

# The Ambiguous Legacies of Women's Progressivism

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Most undergraduates come into my classroom convinced that men have so dominated American political life that they are responsible for all the good and evil in America's public past. The history of progressive reform usually persuades them otherwise. Students discover that black and white women, by the hundreds of thousands—even millions—threw themselves into progressive reform, helping to chart the direction of public policy and American values for the century to come. When they learn this, students want to believe that such activism and power must have tended unambiguously to liberate women. My job is to explain that this is not altogether the case.

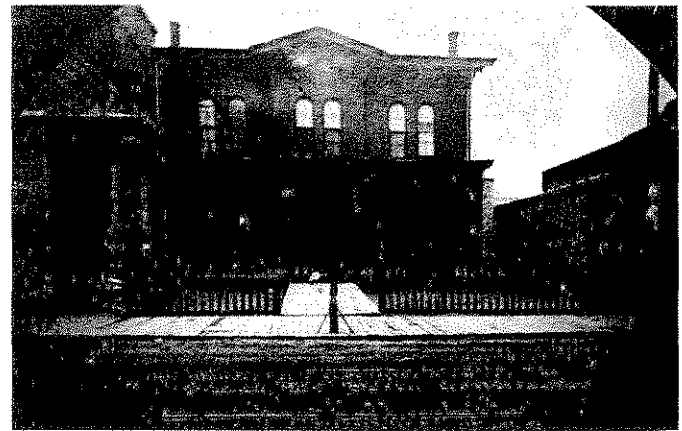
The truth is that female progressive activism left a complicated legacy to twentieth-century American women. First, women reformers generally failed to overcome (and white activists often worked to sustain) racial divisions in American life. Second, black and white female progressives changed "the place" of American women in many important senses, especially in winning admittance to the polls and the policymaking table. Third, despite carving out significant public space for women, female progressives—mostly white in this case—embedded in public policy the notion that motherhood and economic independence were incompatible. Women reformers thus empowered successive generations of women in some ways while continuing to deny them the multiplicity of roles open to men.

Most women's activism took place through the many local, regional, and national organizations that women formed around 1900. The sheer number of women participating in these associations boggles the late-twentieth-century mind and suggests an engaged, cohesive female citizenry well before the achievement of women's suffrage. For instance, two hundred local white women's clubs joined together in 1890 to form the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), which by 1920 claimed over a million members. Along with the National Mothers' Congress (NMC), formed in 1897, the GFWC became a vehicle for moderate white women's political activism. In similar fashion, one hundred middle-class black women's clubs created the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896, and by 1914 this group claimed fifty thousand members in one thousand local clubs. Jewish women organized the National Council of Jewish

Women in 1893, and black Baptist women founded the Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Convention in 1900. That organization alone embraced over one million members.<sup>1</sup>

Although gender and race segregation were the rule among civic organizations early in this century, there were exceptions. Some women participated in gender-integrated groups like the National Child Labor Committee, which targeted child labor as an urgent public problem, and some women helped to found such gender- and race-integrated groups as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League. One of the most important progressive organizations, the National Consumers League (NCL), was ostensibly a gender-integrated group, though white women dominated it throughout the period, and thousands of women—overwhelmingly white—invigorated the Progressive party of 1912.<sup>2</sup>

In these organizations, women pursued an agenda that set them squarely in the social justice wing of progressivism. They aimed to ameliorate the worst suffering caused by rapid industrialization, immigration, and urbanization without forsaking



The mansion of the late Chicago businessman Charles Hull served as the original home of Jane Addams's famous social settlement. This photo of Hull House was taken around 1893. (Courtesy of the Jane Addams Memorial Collection, Special Collections, The University Library, The University of Illinois at Chicago, Negative 146.)

capitalism altogether. To do so, they strove to make government at all levels more responsible for the social and economic welfare of citizens, and though many hoped ultimately to improve the lives of America's entire working class or the whole community of color, most women reformers found that they were especially effective when they spoke specifically to the needs of women and children. Their agendas ran the gamut from anti-lynching campaigns to the prohibition of alcohol, from maximum hours laws to women's suffrage, from improved educational opportunities for African-American children to the abolition of prostitution. A brief article can glimpse only a tiny portion of their work.

One example, the campaign for protective labor legislation, reveals some of the complex meanings of women's progressivism. Although many working-class women believed the solution to workplace problems lay in unionization, some accepted the middle-class preference for legislation as the surest route to job-related improvements. Thus, both groups—organized, for instance, in the National Women's Trade Union League—lobbied their states for guarantees of factory safety, maximum hours laws, and less often, minimum wage provisions as well. Many states passed such laws and even hired women as factory inspectors to enforce them.

These legislative successes were threatened in 1905, when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its famous *Lochner* decision. In it, the Court struck down a New York law that regulated the hours of bakers, an overwhelmingly male group. The Court ruled that states could interfere in the freedom of contract only if long hours constituted a clear health risk either to the workers themselves or to the general public.

