abuses in industry, the factory law was evaded and she, as an inspector, did not have enough legal power to enforce it. There were too many vested interests involved in the business of employing minors. Not only were factories making big profits from children's cheap labor, but sweatshop work in tenement houses was a very important source of this type of cheap labor. The system was flourishing as an extension of another cruel way of enslaving families. Thus, regardless of the amount of evidence presented by Kelley about the illegality of this evil business and the need to eradicate it as a way to end with child labor, the act was finally ruled unconstitutional. Kelley's achievements as chief inspector of Illinois in trying to enforce the child labor law and homework provisions made her earn respect and local reputation.

While still living at Hull House, one of the regular visitors, John Graham Brooks, proposed Kelley to run an organization named National Consumers' League

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<sup>7</sup> In 1891, Florence Kelley left her husband Lazare Wischnewetzky after being hit once again and "spat in her face" (Kish 168). She took her three children with her and moved from New York to Chicago, where she obtained her divorce, re-taking her maiden name. Upon arriving at Hull House, her main concern was to find a secure shelter for her children.

<sup>8</sup> Florence Kelley was appointed to this post because Henry Demarest Lloyd refused it and, in turn, recommended her. Kelley felt an utter admiration for him and his wife, for they took care of her three children, sheltering them in their house while she was working at Hull House.

(NCL) in New York. In 1899, Kelley was appointed general secretary of this voluntary organization and she would commit herself to it until her death in 1932. The NCL's main philosophy was to raise the consuming public's awareness on the goods they usually bought. In order to show the consuming public the poor, unhealthy conditions under which some products were made, they investigated many factories and published studies based on facts and data which stirred the public to take action through their purchasing power, thus functioning, in a way, as the moral conscience of the time.<sup>9</sup>

To spread the Consumers League movement Mrs. Kelley regularly visited colleges to educate young generations. On one of those visits, in 1901, Kelley came to Mount Holyoke College to give a lecture on the League's social program, seeking to mobilize middle-class support, and it was at that moment she caused an impact on a particular woman, Fanny Perkins,<sup>10</sup> arousing in her a social and humanitarian conscience that would "determine the direction of her life" (Martin 75). Perkins described years later, at a memorial meeting in honor of Florence Kelley, the impact and influence Mrs. Kelley had not just on herself but on a whole generation of women, as these words illustrate:

And that influence which she had over a whole generation was of extreme significance. She took a whole group of young people, formless in their aspirations and molded their aspirations for social justice into some definite purpose, into a program that had meaning and that had experience and that had practicality back of it. (18)

This decisive moment would be crucial in Perkins's life after graduation from college. Kelley's charismatic personality galvanized her or, paraphrasing Janice Raymond's words "brought about a change in living" (8), for that day meant an inspirational moment, an epiphany in her life which moved her to a lifelong commitment to social work. Meeting her meant discovering "the perfect mentor, friend, and guide (Downey 13). In 1910, when Perkins was thirty years old, she was offered a job as secretary of the NCL, having the opportunity to work closely with the person who had inspired and stimulated her a decade earlier. At this new post, under the guidance of her mentor, Florence Kelley, she not only gained experience and training but she established a strong friendship that would last for thirty years.

## **WOMEN'S NETWORK DURING THE NEW DEAL**

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<sup>9</sup> See the report published by the New York Consumers' League called *Behind the Scenes in Candy Factories*, Mary Dewson Papers, March 1928, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

<sup>10</sup> Fannie Coralie Perkins is the original name of the future Frances Perkins, first woman to hold a federal post in F. D. Roosevelt's cabinet and first Secretary of Labor in 1933.



The path-breaking efforts of Kelley's generation to raise industrial standards, demanding federal action, would find its realization with the next generation of women. The previous pioneering women had laid the ground by being the first ones to enter public life. Now the time had come for the next generation of women to expand their participation into the political realm. It was during the Progressive period when a remarkable group of college women became very socially active during the 1920s, revitalizing the suffrage campaign, in line with the efforts their predecessors —women like Elisabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucy Stone— had demanded in 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention. During this period many women's organizations flourished in their common crusade to win the vote. The difference this time was the use of a novel strategy and approach, arguing what they would do with their vote, supported again with their sense of moral and civic mission to turn society into a more humane place. Their efforts finally bore fruit when they won the right to vote after the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, thus becoming full citizens of a society they had helped to shape but, ironically, not been allowed to participate in.

