
The “Quickened Conscience”: Women’s Voluntarism and the State, 1890–1920

The history of voluntarism among American women’s organizations offers a valuable perspective on debates now taking place about the nature of civil society and its relationship to the state. Do state initiatives limit those of voluntary agencies? Does the expansion of state responsibilities reduce the effectiveness of voluntary groups? Is society best served by leaving the solution of social problems to voluntary associations independent of state authority and control?

These questions have acquired compelling resonance today, as Americans seek political strategies to address the social and economic changes wrought by an emerging global economy. Should we rely more heavily on voluntary effort and trim the state accordingly? Or should we expect voluntary groups to work closely

Many of our civil associations, much of our political culture, and the basic tenets of what might be called our current social contract emerged during those decades. I want to describe the role of women in this history, and then offer some general observations about its relevance to our current preoccupations.

Empowering Women

More than any other factor, the separation of church and state accounts for the remarkable strength and independence of women’s voluntary associations in the United States. Beginning with Virginia in 1776 and ending with Connecticut in the 1840s, all American states eventually broke the traditional ties that had bound church and state together. This process greatly empowered the laity, whose financial donations now took the place of state monies in supporting the ministry and the church, and accordingly put greater control over church affairs into their hands.

The empowerment of the religious laity had the unexpected consequence of empowering women, not only because women constituted a majority of church members, but also because, beginning in the 1820s, women were able to form vigorous pan-Protestant lay organizations, which challenged the authority of ministers and generated an autonomous social agenda. The best example of such an organization before 1870 was the American Female Moral Reform Society (AFMRS). When the national arm of the AFMRS was formed in 1839, it united almost five hundred preexisting locals scattered in the towns and villages of New England and New York. The AFMRS had no equivalent in England or Europe, where church and state remained entwined and the female laity enjoyed less autonomy.

In the depression winter of 1873–74, another pan-Protestant organization, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, emerged to supplant the AFMRS. By 1883 a branch of the WCTU existed in almost every American county. According to historian Ruth Bordin, the WCTU reached its height around 1890, when, in keeping with its campaign to “Do Everything,” in

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with formal political institutions? Historical studies cannot answer these present-day questions directly, but by offering models of past options they can illuminate current ones.

This essay focuses on women’s voluntarism during the watershed of American history between 1890 and 1920 known as the Progressive era. During this period, traditions of voluntarism and traditions of limited government in the United States fostered women’s associations of extraordinary strength and independence. The fact that many social problems associated with rapid industrialization, rapid urbanization, and massive immigration remained unsolved by predominantly male institutions—whether civil or affiliated with the state—offered a fertile field for women’s activism. At the same time, women’s voluntary organizations added crucial ingredients to the political culture, which, with the aid of the state and of male civil institutions, created an effective new model for addressing social problems.

Chicago alone it maintained "two day nurseries, two Sunday schools, an industrial school, a mission that sheltered four thousand homeless or destitute women in a twelve-month period, a free medical dispensary that treated over sixteen hundred patients a year, a lodging house for men that had [by 1889] provided temporary housing for over fifty thousand men, and a low-cost restaurant."

Throughout the United States, the WCTU provided prodigious social services to local communities and offered women a wide range of leadership opportunities within their communities. By 1896 twenty-five out of a total of thirty-nine "departments" within the WCTU dealt wholly or in large part with nontemperance issues, such as prisons and jails, juvenile welfare, and "the industrial question." To maximize their political power, in the 1870s WCTU locals took the shape of congressional districts, and in 1881 the Union endorsed woman suffrage.

Thus, by the time women's organizations began to address the social problems of the 1890s, two generations of women's vigorous and autonomous social activism had preceded them. The pattern of women's participation in American public culture was well established. Although they lacked rights as individuals (especially as married persons), they exercised power collectively through women's organizations.