Women reformers would not see their protective laws undone. Indeed, their determination to sustain protective labor legislation led to their participation in a second case, *Muller v. Oregon*. In 1903, Oregon passed a law that limited the hours of women in industrial work to ten per day. Two years later, the state prepared a case against laundry owner Curt Muller for violation of the law. Muller took the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, where he expected the reasoning in *Lochner* to strike down Oregon's law. The NCL, with the fiery Florence Kelley at its head, took up Oregon's fight, leading the charge for protective legislation for women workers.

Kelley, who had fought for and implemented a similar law in Illinois, hired Louis Brandeis to argue against Muller. Kelley's colleague, Josephine Goldmark, aided Brandeis in preparing a precedent-setting brief. Providing over one hundred pages of evidence that showed that women workers were hurt by long hours in ways that men were not, the brief argued that women workers warranted the state's interference in freedom of contract even when men did not. In 1908, the Supreme Court accepted their arguments, concluding that "woman's physical structure and the performance of maternal functions place her at a disadvantage in the struggle for subsistence".<sup>3</sup>

Women reformers thus won a progressive end—government intervention in the economy on behalf of workers—by perpetuating an older belief in male/female difference and moreover inscribing that difference into law. In this crusade, activist women, mostly middle-class and white, gained public power for

themselves while at the same time cementing in public policy a view of working women as peculiarly vulnerable workers. This image of working women, while justifying legislation that genuinely helped many, made it impossible for women to compete effectively with men in many sectors of the labor market. This law created a complicated bequest to later generations of American women. Moreover, these maximum hours laws, antecedents of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, also supported racial difference, not explicitly as in the case of gender, but implicitly, by omitting from coverage the occupations in which African-American women were heavily represented: agricultural labor and domestic service.

Another campaign rooted in a belief in the difference between women and men was the movement for mothers' pensions. Mothers' pensions were public stipends paid to mothers—usually widows—who found themselves without male support. The purpose of these payments was to allow impoverished mothers to remain at home with their children rather than having to put them in an orphanage or neglect them while working for wages. Led especially by the NMC and the GFWC, white activists lobbied their state governments for such programs and won them in virtually every state by the mid 1920s. These programs, unfortunately poorly funded and often unjustly administered, set the precedent for Aid to Dependent Children, a federal program enacted as part of the Social Security Act in 1935 during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.<sup>4</sup>

African-American women reformers, seeing that social workers often reserved mothers' pensions for white women, lobbied for their extension to qualified African-American women. Simultaneously however, they promoted day care services as an alternative response to mothers' need to work for pay. These services revealed not only black women's suspicion of government programs—based in part on the disenfranchisement of African-American men and spread of Jim Crow laws in the early twentieth century—but also their greater acceptance of working mothers. Poor wages for men were so endemic to African-American communities that black reformers could not so easily envision a world in which mothers were spared paid labor, and so they were more ready than white women to create institutions that allowed women to be both good mothers and good workers.<sup>5</sup>

In both black and white neighborhoods, day care services were often provided by other, multifaceted progressive women's institutions. Indeed, the quintessential progressive women's institutions were social settlements and neighborhood unions. Social settlements first appeared in the United States in the 1880s. They were places where middle-class women and men lived in the midst of working-class, largely immigrant neighborhoods. Their purpose was to bridge the gap between the classes. By the turn of the century, settlements existed in most sizable cities. Educated women took the lead in the establishment of settlement communities. Once acquainted with their working-class neighbors, these middle-class women created social services that they believed their neighbors needed. Much of the time, settlement residents piloted local health services, educational series, or recreational programs and then lobbied their municipal, county, or state government to provide permanent



To counter the claim that suffragists deserted their families or disrespected motherhood, suffragists often took their children on parade with them, as some did in this 1912 demonstration in New York City. (Library of Congress, Division of Prints and Photographs.)

funding and oversight. In this way, settlement residents became leaders in progressive reform.

The most famous social settlement was Hull House in Chicago. Founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, Hull House set the standard for the hundreds of settlements that subsequently opened in cities all over the country. Beginning with a day nursery (considered a regrettable, stop-gap measure by the white reformers) and evening classes and clubs for its immigrant neighbors, Hull House eventually housed seventy middle-class residents, a library for the neighborhood, a community theater, a gym, playground, labor museum, many classrooms and clubhouses for adults and children, and a coffee house. It offered a visiting nurse and employment counseling to the neighborhood, as well as a meeting ground for unions and political groups. It was a vital hub of neighborhood life and provided the initiative and/or support for much progressive legislation, including protective legislation for women workers and children, women's suffrage, workers' compensation programs, increased funding for public education, and the creation of the U.S. Children's Bureau.

Besides women's suffrage, the Children's Bureau may have been progressive women's most significant national achievement. The idea for a federal agency devoted to child welfare is usually credited to Lillian Wald, founder and head resident of the Henry Street Settlement in New York City. Herself a visiting nurse, Wald joined Jane Addams in creating a female reform network that stretched across the country by 1903. That year Wald first proposed that the U.S. government create a bureau to collect information and propose legislation of benefit to the country's children. In 1912, Congress finally rewarded the women's lobbying efforts by establishing the Children's Bureau in the U.S. Department of Labor.