An important fact which sprang from these coalitions of women was the sense of solidarity and friendship which arose among them, as Perkins pointed out in her oral recollections:

Something that probably is not written in the books, but it is true, it that the friendships that were formed among women who were in that suffrage movement have been the most lasting and enduring friendships--solid, substantial, loyal-- that I have ever seen anywhere. The women learnt to like each other [...]. It was a most peculiar and amazing kind of friendship, of a loyalty that never cracked. (200)

At women's personal level, the suffrage movement meant the beginning of a new concept of friendship which they were not used to or not aware of, as Perkins, years later, reflected:

I don't think up until that time that women had thought of the possibility of having deep and true friendships with other women except on a basis of propinquity. You were good and loyal friends with your neighbor because she was your next-door neighbor [...] but there was not much intellectual or spiritual friendship between them and it wasn't expected. I think that that made a great difference in women's life, women's outlook and women's attitude towards each other and toward the world. Of course it had a great effect politically. (201-202)

Perkins's farsighted theory on this new vision on female friendship adds a great significance to the thesis from which this essay departed. The "political power" attained through these coalitions of women in such an historical milestone as the winning of the vote demonstrates the idea that women, together, "stir to action and

power,” and the union of friendship and politics enriches the relationship, expanding its political effect (Raymond 8).

And yet, after winning the vote, public opinion turned hostile and reluctant to females’ triumph, maybe too scared to face this newly-acquired power. Once this crusade was over, suffrage was perceived as a symbol, a “lost symbol,” as the prominent suffragist leader Anna Howard once claimed (Ware 5), and woman’s status in politics—as Mary Dewson, another leading activist, declared—became again “nebulous, casual and spotty” (54). However, this generation of women struggled to keep alive the “Progressive faith” (Ware 20) during the adverse years of the 1920s. It was in fact during this period that a network started to take shape.<sup>11</sup> New York city became the center of emergence for two main reasons: the core of the social welfare movement resided in this city, drawing almost one third of the New Deal network into social welfare circles there (Ware 33), and most of the voluntary associations, such as the NCL or the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), had their headquarters functioning there. These two organizations were instrumental in the development of the network in the 1920s and a training ground for future public officers.<sup>12</sup> But above all, the league would be the place of the first encounter between Mary Dewson and Frances Perkins. They worked together in 1922, while Dewson held the post of Research Secretary and Perkins was serving on the Industrial Commission under Governor Al Smith. Their interests in the field of labor, combined with their common ideals, made them join in their common pursuit for social reform for over thirty years. Both women did not share an intimate close friendship, as Dewson made it clear in her memoir *An Aid to the End*. Theirs was a relationship based on “the head and not on the heart” (90), but Dewson always supported Perkins and valued her achievements in the advancement of social legislation.

The 1920s allowed the network to make early contacts, building strong ties of friendship they would later use during the 1930s. It also laid the ground to enable them to work for many programs and policies they would fiercely advocate during the New Deal period, such as minimum law wages, regulation of hours, and the passage of the Child Labor Amendment. Gradually the group developed a feeling of being part of a special community, or “little group” as Perkins described it, defining

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<sup>11</sup>“Network” is used here with the meaning historian Susan Ware employs, i.e. understood within the context of women in federal government in the 1930s: apart from meaning an interconnected group, it was a useful channel for transmitting and sharing professional information, a powerful tool also to request assistance or advice when needed, so they could advance women to powerful political posts.

<sup>12</sup> Notable women trained by NCL included: Nelle Swartz, Clara Beyer, Amy Maher, Marie Wing, Beatrice McConnell, Dorothy Kenyon, Josephine Roche, Elinore Herrick, Emily Marconnier. See Josephine Goldmark, *Fifty Years-The National Consumers’ League, The Survey 85 (December 1949): 674-76*. See Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal*, Harvard University Press, 1981.

it as a cordial, interlocking group of minds," placing Mrs. Kelley at the center of it. She considered her "the mother of us all," viewing themselves as part of a large family, tied by an almost "mystical commitment to social reform" (Ware 33); they even had a nickname, "The Children of Light." At a testimonial luncheon in Perkins's honor in 1929, when she was appointed Industrial Commissioner, she thanked this community of women and acknowledged her debt to them:

And so, in a strange way, I am the product of that group's thought and hope, and all I have ever done is, after all, what they have done, too [ . . . ] I can never be grateful enough for the help—the intelligent support, the honest reporting and great good-will—they have given me in all these years we have worked together.<sup>13</sup>

