

“The Power of Female Companionship: Following the Political and Activist Trail of Mary
“Molly” Dewson”

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THE POWER OF FEMALE COMPANIONSHIP 2

Abstract

The first abeyance period of the Women's Movement is thought to have begun in the 1930s and continued through the 1950s. Despite this argued stagnation in feminist efforts, Mary Dewson, a social welfare lobbyist, gained political power as well as accomplished many social welfare improvements. Highlights of her career include working to improve women's working conditions and rising as the director of the Women's Division of the Democratic Party during Franklin D. Roosevelt's political campaigns. Called "Molly" by friends and colleagues, Dewson dedicated her life laboring to improve women's place in society. Molly was able to accomplish these advancements in female livelihood and rise to political esteem by using her network of close friendships with other notable women of the era. An analysis of original documents including letters and photographs shows ways Dewson used camaraderie in many of her activist and political negotiations with women such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins. By using socially accepted relationships and communication, Molly Dewson was able to gain progress in the social justice movement as well as political power during an otherwise dormant era for the feminist movement.

Patterns of female friendship in the United States as well as what is considered normal and deviant behavior within these friendships has certainly changed and shifted since the country began. While some studies suggest women are more capable than men to form deeper connections with others of the same sex during a friendship, many sociologists disagree (Yalom & Brown, 2015). Instead, they argue it is the social construction of appropriately deemed gendered behaviors that assist in building relationships. While close female companionship was an integral part of female life before the 1950s, the “back to normal” rhetoric meaning back to the nuclear family, prevalent after World War II caused a shift in the priority and structure of female companionship. Before the 1950s, girls were encouraged to experiment with same-sex relationships, and it was common for a girl to develop a “crush” on someone of the same sex (Spurlock, 2015). These early relationships were believed to prepare the girl to enter later into a heterosexual relationship as well as to provide emotional support men were considered unable to give (Spurlock, 2015).

This change in emphasis and construction of female friendships has formed a social problem involving girls and their interactions with one another. Lipkin argues relationships are crucial for female development (2009). With one of the formerly most essential relationships, a girl would enter, previously akin to first love, now deemed as a threat to sexuality, what has been the impact on girls in present day (Lipkin, 2009)? Girls are socialized to be “nice”, passive, cooperative, quiet, and friendly (Lipkin, 2009 & Zaslow and Schoenberg, 2012). Lipkin found mothers increase punishment towards their daughters when demonstrating signs of aggression during ages 4-6, to socialize them into repressing their anger (2009). If girls are not supposed to be angry or aggressive physically, how are they able to release their anger? During the 1990s, bullying went to the forefront of social issues among youth. While the focus was mainly on boys,

if discussing girls, relational and social aggression were most often deemed as the bullying behaviors performed by girls (Zaslow and Schoenberg, 2012). This “mean girl” behavior (with the specific name popularized by the 2004 film of the same name, *Mean Girls*) seems to have increased since the destruction of female companionship. Most conflict between girls occurs during the time when girls are socialized to begin showing interest and attention to boys. As boys are expected to become the focal point of their lives, many of the arguments between girls revolve around finding and keeping a boyfriend (Lipkin, 2009). These arguments are most often illustrated not through physical aggression but through harming other’s relationships or social status. Lipkin provides examples of relational aggression displayed by girls such as directed negative facial expressions, intentionally ignoring someone, or sabotaging another’s relationship (2009). Social aggression can include internet bullying, seeking ways to humiliate the other person in front of others, and negative gossip about others. Lipkin sums up girls in the present day’s behaviors well, “The problem is not that girls are angry...the problem is that girls’ legitimate anger has been co-opted as either erotic, trivial, or pathological, and separated from its real source” (2009).

After the Suffragist Movement’s success in gaining the right for white women to vote, many scholars conclude an abeyance period occurred during the 1920s through the 1950s. During times of economic turmoil such as The Great Depression that began in the 1920s and continued through the 30s, people tend to turn toward behaviors that manifest national behavior and silence their activist pursuits until a later date. Nagel argues nationalism creates a sort of moral obligation for all to comply with their gendered expectations (2003). Work is often being done in the privacy of activist homes, but public displays are saved until it is deemed more

culturally appropriate. With the tragic event of Pearl Harbor launching the United States into World War II, this abeyance period between waves of feminism was lengthened.

