

History Now. The Historians Perspective

The Historian's Perspective

Women and the Progressive Movement

by Miriam Cohen

At the end of the nineteenth century, American politicians, journalists, professionals, and volunteers mobilized on behalf of reforms meant to deal with a variety of social problems associated with industrialization. Women activists, mainly from middling and prosperous social backgrounds, emphasized the special contribution that women could make in tackling these problems. With issues of public health and safety, child labor, and women's work under dangerous conditions so prominent, who better than women to address them? Focusing on issues that appealed to women as wives and mothers, and promoting the notion that women were particularly good at addressing such concerns, the female activists practiced what women's historians call maternalist politics. By emphasizing traditional traits, female social reformers between 1890 and World War I created new spaces for themselves in local and then national government even before they had the right to vote. They carved out new opportunities for paid labor in professions like social work and public health. Maternalists also stressed the special needs of poor women and children in order to build support for America's early welfare state.[1]



Jane Addams, from the frontispiece of her book, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York: Macmillan, 1910). (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, [GLC05168](#)) [Click on image to enlarge.](#)

Regardless of sex, activists did not always value the same reforms, nor did they always agree on the nature of the problems, but as part of the progressive movement, their concerns shared some basic characteristics. Historian Daniel Rodgers argues that progressives drew on three “distinct clusters of ideas.” One was the deep distrust of growing corporate monopoly, the second involved the increasing conviction that in order to progress as a society, the commitment to individualism had to be tempered with an appreciation of our social bonds. Progressives also believed that modern techniques of social planning and efficiency would offer solutions to the social problems at hand. Their ideas did not add up to a coherent ideology, but, as Rodgers notes, “they tended to focus discontent on unregulated individual power.”[2] As the nineteenth century closed, periodic economic downturns served as wake-up calls to the dangers of relying solely on the workings of the free market to ensure the general prosperity.

Concerns about social problems were not new for women. Since the antebellum era, middle-class white and black women engaged in various forms of civic activity related to the social and moral welfare of those less fortunate. Temperance, abolition, and moral reform activities dominated women’s politics before the Civil War. By the 1870s, women were broadening their influence, working in national organizations such as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), which helped single women in America’s cities. During the Progressive era, a moral-reform agenda motivated many women; such organizations as the WCTU, for example, intensified their activities on behalf of a national ban on alcohol and against prostitution.

But it was after 1890 that the issues surrounding social welfare took on their greatest urgency. The Panic of 1893, along with the increasing concerns about industrialization—the growing slums across American cities, the influx of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, the increase in labor strife—

contributed to that sense of urgency.

Within a decade, vast networks of middle-class and wealthy women were energetically addressing how these social programs affected women and children. Encouraged by the national General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), local women's clubs turned to learning about and then addressing the crises of the urbanizing society. Excluded by the GFWC, hundreds of African American women's clubs affiliated with the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) focused on family welfare among black Americans who were dealing with both poverty and racism. The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), dominated by prosperous German-Jewish women, sprang into action in the 1890s as well, to work with the newly arrived eastern European Jewish community. The National Congress of Mothers (later the Parent Teacher Association) emerged in 1897 to address the needs of the American family and the mother's crucial role in fulfilling those needs. Activist women throughout the country, from Boston in the east, to Seattle in the west, and Memphis in the south, focused on improving public schools, especially in poor neighborhoods.[3]

Responding to the problems associated with urban industrial life, American women reformers looked to their counterparts in Europe who were struggling with similar issues. One such initiative, which caught on with American women who visited England in the 1880s, was Toynbee Hall, a settlement house located in London's poverty-stricken East End. The efforts of the men at Toynbee to reach across the class divide inspired Jane Addams, who founded Chicago's Hull House in 1889, as well as a group of Smith College graduates who founded the College Settlement House in New York around the same time.[4]

The settlement house movement soon took hold throughout the country. Located in urban, poor, often immigrant communities, the houses were residences

for young middle-class and prosperous women, and some men, who wished not merely to minister to the poor and then go home, but to live among them, to be their neighbors, to participate with them in bettering their communities. Their poorer neighbors did not live in the settlement houses but spent time there, participating in various clubs and classes, including kindergarten and day nurseries for children. Settlement houses also sent volunteers out into the community. Truly pioneers in the area of public health, their visiting nurses taught hygiene and health care to poor immigrant households. Settlement house workers and other women reformers also campaigned for public milk stations in an effort to reduce infant mortality.

