

## Eleanor Roosevelt: A crusading spirit to move human rights forward

Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights  
2018, Vol. 36(4) 241–246  
© The Author(s) 2018



Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/0924051918801610  
journals.sagepub.com/home/nqh



**Anya Luscombe**

University College Roosevelt, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

In December 2018 all peoples and all nations of the world can celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ‘common standard of achievement’ of rights and freedoms, the document that the first Chair of the Human Rights Commission, Eleanor Roosevelt, called an international magna carta for all mankind.<sup>1</sup>

Appointed to the United Nations by President Truman in 1946, Eleanor Roosevelt quickly proved her critics wrong that she would not be able to make a substantial contribution to this new organisation. On 27 January 1947 at Lake Success, New York, the members of the Human Rights Commission unanimously elected Eleanor Roosevelt chair. She warned she would ‘not only be an impartial Chairman, but perhaps at times a harsh driver’.<sup>2</sup> It was an enormously difficult task to reach consensus on the wording of a declaration of principles that people of all creeds, colours, races, and backgrounds could agree to jointly strive for. But she succeeded thanks to her diplomatic and political skills. The declaration was adopted almost unanimously: eight abstentions, no votes against. The general assembly members rose to their feet on 10 December 1948 to give Eleanor Roosevelt a standing ovation.

The seventieth anniversary of the UDHR is an opportune moment to reflect on the key leadership role played by Eleanor Roosevelt in both the creation of the UDHR and, throughout her life, in the creation of greater consciousness of the rights of all peoples in the world. Which lessons can those trying to achieve greater adherence to human rights in today’s world take from her leadership characteristics?

1. Eleanor Roosevelt, ‘Speech introducing the UDHR to the General Assembly of the United Nations’ (1948) <[www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/maps/UDHRspeech.htm](http://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/maps/UDHRspeech.htm)> accessed 21 June 2018.
2. John F. Sears, ‘Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (2008) *The Task Force – Celebrating Eleanor Roosevelt* <[fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/sears.pdf/c300e130-b6e6-4580-8bf1-07b72195b370](http://fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/sears.pdf/c300e130-b6e6-4580-8bf1-07b72195b370)> accessed 1 May 2018.

**Corresponding author:**

Anya Luscombe, University College Roosevelt, Utrecht University, The Netherlands.

E-mail: [a.luscombe@ucr.nl](mailto:a.luscombe@ucr.nl)

## 1. Crusading spirit

In April 1948, seven and a half months before the adoption of the UDHR, Eleanor Roosevelt was awarded an honorary doctorate of laws by Utrecht University, the first such award by the University to a woman. In her acceptance speech she took the opportunity to stress both the importance of a strong United Nations for the world and the importance of including better social economic conditions in post-war reconstruction efforts. 'There must be a crusading spirit and a maturity', she said, 'which comes from the love of other human beings, or our best plans will fail.'<sup>3</sup>

By April 1948 anyone who had followed ER (as she is commonly referred to by scholars) would have been able to predict that she would be able to bring the negotiations on the UDHR to a successful end. Her crusading spirit, political acumen, memory, tenacity, and deep belief in human dignity, human rights and responsibilities, were there for all to see. It is all the more frustrating, therefore, that her enormous contribution as a human rights leader is often overlooked.

## 2. Developing a social and political conscience

Eleanor Roosevelt's interest in the plight of others and finding practical, political and legal solutions to help had started early, well before she entered the White House as the First Lady, wife of President Delano Roosevelt.

ER was born in 1884, the daughter of Elliott Roosevelt and Anna Hall. Elliott was the brother of Theodore Roosevelt, US president from 1901-1909. Eleanor's parents both died before she reached the age of 10 and she went to live with her strict Victorian grandmother. In 1899 Eleanor was sent to Allenswood Academy for Girls in London where the progressive headmistress Marie Souvestre recognised Eleanor's intellect and potential and urged her to be socially and politically involved. Souvestre and her pupil spent the summers traveling through Europe 'seeing both the grandeur and the squalor of the nations they visited.'<sup>4</sup> On her return to the US, Eleanor - much to the surprise of her family - volunteered to work in settlement homes in the slums of New York City.

She married her fifth cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in 1905 and within ten years had six children, one of whom died in infancy. Franklin became assistant-secretary to the Navy in 1913 and Eleanor hated the social duties that were expected of her as a politician's wife. World War I though meant social duties were much less expected and Eleanor volunteered to work for the Red Cross.