The Role of Education

The generation of women who did so much to reshape American public culture between 1890 and 1920 built on traditions of activism that arose from the separation of church and state, but their opportunities for community service were greatly expanded by their increased access to higher education. By 1880 one of every three students enrolled in American institutions of higher learning was female. Three kinds of institutions produced this remarkable result. First, elite women's colleges, such as Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley, began accepting students between 1865 and 1875, providing equivalents to elite men's colleges. Second, state universities, established through the allocation of public lands in the Morrill Act of 1862 and required to be "open for all," made college educations accessible for the first time to large numbers of middle-class daughters in the nation's central and western states. Third, large numbers of women were enrolled in normal colleges or teacher-training institutions; indeed, the chief force driving women's access to higher education between 1830 and 1870 was their employment as teachers in the hamlets and villages of the newly settled West.

Though a small percentage of all women in the 1890s, college-trained women in American cities exercised an influence disproportionate to their numbers. Vida

Scudder, a Smith graduate, summarized the spirit of their empowerment in 1890: "We stand here as a new Fact—new to all intents and purposes, within the last quarter of a century: Our lives are in our hands." Women's unprecedented access to higher education in the United States by 1880 created a generation of leaders capable of effectively channeling women's activism to meet the new challenges of their modernizing society.

The Social Settlement Movement

The best-known and most influential flowering of women's public culture in the 1890s was the social settlement movement. Imitating the British example of Toynbee Hall, settlements consisted of middle-class people who took up residence and tried to promote civil institutions in poor, working-class urban neighborhoods. In the United States this movement was predominantly female, and the neighborhoods were populated by immigrants. Like Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago in 1889, most of the movement's leaders were women who had been born around 1860 and had spent the 1880s searching for work commensurate with their talents. At all levels, the settlement movement attracted women college graduates who had few alternatives other than marriage or teaching.

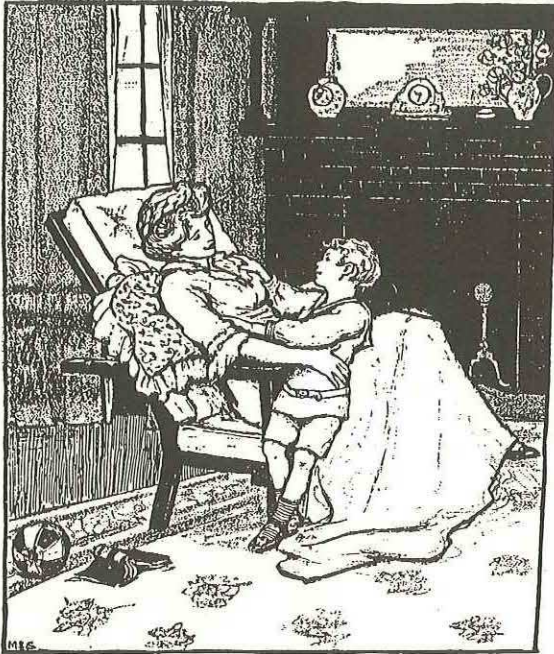
By 1910 over four hundred settlements had been established in American cities—most drawing on private sources for financial support, some on organizations like the YWCA, some on churches. About three quarters were founded by women. In about half, all the residents were women, and in another third the

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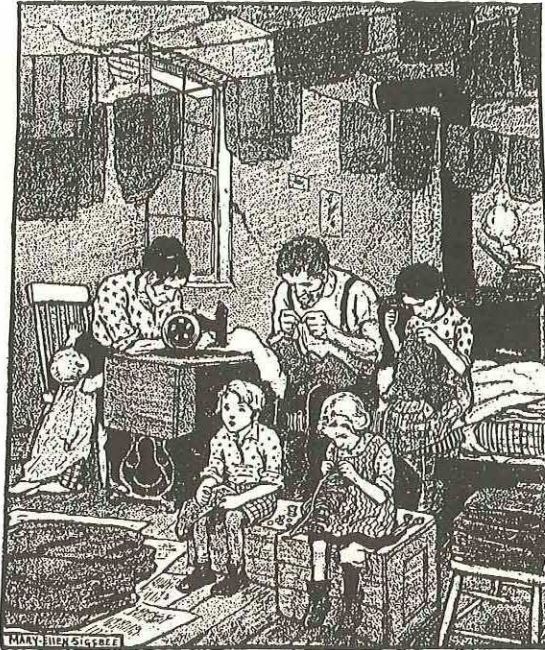
majority of residents were women. Settlements were sites of tremendous originality, creating new civic institutions, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which arose out of the Henry Street Settlement in 1909, and conceiving important public policy innovations, such as the creation of the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1912, which in turn originated the first federal health legislation, the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, passed in 1920.