Most settlement houses identified themselves with Protestant Christianity, and indeed, in response, Catholic and Jewish activists founded their own institutions. However, both Lillian Wald, head of the famous Henry Street Settlement in New York, and Addams, among others, ran secular institutions.

Taking up residence in settlement houses attracted women who wished to carve out non-traditional lifestyles, where they could be among their close companions and devote themselves to what they saw as meaningful lives. By the mid-1890s, the core community of Hull House consisted of Jane Addams, the most celebrated female social reformer of her day; Florence Kelley, Illinois's first State Factory Investigator, who would later move to New York to become the head of the National Consumers League (NCL); Dr. Alice Hamilton, America's founder of industrial medicine; and Julia Lathrop, a pioneer in the field of child welfare who was to become the first woman to head a federal agency when she became director of the newly founded US Children's Bureau in 1912. Historian Kathryn Sklar writes of the Hull House community that the women "found what others could not provide for them, dear friendship, livelihood, contact with the real world, and a chance to change it." [5] Only a small group of women actually took up residence at the settlement house, but many women in cities and towns throughout the country worked as volunteers for these es-

tablishments, including the young Eleanor Roosevelt, who worked at the Riverside Settlement in New York City before her marriage to Franklin.

Beyond the settlement houses, women worked hard on a variety of social initiatives. One of the most important involved efforts to improve working conditions in America's factories, particularly in those trades, such as garments and textiles, that employed so much immigrant labor at low wages. The National Consumers League and the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), both dominated by women, launched campaigns across the country, calling on state governments to institute protective labor laws that would end very long work hours for women and the labor of children and young adolescents. They also demanded that state government provide factory inspectors to see that the new laws were enforced.

Some progressive women believed that rather than campaigning on behalf of poor women, they could best offer help by encouraging the efforts of working women to empower themselves through collective bargaining. Unionizing women was an especially difficult challenge because the larger society viewed them as marginal workers, rather than critical breadwinners who needed to support themselves or help support their families. The National Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), with branches in a number of cities, was an organization of wealthy and working-class women who came together to aid the efforts of women who were already working with their male co-workers in the garment and textile unions.

While many did philanthropic work on behalf of poor families, in this new era women also called for state participation in granting financial relief to the needy. To help one group of poor families—single mothers forced to raise children without male incomes—they campaigned on behalf of state aid to widowed mothers. Given the high male mortality due to work accidents and poor job conditions, the growing numbers of young, very poor widowed mothers

was a major social problem. By the early twentieth century, many family welfare experts were convinced that if at all possible, poor children of widowed mothers should be kept at home, rather than placed in orphanages, which had been the custom in the nineteenth century. In the second decade of the twentieth century, mothers' pension leagues campaigning across the country were remarkably successful. By 1920, the vast majority of states had enacted some sort of mothers' pension program. These state-funded initiatives were the precursors to the Aid to Dependent Children Program, which became federal law during the New Deal as part of the Social Security Act.

Mothers' pension campaigns exemplify how advocates for expanding social welfare appealed to the maternalist sensibilities of middle-class audiences. In writing in 1916 about the activities of their Propaganda Committee, Sophia Loeb of the Allegheny County Mothers' Pension League, campaigning for mothers' pensions in the Greater Pittsburgh area, reported on the first-ever public celebration of Mother's Day in the United States, noting that the gathering of 1,100 "was unique in the fact that not only was tribute paid to Motherhood in speech and flower, but Mother was honored in a more practical way by trying to assist the mothers less fortunate, in their struggle to help her children under her own roof." [6]

Reforming the juvenile justice system was another way to limit the institutionalization of poor children. Prior to the Progressive era, children arrested for a whole host of crimes, including truancy and shoplifting, could end up tried as adults and placed in adult jails. Yet, increasingly, middle-class and prosperous Americans were adopting the view that children, including poor children, should be viewed not as miniature adults, but as human beings who needed proper teaching and nurturing in order to grow into responsible adults; such nurturing would preferably be done by parents, not outside institutions. In 1899, Hull House reformers such as Julia Lathrop and Louise DeKoven Bowen persuaded Illinois lawmakers to institute the first juvenile court; unlike the

adult courts, it could exercise greater flexibility in sentencing and it could concentrate on rehabilitation rather than punishment. Soon after, such courts were instituted in cities across the United States.[7]