Mary “Molly” Dewson despite the Great Depression of the 1930s built up the Women’s Division of the Democratic party before rising to the director of the Women’s Division of the Democratic National Committee in 1936 (Ware, 1987). During Franklin D. Roosevelt’s terms as President of the United States, Dewson held advisory positions on the Consumers’ Advisory Board, the Advisory Council to the Committee on Economic Security, and the Social Security Board (Morin, 1994). Before gaining these influential positions, Dewson accrued an extensive list of activist efforts and roles. She researched women workers at the Women’s Educational and the Industrial Union and would later help gain the first women’s minimum wage in the history of the country (Ware, 1987). Molly Dewson led a parole department at a reform school for girls in Massachusetts (Ware, 1987). She was a delegate to the 1915 National American Woman Suffrage Association’s convention (Morin, 1994). By 1916, Dewson was in charge of the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association’s legislative committee (Morin, 1994). During World War I, Dewson traveled to France with the Red Cross to volunteer where she rose as the head of relief efforts of the southern third of France by the war’s end (Morin, 1994). Upon her return from France, Dewson resumed her activist efforts working for more minimum wage requirement laws for both women and children (Morin, 1994). She spent a brief period as the secretary of the Women’s City Club of New York (Morin, 1994). Introduced to partisan politics by her dear friend, Eleanor Roosevelt, Dewson continued her activist efforts in the national forum through the New Deal (Ware, 1987). Dewson was a strong believer in women’s inclusion into politics working to build up local women’s political organizations and lobbying for prominent political positions to be filled with qualified women (Ware, 1987).

During a time that has been deemed by many as the first abeyance period of feminist movements, how did Molly Dewson acquire such a resume of activist gains concerning women and children as well as gain political power? Dewson's close female companionships with such notable figures of the time as Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins as well as with many other women in her activist circles, allowed her to form a web of resources to fuel her efforts. Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination provides a theoretical lens in which to analyze how Dewson constructed this web of privilege (2008). The Matrix of Dominations consists of the interweaving of one's race, sex, class, and sexuality and how they, together, determine one's privileges and eligibility to gain power in society (Hill Collins, 2008). An analysis of Dewson's private letters, photographs, speeches as well theoretical perspectives will illustrate Dewson's use of female companionship to gain political power and social justice gains. It is important to note the privileges Dewson has in her situation; she was white, educated, and of a higher social class. These social categorizations undoubtedly influenced her ability to gain power during this time. Similarly, the call for an overall return to an increased importance of female friendship is limited to a mostly white, middle-class audience as further structural inequalities may prevent others from achieving development. This choice is not to imply that female companionship is not necessary for all girls, but to acknowledge the limitations of this particular research topic as well as structural issues that must be addressed by society before this matter would become applicable.

One could argue Molly Dewson was born into politics. Her great-great-grandfather played a part in the Boston Tea Party in 1773 and later served on the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Morin, 1994 & Ware, 1987). While growing up on her family's estate in Quincy, Massachusetts, it was not uncommon for Dewson to pass Civil War

diplomat, Charles Francis Adams, whose father and grandfather were past presidents of the United States (Morin, 1994). Dewson enjoyed the outdoors and defied gender norms by playing with toy soldiers, pitching on the boys' softball team, and spending lots of time with her older four brothers (Morin, 1994). Dewson was the daughter of a prosperous tanner, and while she often downplayed her social class throughout her career experienced a middle-class lifestyle even as the economy began to the downturn (Ware, 1987). Dewson later explains upon recollection of her childhood, "I had been brought up in a group where the women were very well-treated, very well-advantaged, and where they had, they own property" (Ware, 1987). She continues to argue, "I don't think people realize how much professional and cultural life women had if they wanted before the days of women suffrage" (Ware, 1987). Dewson did recognize her potential and realized the need for her to gain an education. At seventeen years old, Dewson asked her father for permission to attend Bryn Mawr College. While her family did not agree to her attending a college in Pennsylvania, they did compromise and allow her to attend nearby Wellesley College (Ware, 1987). Dewson excelled at Wellesley, gaining positive attention in classes, developing many relationships with faculty, gained access to the college's most prestigious social club, and was elected president of her class (Morin, 1994 & Ware, 1987). Dewson received a broad liberal arts education and took classes in subjects such as sociology, philosophy, Bible, French, physiology, health, mathematics and mineralogy (Ware, 1987). While Dewson's declared specialty was history, she later stated it was "Statistical Study of Certain Economic Problems," a graduate-level seminar that stands out to her the most (Ware, 1987). She believed this class more than any other treated her as an adult and, therefore, prepared her to incorporate the skills gained in her later career (Ware, 1987). In her senior yearbook, the class prophesized that Dewson would one-day campaign for the presidency and win, being

remembered as one of the "the glories of American history" (Morin, 1994 & Ware, 1987). While Dewson never ran for political office, with her close relationship with and position as advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt one could argue her classmates were very close in their predictions.