Women reformers affiliated with the social settlement movement formed the core of what has been called a "female dominion" of reform. Much of the power of that dominion rested on the support it received from a wide range of women's voluntary

TO THE WOMAN IN THE HOME



How can a mother rest content with this—



When such conditions exist as this?

There are thousands of children working in sweat-shops like the one in the picture. There are thousands of children working in mines and mills and factories. Thousands more are being wronged and cheated by Society in countless ways.

IS NOT THIS **YOUR** BUSINESS?

Intelligent citizens WHO CARED could change all this—providing always, of course, that they had the power of the ballot.

DO **YOU** CARE?

Mothers are responsible for the welfare of children.
This duty as mothers requires that they should demand

VOTES FOR WOMEN!

NATIONAL WOMAN SUFFRAGE PUBLISHING CO., Inc.

PUBLISHERS FOR THE

NATIONAL AMERICAN WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION
605 FIFTH AVENUE  NEW YORK CITY

organizations formed in this period, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Congress of Mothers (later called the PTA), the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Association of Colored Women, the American Association of University Women, and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Support also came from

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the woman suffrage movement, which gradually muted its defense of suffrage as a right and amplified its advocacy of suffrage on the grounds of the reform agenda that women could accomplish with the vote. For example, a flyer issued by the National American Woman Suffrage Association around 1910, "To the Woman in the Home," advocated votes for women on the basis of their duty to end sweatshop working conditions.

Women's Activism and the State

There is no doubt that traditions of voluntarism and limited government formed a positive and innovative context for women's organizations in the United States. The strength of women's voluntarism drew on the strength of voluntarism within American political culture generally. Yet these traditions were themselves a fundamental obstacle that prevented American political culture from addressing some of the era's most grievous problems. For women's organizations, the challenge was to reach beyond voluntarism to forge new models of public responsibility involving the state.

Courts enforced the concept of limited government by prohibiting legislatures from responding to many civil groups who advocated enlarged state responsibility. For example, after the fledgling American Federation of Labor in the early 1880s obtained the passage of a New York law that prohibited the production of cigars in tenements, the New York Appeals Court ruled the law unconstitutional. As head of the AFL, Samuel Gompers concluded that "the power of the courts to pass upon the constitutionality of the law so complicates reform by legislation as to seriously restrict the effectiveness of that method." But women's organizations continued to pursue "reform by legislation," and with some success. Two years after the *Lochner* decision (1906), in which the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a New York law limiting the hours of work for bakers, the National Consumers' League (NCL) won a landmark case permitting regulation of

working hours for women, on the grounds that women were different from men and deserved different treatment.

As important as such victories were, women's organizations did not pursue their public agenda through court battles alone. In fact, women's voluntarism in the Progressive era overflows with examples of organizations forming partnerships with the state to implement goals that could not be achieved without the power of the state. This paradigm is well represented in the "White Label" campaign of the National Consumers' League, which between 1899 and 1917 sought to improve working conditions in the garment industry.

The White Label

The first league, founded in New York City in 1890, began when working-class women appealed to middle-class consumers about their working conditions in a hat-making firm. In 1898, Florence Kelley, who the next year became executive director of the national organization, proposed a White Label that would identify products from factories that complied with state factory law, hired no children under 16, made all goods on the premises, and had no employees working overtime. Kelley identified some factories

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already worthy of the label, designed the label, created a model contract between manufacturers and consumers' leagues, and devised "a well-considered plan for advertising the label."