In the 1920s she joined the New York City Women's Club and also became active in the National Consumers League and the New York chapters of the League of Women Voters and the Women's Trade Union League. When in 1921 FDR contracted polio, ER took it upon herself to keep the Roosevelt name at the forefront of the political scene. She became the Democratic Women's Committee vice-president and finance chairman, and edited the *Women's Democratic News*. Her 'political contributions and organizational sagacity made her one of New York's leading politicians... Repeatedly she goaded women's and other reform groups to set realistic goals, prioritize their tasks, and delegate assignments.'<sup>5</sup>

3. Eleanor Roosevelt, 'Redevoeringen gehouden ter gelegenheid van de erepromotie van Mrs. Anna Eleanor Roosevelt-Roosevelt op 20 April 1948', *Jaarboek der Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht 1947-1948* (Drukkerij v.h. Keming & Zoon NV 1948).

4. Columbian College of Arts & Sciences, 'Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project', <erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/anna-eleanor-roosevelt> accessed 1 May 2018.

5. *ibid.*

### 3. Women's rights

The 1920s is also the time ER honed her skills as a communicator, giving speeches, writing articles and opinion pieces and getting involved in broadcasting. When it comes to radio and the Roosevelts, FDR's Fireside Chats spring to mind, but it was actually his wife who broadcasted much earlier and more frequently.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in the 1930s she was one of the most highly paid broadcasters in the US: very unusual at a time when the numbers of women on air were extremely low and those speaking about social and political issues even lower.<sup>7</sup> She came in for much criticism; her activities were seen as unbecoming for a woman, particularly a First Lady. However, her journalistic endeavours gave her a chance to earn money which she could give to charity and for her to show that a woman could have an independent career.

ER frequently appealed to her female audiences that it was up to them to be active citizens, to hold their elected representatives to account and form together to work for peace in the world. At a ceremony in her honour in the Parliamentary buildings in The Hague on 19 April 1948, organised by the Dutch National Women's committee, she called on the women there to support the United Nations.<sup>8</sup> When awarded the honorary doctorate of laws in Utrecht the following day, she was recognised for her work in the field of social justice, but also for being 'the perfect mother' and the wife of FDR. She graciously accepted the award as an expression of gratitude to her husband and the US.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in much of what she did at the UN she wanted to secure her husband's legacy.

ER did not identify with the tactics of the more militant feminists of the National and World Women's Parties and her long-term opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, which she believed would not protect women workers, has opened her up for criticism by those fighting for emancipation.<sup>10</sup> Yet, while she often said that a woman's prime work was in the home (a realistic observation given the social context of her time), she also tried to use her influence in a pragmatic way to further the cause of women's rights. In 1933 when ER became First Lady she decided to hold women-only Press conferences so that newspapers during the depression would have to keep at least one female political reporter on the books if they wanted to cover the First Lady. She pressured the administration to appoint women to key positions in government and vociferously reminded the administration to ensure women – and African/Americans – were not left out of the New Deal support programs.

What would ER have said about political participation of women across the world today? While the number of women in parliament across the globe has doubled since 1995, figures from UN Women from 2016 show it is still only 22.8 percent - a long way off the 50-50 split to represent the

6. In a series of broadcasts the first of which took place in March 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt 'chatted' to the American public via the radio about government plans to counter the Great Depression and on war preparations. See, for example, Amos Kiewe, *FDR's First Fireside Chat: Public Confidence and the Banking Crisis* (Texas A&M University Press 2007).

7. Paul Belgrade, 'Radio Broadcasts' in M. Beasley, H. Shulman and H. Beasley (eds), *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Press 2001).

8. 'Eleanor Roosevelt gehuldigd door de vrouwen van Nederland' (19 April 1948) *De Tijd* <[www.delpher.nl](http://www.delpher.nl)> accessed 1 May 2018.

9. Redevoeringen (n 3).

10. Paula F. Pfeffer, 'Eleanor Roosevelt and the National and World Woman's Parties' (1996) *The Historian* <<http://harvey.binghamton.edu/~hist266/era/eleanor.htm#fortytwo>> accessed 21 June 2018.

way populations are divided.<sup>11</sup> What would ER have said about continued discrimination and lack of access to education and job opportunities for women in many countries? For example, the 20 percent pay gap in the US and the situation in developing Asian countries where less than half of all women work compared with 80 percent of men?<sup>12</sup> Such figures can be depressing, but it is important to remember that the world has come a long way since the UDHR. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as many other agreements, help those who are aiming to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women.

#### 4. Minorities' rights

Eleanor Roosevelt also fought for the recognition of minorities. She joined the Washington chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and National Urban League, invited key activists to the White House, and advocated for the integration of African-Americans in the American military. In 1939 she resigned from the prestigious Daughters of the American Revolution organisation when it refused to allow the African-American contralto Marian Anderson to use its hall – and organised for Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial instead. She was unsuccessful, however, in persuading FDR to back anti-lynching federal legislation. Her stance on civil rights attracted much criticism from politicians and commentators opposed to the Roosevelt administration or opposed to her personally and throughout her life she received death threats from organisations like the Ku Klux Klan.