Lesbian Separatist Theory developed by Mary Daly, argues women should separate from mainstream society and live intentionally together to allow their power to illuminate that is shadowed by men in our current patriarchal society (1990). Daly believed true feminists must also be lesbians as their sexuality played a crucial role in their transcendence into their "Female Self" (1990). Daly emphasized the importance of female friendships in her argument, "Sisterhood has nothing to do with breaking down "the walls of self", but with burning/melting/vaporizing the constricting walls imposed upon the Self. Moreover, female friendship is not concerned with "expanding walls and keeping them intact", but with expanding energy, power, and vision, psychic and physical space. Sisterhood and female friendship burn down the walls of male-defined categories and definitions" (1990). Lesbians, Daly argues, were already outside the barriers of patriarchy as they were not forced to submit to a man even at home (1990). Their place in society allows them to operate more freely in their development of their self and desires (Daly, 1990).

Molly Dewson lived with Polly Porter, whom she met during her time at the reform school for girls (Morin, 1994). Dewson and Porter bought a small dairy farm in 1913 and spent limited time apart after that (Morin, 1994). Each considered the other their "partner" and enjoyed their time together (Morin, 1994). Few letters exist between the two as they rarely spent time apart from one another and Ware suspects that due to Porter's private nature any other letters were likely burned after Dewson's death (Ware, 1987). In the letters present, it is evident that the

two had "pet names" for one another, loved each other dearly, and longed to be with one another when apart (Ware, 1987). Polly wrote to reassure Dewson that she had not forgotten about her as she was as a "ship without sails and a pilot without a north star were she not a part of [her] life" (Ware, 1987). Whether their relationship transcended into the realm of what would present day likely be considered lesbianism is unknown. It was not uncommon for two middle-class women to live together during this time, as it was seen as distasteful for a single woman to live alone (Ware, 1987). Therefore, "Boston Marriages" were common and if any sexual activity between the two was presumed most turned a blind eye (Ware, 1987). Dewson's relationships with Porter does, however, put female companionship at the very foundation of her home life. Her personal support system was through female companionship. This absentee of male influence in Dewson's life similarly to lesbian separatism theory may have given her additional support to pursue other female friendships. These female friendships that would soon wind a path that would allow her to gain both personal career growth as well as reforms for many women and children in the United States.

Molly Dewson met Eleanor Roosevelt during her brief time as the Secretary of the Women's City Club of New York (Morin, 1994). While their friendship was just at the beginning stages, Eleanor Roosevelt called Dewson to handle a situation at the Democratic campaign headquarters in St. Louis (Ware, 1987). The position was only to last a few days but catapulted Dewson into the national political realm. There she would remain until she began to distance herself in the late 1930s. The trust Roosevelt placed in Dewson at the early stages of their friendship provided a firm foundation for their friendship to grow more intimate. While Eleanor Roosevelt wrote many letters to politicians, activists, and citizens during her husband's terms as

President, it is with almost zero doubt that the friendship between Eleanor Roosevelt and Molly Dewson was genuine and surpassed political pleasantries.

On January 27th. 1939, Dewson wrote to Roosevelt expressing her distress in how much time had passed since they last saw one another and poses the following questions, "When you are shopping in N.Y.C. sometime could I go along and hold your purse? Or chauffeur you to a meeting in the Bronx?" These questions not only illustrate Dewson's knowledge of Roosevelt's pastimes but also of her locations where she frequents. Dewson's proposal to spend time with the First Lady is so important to her that she would happily hold her purse or be her driver if it meant being in her presence. Coordinating visits was a constant problem for the two, busy women. They often missed each other by only a few weeks. In early April 1939, Dewson pens a letter to Roosevelt discussing Easter and suggests five dates for that month for the two to meet in New York City for tea. This exchange occurs near the beginning of Dewson's retirement, and she questions whether she is truly retired to Roosevelt as she is still so busy. She would be leaving for California until November on a motor trip after this visit to New York City and was hoping to visit with Eleanor before she left (Dewson, 1939). Eleanor responds just a few weeks later lamenting, "Oh dear, oh dear! I can't be with you on any of the days you mention" (Roosevelt, 1939).

Molly's health was also a point of discussion between the two women particularly in the later years of their friendship. On April 26th. 1939, Roosevelt expresses sympathy for Dewson as she had expressed anxiety in her last letter about the "hard winter" she had endured. Similarly, Roosevelt also shared with Dewson of her dissatisfaction and discouragement concerning her personal affairs (Dewson, 1938). On October 25th. 1938, Dewson's response shows an attempt to comfort Eleanor, "I think of you as about the grandest woman in the country but more important

to me I think of you intimately as a friend." She continues by kindly suggesting, "Well maybe when you are not the wife of the President you may have a little more time..." (Dewson, 1938). Molly's physical health was also a subject of discussion between the two. In June 1939, Dewson reported positive news to Eleanor about her blood pressure and heart being "normal" for the past four months. Eleanor writes back in early July, exclaiming her happiness in this report of good health from Dewson (1939). She also encourages Dewson to "not overdo and lose what you have gained" (Roosevelt, 1939).