Whether campaigning for mothers' pensions, protective labor legislation, public health programs, or the establishment of the juvenile justice system, progressive maternalists stressed that these initiatives would help women become better mothers. They advocated specific programs because of their traditional convictions regarding gender roles and family life, with men as successful breadwinners and women proper domestic caretakers, but their approach was also strategic. Women knew that their participation in the political arena flew in the face of conventional norms; concentrating on issues already associated with women's traditional roles lessened the impact of their challenge.

Some women activists, however, did challenge aspects of traditional gender norms. The writer and renowned lecturer Charlotte Perkins Gilman also believed in women's special attributes, but she questioned the very organization of society based on the private household, arguing that both housekeeping and childcare could be done better in collective settings, which would free women to pursue other occupations. Other activists, unlike the social progressives, promoted a new embrace of women's sexuality, some advocating free love. Margaret Sanger campaigned for access to safe, inexpensive contraception in order that women could assert more control over their health and the way they chose to mother.

Because Gilman, Sanger, and the free-love advocates promoted women's autonomy, we often associate them with the emerging feminist movement that was to become so important later in the twentieth century. But scholars have recently argued that the progressive social reformers can also be named feminists, specifically social feminists, because they were committed to increasing women's social and political rights even as they used arguments about

women's special needs and attributes to achieve their goals. Thus, the progressive women promoted women's suffrage; many worked vigorously on behalf of the cause and belonged to the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the dominant pro-suffrage organization of the day. In arguing for women's suffrage in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1910, Jane Addams appealed to her middle-class readers by pointing out that women in modern society no longer performed the functions of producing for their families all the goods that they would consume at home; if they cared about the health and safety of their own families—the food they ate, the water they drank, the diseases they might catch—they ought to care about the conditions all around them, and they ought to want the ability to vote on these public concerns.[8] Moreover, social feminists did not always emphasize women's special role as mothers when arguing on behalf of the vote. As pragmatic activists, they adopted more than one strategy to achieve reforms. Like men, their politics were multifaceted and were shaped by a variety of concerns. To achieve their ends, they worked with various reform coalitions and they often tailored their rhetoric to strengthen those coalitions.

And though they believed that women had a special affinity for social welfare work, progressive women did not rely on the notion that women had a natural sympathy for the poor. Tackling the social problems of the day, they believed, required hardheaded research. "A colony of efficient and intelligent women," Florence Kelley wrote of her colleagues at Hull House in 1892.[9] Three years later, the women of Hull House published the famous detailed survey of social conditions in Chicago, *Hull House Maps and Papers*, now considered a major work in the early history of American social science. Women conducted detailed social investigations as part of their campaigns on behalf of protective labor legislation. And at the Children's Bureau, Lathrop campaigned on behalf of public health initiatives for infant and maternal care and against child labor by first launching major investigations of the conditions that she wanted government to address.

A conviction that knowledge about social conditions would lead to social change, implemented through modern “scientific” methods, was a hallmark of progressive social reformers, both male and female, but for women researchers, the determination to study social problems opened up new opportunities to forge a place in the emerging social sciences. Women often founded and developed the first graduate schools of social work. In turn, the professionalization of social work provided women with a number of professional opportunities, not only as teachers in graduate training programs. As the new fields of child and family welfare were taken up by local, state, and ultimately, the national government, social feminists argued successfully that women ought to perform these jobs. In 1919, the Children’s Bureau under Lathrop employed 150 women and only 19 men.[10] Women also took jobs in the US Women’s Bureau, founded in the aftermath of World War I to attend to the needs of working women. In 1914, Congress funded educational extension programs in rural areas, which included home economics. Working for the United States Department of Agriculture as home economists, women provided information on new household technologies and worked to spread the new home economics education out to the countryside.[11]

In rendering “professional” advice to poor mothers, advocating the use of modern housekeeping and nutritional and medical practices, and promoting the supervision of families in the juvenile court, the progressive women surely exhibited class biases. Progressive reformers were often too sure they knew what was best for the poor. But more so than most reformers of the day, women like Lathrop, Kelley, and Adams had an appreciation for the real problems faced by the poor; Lathrop, specifically, had a special respect for the hard work of mothers, especially poor mothers. Convinced that poverty and inadequate services, not character defects, were responsible for disease, malnutrition, delinquency, and premature death among poor families, Lathrop and her staff at the Children’s Bureau worked tirelessly to prove it to others.