What would ER have said about the deplorable state of race-relations in the US today? When hundreds of young African-American men are shot by police each year and the country's President describes individuals living in neighbouring countries as 'drug dealers and rapists'?<sup>13</sup> The UDHR is clear on discrimination and the right to life, liberty and security. ER would have used the media to make her concerns clear, she would have lobbied for change, she would have confronted those who discriminate and not been afraid to call out those, including the powerful, who appear to condone white supremacy.

#### 5. Rights of the dispossessed

Eleanor Roosevelt was cut out for her assignment to Committee Three of the UN, which dealt with the thorny issue of refugee resettlement. The Soviet Union insisted all refugees return to their country of origin, whereas Western nations argued refugees should be able to settle wherever they wished. By 1959, fourteen years after the end of World War II, many refugees were still without a home. In a United Nations radio broadcast to mark the UN Year of the refugee, ER made a moral

11. UN Women, 'Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation' (2017) <[www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures](http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures)> accessed 1 May 2018.

12. American Association of University Women, 'The Simple Truth About the Gender Pay Gap' (2017) <[www.aauw.org/files/2017/09/TheSimpleTruthFall2017OnePager-nsa.pdf](http://www.aauw.org/files/2017/09/TheSimpleTruthFall2017OnePager-nsa.pdf)> accessed 1 May 2018; Asian Development Bank, 'Closing the Gender Gap' (2018) <[www.adb.org/themes/gender/overview](http://www.adb.org/themes/gender/overview)> accessed 20 July 2018.

13. Jon Swaine et al, 'Young Black Men Killed by US Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1,134 Deaths' (31 December 2015) *The Guardian* <[www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young-black-men](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young-black-men)> accessed 1 May 2018; Rupert Neate, 'Donald Trump Doubles Down on Mexico 'Rapists' Comments Despite Outrage' (2 July 2015) *The Guardian* <[www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/02/donald-trump-racist-claims-mexico-rapes](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/02/donald-trump-racist-claims-mexico-rapes)> accessed 21 June 2018.

appeal to her listeners and world governments to take responsibility: 'We have an opportunity, each of us, to remove this blemish from the conscience of mankind', she said.<sup>14</sup>

What then, would ER have said about the year 2018 when we are, as the UNHCR states, 'witnessing the highest displacement on record . . . [with more than] 65 million people around the world forced from home . . . a world where nearly 20 people are forcibly displaced every minute as a result of conflict or persecution'?<sup>15</sup>

What then would ER say about rich Western countries who continue to erect walls both physical and rhetorical to keep refugees out? Who turn back boats full of desperate people from Libya and who turn a blind eye to victims of war, like the Syrians, or of persecution, like the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, forcing them into camps in neighbouring countries where respect for human dignity, as outlined in the UDHR, is hard to find?

## 6. Lessons in leadership

While there are many definitions of leadership, they would all seem to include characteristics of setting direction and getting others to cooperate.<sup>16</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt did both of those and exhibited many other skills needed in a leader. She understood the importance of listening to others, of hard work, of modesty, of compassion and of bravery. When arguing for the inclusion of economic and social rights in the UDHR, she went against the prevailing view of the US State department. According to her State Department advisor, James Hendrick, ER's 'determination overcame both [Undersecretary of State Robert] Lovett's opposition and Secretary of State George Marshall's skepticism about the Declaration'.<sup>17</sup>

The UDHR and the subsequent legally binding international covenants and national laws give all those interested in human rights the tools to ensure rights, freedoms and responsibilities now and for the next 70 years. To deal with today's problems in the world, the text of the Universal Declaration, and the vision of humanity espoused by it, is more relevant than ever as a source of inspiration. But documents and words are not enough. All those interested in human rights will also need to learn to actively listen, to cooperate, to be brave, to be determined, to be self-disciplined and put the needs of others first; in short, they need 'a crusading spirit'.

Those who want to be leaders, whether they are activists, lawyers, scholars or citizens, and those who claim to be leaders when their human rights behaviour clearly shows they are not, need to remember the reason why 'the inherent dignity of all members of the human family' has to be respected: for the sake of the world. They need to, as ER said, start close to home: to ensure equal political representation of women, of minorities in their countries or neighbourhoods and put the need for human dignity and compassion first when desperate people are fleeing from disaster.

As Eleanor Roosevelt argued, the path towards universal human rights is not easy, but we should not give up. We should not despair that we are not there yet, but redouble our battle to make it happen.

---

14. UN Radio, 'Life Begins at Ten' (1 January 1959) <[www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/C724/C724/](http://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/C724/C724/)> accessed 1 May 2018.

15. UNHCR, 'Figures at a Glance' (2018) <[www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html](http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html)> accessed 1 May 2018.

16. See for example André Martin and Christopher Ernst, 'Exploring Leadership in Times of Paradox and Complexity' (2005) 5 *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society* 82 <<https://doi.org/10.1108/14720700510604724>> accessed 1 May 2018.

17. Sears (n 2).

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.