In addition to their discussion of personal interests, travel, health, and wellbeing, the women also express their dear sentiments towards one another. Their devotion is evident in the way they sign their letters with such expressions as "Affectionately," Devotedly, "With Love," "Much Love," and "My love angel" (Dewson, 1939, Roosevelt, 1939, Roosevelt, 1940). Dewson thought so much of Eleanor Roosevelt that she expressed this in public during a speech at the Buenos Aires Conference campaign of 1936. She explains Eleanor as "a symbol of the way women can serve the country when they are given an opportunity to do so" (Dewson, 1936). She praises her for her personal interest in the women of the United States and claims "Mrs. Roosevelt has established a precedent for all women in her interest" concerning the economic affairs of the country (Dewson, 1936).

It was not just a multi-year of friendship that spanned distance, survived political pressures, and provided support that both women desperately needed. Many of Dewson's political negotiations whether concerning campaign efforts, her activist desires, or her attempts to put more women in political leadership occurred through these letters. Often, Eleanor would loop her husband, Franklin into conversations she deemed relevant, and other times, Mary was not shy to plead for her to bring an issue up to him. Molly's apparent lack of fear or concern for

her own status appears in the myriad of topics she brings up to the both the President and the First Lady. On November 12, 1940, Molly wrote to Eleanor suggesting they change the national anthem to "American the Beautiful" as it would provide a "good enough uplifting anthem for our many meetings" (Dewson). Eleanor responds dutifully obliging Molly and states she would pass her suggestion along to the President (Roosevelt, 1940).

Likely the most notable political public figure Dewson played a part in their obtaining of their position was Frances Perkins. Perkins was the U.S. Secretary of Labor from 1935 to 1945, and the first woman appointed to the President's cabinet. What is less known, is that it was not uncommon for Eleanor to write Molly concerning issues that the President supported, that he feared Perkins would disagree. One example is the discussion of whether the Employment Service and Unemployment's Compensation should be under one agency: the Federal Security Agency. Roosevelt and Molly Dewson agreed and felt it would save the government money long term (E.R., 1939). Eleanor wrote to Molly four days after the President sent her a Memorandum agreeing with her position on the matter. She urges Molly to speak with Frances Perkins as she fears she will oppose this action and believed she "will have more weight" than if Eleanor were to talk to her (Roosevelt, 1939).

Molly did acquire many political and activist successes throughout her friendships, such as her influence on Harriet Elliot's efforts to gain funding for Project N.C. 1508 benefiting the Women's College of North Carolina (Dewson, 1938). Eleanor did not give in to every one of Molly's wishes. One instance was Molly's request for Eleanor to attend the Young Democrat National Conference. Molly had been contacted to encourage Mrs. Roosevelt to attend the event citing that membership was low and things were looking "particularly discouraging" for young women (Dewson, 1938). Dewson writes to Eleanor on the very letter she receives rather

halfheartedly explaining, "Evidently they think I have influence with you" (1938). She makes the note for Eleanor to do what she believes is "wise" and not "to act on the basis of her influence" (Dewson, 1938). Roosevelt does not attend the conference but does reply to Molly. On August 9, 1939, Eleanor explains Molly's letter did not arrive in time for her to attend the meeting but would not have been able to attend regardless as she had several other invitations. She also confesses to Molly that she believes the "Young Democrats are very weak" and not worth her time (Roosevelt, 1939).

During her political career, Molly gained nicknames including "Queen Molly," "More Women Dewson," and "The General" (Ware, 1987). However, for those who knew Molly intimately also knew her desire for gaining attention to the issues that meant most to her were dear to her heart. Perhaps this is why she incorporated and developed her friendships around and into her work. Dewson explains, "All my life I have been watching women-thinking about women and their relation to public affairs" (1935). For Dewson, neither her personal or professional life would exist without her web of female companionships. Dewson saw the value of women in politics ahead of her time; she honestly believed women could influence a political party. "No woman is too busy, too tired, or too dumb to help. Be a simple soldier helling in a simple way if that is all you can manage" (Dewson, 1935). Dewson worked in small steps, one legislation passed, and one letter was written at a time. Similarly, for our society to return to having high regards towards female companionship, we must not expect it to occur in leaps and bounds but through actions of those who defy the norm. Female friendships can provide an immense amount of personal support and growth as well as career, social, and political advancement that are currently lacking in resources for many women today. For women, all women, to access more privilege in society, we must assess the structural boundaries which limit

their advancement. Combating the heterosexual complex, which has instilled fear in women that their friendships may be deemed as "inappropriate" and encourages competition against one another, is one step in countering the harmful effect this has caused to women's lives and place in society.

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