Although the NCL and its local leagues included some trade union members, consumers' leagues consisted overwhelmingly of white, middle-class women. Anti-sweatshop campaigns in major American cities in the 1890s appealed to middle-class self-interest by emphasizing the public health threat posed by garments produced in disease-ridden tenements. Middle-class consumers were taught to fear that such garments might import smallpox, diphtheria, or other diseases into their homes. The new germ theory of disease transmission lent credence to this view.

Yet middle-class consumers were not alone in their concern for clean and healthful working conditions. Such conditions also mattered to workers. Dank air, filthy floors, and stinking toilets were some of the most objectionable features of sweatshop labor. "The shops are unsanitary—that's the word that is generally used, but there ought to be a worse one used," strike leader

THE CONSUMERS' LEAGUE
OF
MASSACHUSETTS

4 Joy Street, Boston.



THIS LABEL

Certifies that the goods which carry it have been made in clean and safe factories under good conditions, and that the manufacturers who use the label employ no children and give out no work to be made up outside the factories.

April, 1907

*White Label
Consumers' League of Massachusetts
Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College*

Clara Lemlish said in 1909. Tuberculosis was common in the garment industry—induced by the long hours and damp air—and spread rapidly in unventilated rooms, so the quality of air could be a life-and-death matter to sweatshop workers. Thus health issues forged a common bond between consumers and producers in the garment industry—a bond that promoted the NCL's view that it was speaking for the welfare of the whole society, not the narrow interests of one group.

Acting as though they believed that the state, too, represented the welfare of the whole society, league members worked closely with state and local officials. The Louisville league exemplified this process in 1902. Though its campaign began by targeting consumers (who were asked to purchase goods carrying the Consumers' League label) and leading department stores (who were urged to carry such goods), the league also assisted, as its minutes show,

in passing the Child Labor Law and the Compulsory Education Law and amending them at many sessions of the Legislature. Cooperated in enforcing both, by working with the truant officers, visiting the homes of truants, and supplying shoes and clothing necessary to return them to school.

Later the league boasted that it had "secured the passage of the ten hour law for women, which is the only labor law for women in Kentucky."

In Louisville, as elsewhere, the label campaign ineluctably carried league members into new realms of knowledge about their communities. It did so by raising detailed questions about working conditions that were new to this middle-class constituency. Before local leagues could award the label to manufacturers, they had to answer a multitude of questions about the work process. How far below the standard set by the Consumers' Label were their own state laws? Should the state issue licenses for home workers? Was their own state high or low on the NCL's ranked list showing the numbers of illiterate child workers in each state? Should laws prohibit the labor of children at age 14 or 16? Should exceptions be made for the children of widows? Could workers live on their wages, or were they forced to augment their pay with relief or charitable donations? How energetically were state factory laws enforced? How could local factory standards be improved? Such questions, most of which were quite alien to middle-class women in 1890, by 1905 had acquired personal meaning and moral significance for thousands of politically active women.

Most of these questions assumed that the NCL's goals could not be fully implemented without the coercive power of the state to intervene in the relationship between employer and employee. Indeed, it is not too much to say that their campaign would not have been

possible without the state's coercive power as a weapon in their armory. In that sense, their own robust intervention in public culture was decisively aided rather than diminished by the power of the state, and the more responsive the state was to their interests, the more actively they promoted their goals.

The NCL's cooperation with "enlightened" businessmen was also an important feature of its success. The alliance of large department store owners with the League's White Label campaign exemplified the tripartite dimensions of its coalitions: they included entrepreneurs as well as reformers and their grassroots supporters. Economically, the campaign aided large producers who could achieve economies of scale in the

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pricing of their goods, and who profited from the more stable workforce attracted by better working conditions. These economic facts of life became dramatically apparent in the partnership that John Wanamaker and his department stores forged with the White Label campaign. One of the League's largest approved manufacturers, Wanamaker originated what became a staple of the campaign—a series of exhibits in which garments bearing the label were augmented by pictures of sweatshop labor compared to pictures of workers producing Wanamaker garments. Wanamaker carried the exhibit to state and international fairs throughout the United States in the decade before World War I. The White Label campaign offered Wanamaker a perfect opportunity to give his commercial leadership a moral aura, and at the same time consolidate his economic power.