Addams immediately argued that a woman should head the new agency and proposed in particular Julia Lathrop, a long-time resident of Hull House. To everyone's surprise, President William Howard Taft accepted the recommendation, and

Lathrop became the first woman ever to head a federal agency. She quickly hired other women to staff the bureau, which became a female beachhead in the federal government for decades to come. In 1921, Lathrop and her staff drafted and won from Congress the first piece of federal social/welfare legislation: the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act, which sent public health nurses into nearly every corner of America to teach pregnant women how best to care for themselves and their newborns. This set another precedent for New Deal programs.<sup>6</sup>

Although African-American women also founded social settlements, as did some interracial groups, more typical of black women's institution building was the neighborhood union. Such entities differed from social settlements mainly in that few reformers actually lived in them, reflecting in part the tendency of black women reformers to be married while their white counterparts often remained unmarried. Many of these progressive institutions called themselves missions, community centers, institutional churches, or even schools, but like settlements, they provided meeting places and services for those living nearby, and they joined the middle and working classes in local political crusades.<sup>7</sup>

The most famous such center was the Neighborhood Union in Atlanta. Founded in 1908 by Lugenia Burns Hope, the union provided day care services, health care and health education, and playgrounds. It sponsored clubs and classes for children and adults alike, and organized lobbying campaigns to obtain greater funding for the education of African-American children, as well as improved street lights and sanitation in black neighborhoods. Members urged public relief for the unemployed. The Neighborhood Union's appeals for governmental support remind us that even though black women had less hope for a positive response from government officials than white women, they did not—even in this hour of miserable race relations—give up entirely on obtaining government resources.<sup>8</sup>

Just as social settlements and neighborhood unions were usually race-segregated, so were organizations that fought for women's suffrage. Ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 stood as a monumental victory for women progressives; it is one of the signal achievements of progressive reform. But even that fight to expand democracy was marked by racial division and hierarchy. Hoping to win support from white southerners, leaders in the North refused to admit black women's clubs to the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which, with two million members in 1917, was the largest suffrage organization in U.S. history. In response, black women formed their own suffrage associations—like the Equal Suffrage League founded by Ida Wells-Barnett in Chicago—or fought for enfranchisement through multi-issue groups like the NACW or the black Baptist Women's Convention.<sup>9</sup> Complicating black women's struggle for suffrage was their simultaneous fight for the re-enfranchisement of African-American men in the South, whose right to vote was eroding in the face of brutal violence, literacy tests, and poll taxes. When the women's suffrage amendment passed, no state could deny suffrage on



**Lugenia Burns Hope founded the Neighborhood Union in Atlanta. While white progressives in the South usually pursued policies that assured white dominance, Hope's activism reminds us that southern African Americans were also progressives. (Courtesy of the National Park Service, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site, Washington, DC.)**

the basis of sex, but the same measures that disenfranchised black men in the South also prevented most black women from approaching the polls. Thus, not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did women's suffrage achieve a complete victory.

Black and white women were integral to progressivism. No history of progressive reform could possibly be complete without discussing the campaign for women's suffrage, the work of neighborhood unions, or the struggle for protective legislation.

These efforts by millions of American women suggest several conclusions. This history illuminates the source of sometimes contradictory views of women embedded in public policy and personal identities since the Progressive Era: while most American women received the vote by 1920, imparting a new parity with men in public life, the same period produced legislation that construed women primarily as mothers rather than as workers and as more vulnerable, weaker workers than men. This ambiguous legacy has reverberated through the twentieth century.

The history of these women reformers moreover reveals some of the ways that race has shaped women's experience and political agendas in the past, and it embodies the ways that racism has crippled democracy and betrayed democratic movements in the United States. It reminds us that the renewed political life we might create in the twenty-first century, if it is to fulfill

the promise of democracy, must strive to overcome the racial hierarchy that progressives—and all of their successors—failed to defeat.

## Notes

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2. Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890–1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990), 45–46, 100–14, 146–96, 274; Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830–1930," in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 43–93; and Robyn Muncy, "'Women Demand Recognition': Women Candidates in Colorado's Election of 1912," in *We Have Come to Stay: American Women and Political Parties, 1880–1960*, ed. Melanie Gustafson, Kristie Miller, and Elisabeth Israels Perry (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 45–54.
3. *Muller v. Oregon*, 208 U.S. 412; Nancy Woloch, *Muller v. Oregon: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996); Sybil Lipschultz, "Social Feminism and Legal Discourse," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 2 (Fall 1989): 131–60; and Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Hull House in the 1890s: A Community of Women Reformers," *Signs* 10 (Summer 1985): 658–77.
4. Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 135–66; and Theda Skócpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992), 424–79.
5. Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism: 1890–1945," *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 559–90; Eileen Boris, "The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the 'Political,'" *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 2 (Fall 1989): 25–49.
6. Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
7. Salem, *To Better Our World*; and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
8. Jacqueline Anne Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope: Black Southern Reformer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).
9. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830–1920," in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1978); and Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 226.

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