With time, women in the network became aware of the fact that in order to push for social reform, as their predecessors had been trying for decades, they needed to join politics, to enter that male-dominated terrain in which they had never been taken seriously. They were eager to show their capabilities and talents, and they felt proud of their differences and their sex as women. Indeed, they were less concerned about gender and more about social change. Soon, many of these social workers and other women already involved in politics joined forces with the Democratic Party, supporting F.D. Roosevelt's campaign in 1931. Mary Dewson was the main architect in leading and organizing this effort for one year, becoming director of the Women's Division for the campaign, looking for allies among the Democratic women in New York for Governor Roosevelt. As soon as Roosevelt won the election the following year, Dewson decided to cash on him, for she was determined to place notable women who had been devoted to social reform for years in high political posts, most of them belonging to the network. The network by that time was formed by twenty eight women in total.<sup>14</sup>

Dewson knew that, as the country was going through a severe economic depression, government needed committed public servants for the advancement of its policies, and one of her main objectives was to place talented women in powerful posts. Frances Perkins was her main target. The tactic she employed to convince the president about the necessity to place Perkins in that post was, as she confessed, "deceptive." She orchestrated a letter-writing campaign for Perkins's nomination as Secretary of Labor, involving many of her friends from the network in the campaign, sending an impressive stack of letters favoring her appointment, letters coming from different backgrounds, both female and male friends Perkins had previously worked with: social workers Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and Alice

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<sup>13</sup> Frances Perkins's speech "My Job," published in *The Survey*, March 15, 1929, Women's Rights Collection, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>14</sup> For detailed information about names and women's positions during the New Deal, see Susan Ware's *Beyond Suffrage*, chapter 1, "The Women's Network," or Appendix C, where she offers an interesting and complete summary of biographical information about them.

Hamilton from the Hull House years, to name a few. Dewson deserved most of the credit for this tactic in which the President-elect himself was surprised at receiving so many indications of support towards Perkins, as he stated: "letters from persons of experience and standing in matter concerning labor written me spontaneously in favor of the appointment of Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor" (Dewson 78). Dewson confessed she "did not own up" (78) that at intervals she had been the chief architect of this strategy. Apart from that maneuver, there was another instance in which Dewson devised another arrangement backed by their mutual friend, Grace Abbott. Grace Abbott was the one in charge of arranging a conference held in Washington; many prominent members from Congress, women's associations and newspaper women were present at the event, in which Perkins would be talking about the impact of unemployment on the nation's youth. She even scheduled a photography session for her, a fact that bewildered and shocked Perkins, who soon realized that it was really a hidden plan, probably led by Dewson and whose main purpose was to get her "into the public eye" (Perkins 513).

Perkins at that time was already a recognized Industrial Commissioner who had been a public officer in the Department of Labor since 1919, introducing many innovative social programs at local level in New York. Grace Abbott and Dewson were proud of her friend and they both knew that she was a professional and an expert in that field. As Perkins herself once stated to Governor Roosevelt "I have a record as a responsible public officer for almost ten years" (47). Consequently, her colleagues knew that she was the perfect candidate to take on that responsibility, leading the Department of Labor at a critical time of high unemployment rates. As Dewson declared, F. Roosevelt in the back of his mind knew that: "his secretary of labor must have knowledge of the workers' problems and of the efforts already made or suggested for the solution, technical experience, keen intelligence, and the ability to state convincingly the value of such laws" (79). Mary Dewson championed in her favor relentlessly until she was appointed Secretary of Labor in February 1933. Years later, she clarified that her decision to support Perkins's appointment did not come out from "an act of friendship" but rather because she believed that "it was a golden opportunity to push ahead the labor legislation program she had worked for so many years" (33). Although Dewson transmitted through these cold words that it was a practical decision for the benefit of a whole nation, there are many pieces of evidence that show that they were friends. It is true that maybe not such "personal friends" (Dewson 33) as the friendship she maintained with Eleanor Roosevelt, but for thirty years they were both on very good terms, and Dewson was usually present at many official events as if she were a member of her family, for Perkins's husband suffered from a mental illness and he was hospitalized most of the time. Admittedly, Perkins's projection of herself in public life was that of a distant person, added to the fact that she was extremely timid, except for one time in which "her reserves melted" (Dewson 89), and showed through a letter written to

Dewson a gesture of affection towards her. It was in 1929 in the luncheon in her honor as the first woman to be appointed New York Industrial Commissioner:

I cannot tell you how much that luncheon you arranged for me has meant in my life and I want you to know that not only I am grateful for all that you did to make it a success, but that it has given a new insight into the beauty of loyalty and chivalry between women. How fine it is to play the game together all these years, isn't it? Never fail to call on me for anything I can do, either for you or for your schemes. (Dewson 89)

Dewson's efforts to propel Perkins's nomination and persuade Roosevelt were successful, for Perkins was appointed the first woman Secretary of Labor of the United States. However, Perkins never felt truly predisposed to take such a controversial position, as she knew that she had to fight on several fronts, the most important handicap being a woman in a male-dominated Cabinet, which made the task even harder. Finally, she decided to take the job pressed by Mary Dewson counterarguments, focused mainly on her "duty to the sex" (Perkins 525). On a testimonial dinner to honor her on her appointment as the first Secretary of Labor, Perkins expressed, first, her debt to all the pioneering women who had struggled in their efforts to advance the cause of women:

I saw the whole procession of all the women who have tried during these hundred years, the women who have made life better for women. I felt I wanted to bring a tribute to what they have done for us, these women who have opened doors for us, and I want to be worthy of them.<sup>15</sup>

Among those pioneering women, Florence Kelley had been her leading force to commit her life to social labor. In 1939, Perkins insisted again on the idea that her public promotion throughout the years had to be considered as advancement not focused on Perkins, the person, but as the embodiment of the Consumers' League, claiming that she was "merely a symbol who happened to be at hand."<sup>16</sup> Perkins's record as Secretary of Labor for twelve years remained impeccable and unnoticed as well, for she was the main mover of the passing of groundbreaking legislation during the New Deal period. The "legislative seeds Kelley sowed for almost fifty years flourished profusely"<sup>17</sup> through the passing and enactment of the Social Security Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, or the eradication of child labor, just to

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<sup>15</sup> Testimonial dinner to honor Frances Perkins. *Speeches and Articles*, Frances Perkins Papers, Box 46 March 24, 1933, Columbia University.

<sup>16</sup> Address at the 40th Anniversary Dinner of the Consumers' League: "The living spirit of Florence Kelley." Frances Perkins Papers, 1939, box 52, Columbia University.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Josephine Goldmark, June 22, 1945. *Frances Perkins Correspondence and letters*, Columbia University.

name a few.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, she was “worthy” of having the recognition of the previous female generation and her own. Perkins’s accomplishments in attaining social welfare for the American society mirrored Kelley’s prophecy in the year 1929, when Kelley wrote a letter on Perkins’s appointment on her new post as Chair of the New York Industrial Board. In it Kelley assured that, since Perkins was holding that post, it ensured that “there will be less death, misery and poverty because you are at the helm.” To which Perkins answered: “to the very last ounce of my ability I shall try to do what you expect of me.” Perkins really “tried” on all fronts she had opened not to disappoint anyone: pioneering foremothers, her loyal friends and her own sex, as a woman. However, the price she had to pay was very high indeed for, as much as she served as a loyal and professional public servant and she obviated her gender and sex, she struggled in a male-dominated terrain, and the press always scrutinized her, focusing usually on her sex rather than on her qualities as a talented and experienced public servant. She remained as the “other” in an all-male Cabinet, and she is still positioned as “a marginalized other” (Burnier 399) in today’s American public administration, placing her in the periphery and not at the center of her historic achievement as the first woman public executive and her later victories as the main architect in passing milestone laws (Burnier 415).

To conclude, and as this paper has previously pointed out, a patriarchal system based on sex roles and constricting norms has oppressed women for centuries, avoiding their advancement in political life, education and culture. The bold fact of their conquering the public sphere throughout history was a situation in which many men did not feel comfortable and, consequently, did not accept, because they really had internalized woman’s inferior social role as the “main guardians of the house.” However, there were exceptional women like Perkins who, backed by other remarkable women’s networks, attained prominence in the world of politics and were determined to deconstruct the gender issue as just an obstacle which, as Perkins once put it, was that of “climbing trees.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For full information about Frances Perkins’s biography read George Martin *Madam Secretary, Frances Perkins*, 1976, or Kirstin Downey’s *The Woman Behind the New Deal, The Life and Legacy of Frances Perkins*, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Reminiscences of Frances Perkins, part 3, p.568. Columbia University Oral History Research office Collection, 1951-1955.

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