The genuine efforts of social feminists to reach across class lines were born of their belief that shared experiences among women, and shared ideals, could erase class differences. Yet immigrant women, living with families that were often struggling just to make ends meet, often had priorities that differed from the more prosperous women seeking to help them. As a labor activist from the working class, Leonora O'Reilly worked with elite women in a variety of reform organizations, formed close friendships with wealthy women, and was a founder of the New York WTUL, yet at various times she complained about upper-class condescension.[12] The class divide existed among women within minority groups as well. Newly arrived Russian Jewish women often resented what they perceived to be condescension on the part of the women of the NCJW, even though the wealthier women did provide critical help for immigrants. Similarly, the commitment to uplift on the part of black women in the NACW meant providing essential social services to their poorer sisters, but the more prosperous women often had difficulty understanding and appreciating some of the concerns of poorer women.

If class prevented women from uniting, reaching across racial lines was even more problematic. While white women could be patronizing when it came to immigrants, their attitude toward African American mothers could be even more troubling, and steeped in assumptions about the superiority of all European cultures. Many progressive women assumed that European immigrants could learn modern values regarding good mothers, but most believed black Americans could not. Since settlement houses were largely segregated, black women could not and did not rely on white settlement houses, founding their own, such as the Frederick Douglass Center in Chicago, developed by the activists Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Fannie Williams, and white reformer Celia Parker Woolley. In 1897, Victoria Earl Matthews established New York City's White Rose Mission, the first black settlement run exclusively by African Americans.[13] Black women, like their white counterparts, also pushed women's suffrage, only to find that the suffrage organizations such as NAWSA

were at best indifferent regarding the issue of black access to suffrage and at worst, hostile.

Most white reformers were limited by the prejudices of their day, but some of the most prominent stood out for their broader vision of equal rights. Florence Kelley and Jane Addams were strong supporters of African American suffrage; although they both had been active members of NAWSA, they publicly protested the organization's endorsement of a states' rights position on the question of whether or not black Americans should be given equal access to the ballot box. Kelley, Adams, and Lathrop were early and active members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The decade that followed World War I saw the demobilization of most progressive initiatives. Efforts to enhance government responsibility for social welfare took a back seat to nativist campaigns and moves to decrease the power of trade unions while increasing the ability of American corporations to operate unimpeded by government regulations. By the middle of the 1920s most of the progressive women's organizations and their members were facing well-publicized accusations that they were part of a vast radical conspiracy that was determined to bring a communist government to the United States, just as the Bolsheviks had recently done in Russia.

Yet the achievements of the earlier decades had long-term effects that outlasted the postwar backlash. A younger generation of women remained employed in government agencies such as the Children's Bureau and the Women's Bureau. In 1933, three years into America's greatest economic depression, the issues of social welfare moved front and center on the national agenda. When Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency that March, progressive women who had actively supported his candidacy and worked hard to get out the vote were in a position to demand they be given even greater roles in the federal government. The appointment of Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor, the first woman to

head a federal cabinet department, was evidence of their political power. A former head of the New York Consumers League, former industrial commissioner for New York State, and former state labor commissioner for New York Governor Franklin Roosevelt, Perkins, and the progressive women around her and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, would now work successfully to implement national legislation on child labor, income supports for needy Americans, and a whole host of issues that had long been at the heart of their political agenda.

[1] See Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890–1933* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[2] Daniel Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982), 123.

[3] Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890–1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46.

[4] Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 257.

[5] Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation’s Work: The Rise of Women’s Political Culture, 1830–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 186.

[6] “Report of the Propaganda Committee,” *Report of the Mothers’ Pension League of Allegheny County, 1915–1916* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), n.p.

[7] Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed*, 45–46; Michael Willrich, *City of Courts: Socializing Justice in Progressive Era Chicago* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[8] “Why Women Should Vote,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* 27 (January 1910), 1–22.

[9] Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation’s Work*, 194.

[10] Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion*, 51.

[11] Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 289.

[12] Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 75.

[13] Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890–1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 100.

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