After 1908 the National Consumers' League moved away from the White Label campaign and put its public power to new uses. Working with its local league in Oregon, the NCL sponsored, in *Muller v. Oregon*, a pathbreaking argument before the Supreme Court, in which the Court for the first time recognized the validity of sociological evidence. The so-called "Brandeis Brief" was actually written by Brandeis's sister-in-law, Josephine Goldmark, who was Florence Kelley's chief assistant. In 1917 the League again worked with its Oregon local to establish the constitutionality of hours regulations for men in non-hazardous occupations. Between 1910 and 1923, the NCL conducted a successful campaign for the passage of minimum wage legislation, which in 1938 became the basis for the adoption of minimum wage provisions in the Fair Labor Standards Act. In this way, the White Label campaign

became an opening wedge for more general protections for American wage earners.

Lessons of the Campaign

How does the White Label campaign illuminate our concerns about the relationship between civil associations and the state? Four conclusions seem relevant.

First, the campaign drew women into public life in ways that validated what might be called their "social citizenship" almost twenty years before the passage of the woman suffrage amendment to the Constitution. By confronting large social questions that grew out of but reached beyond issues related to women and children, women demonstrated their value as equals to men in public life.

Second, women's voices "elaborated and made authoritative" (in Tom Bender's phrase) new forms of power in public life. The campaign created a new "supply" of women's power. The "demand" for that power came from the need within newly evolving liberalism for an ethical buttress to support state intervention in the economic marketplace. The step from concern about women and children to advocacy of state intervention was an easy one for many women to take.

Third, NCL members provided innovative answers to "the social question." In its component parts, "the social question" included the largest issues then being debated in public life: What do the social classes owe one another? How could civil society affect the marketplace economy? Where should middle-class people stand in relation to the changes precipitated by massive industrialization, urbanization, and immigration? Where should middle-class people stand in relation to the often violent struggle between capital and labor? And how might that conflict be mediated by the state?

Fourth, in our own time liberalism has been defined as a set of principles whereby practitioners of divergent conceptions of the good can peacefully coexist. But liberalism requires what today's public culture calls a "level playing field." Consumers' Leagues and other women's voluntary associations helped create that fictive field.

The Fate of Women's Activism

We can make several general statements about the relevance of this model of problem-solving to the present. First, it shows that transformative economic change can become an impetus for extensive social and political change. Second, it suggests that the potential for solving social problems lies in a fruitful combination of civil and state initiatives rather than a withering of state initiatives. Third, the model suggests that given the voluntarist biases in American political culture, we

will always be debating where the line should be drawn to limit state authority. That debate arises more from the vitality of voluntarism in our political culture than from the power of our state.

At first glance, the Progressive model might make one wonder whether growing government capacity after 1930 undermined the civic vitality of women's pre-1920 activism. But a closer examination reveals this conclusion to be unwarranted. Historians devote much of their energies to analyzing causal relationships among variables. A simple correlation—such as that between civic activism and limited government capacity at one time, and declining civic activism and government with larger capacity at another time—may or may not reflect a causal relationship. In fact, everything we know about women's activism before 1920 leads us to conclude that this correlation was not causal.

Historians have identified a multitude of causes that led to the decline in women's civic activism. The two most important were the end of the suffrage movement with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, and "Red Scare" attacks on women's activism by hyper-patriotic, right-wing groups in the 1920s. Also important was the cultural shift in the psychological construction of women's identity away from a nineteenth-century emphasis on the differences between the sexes to a twentieth-century emphasis on the similarities between the sexes. Whereas the nineteenth-century formulation had encouraged women's collective activism, the twentieth-century formulation discouraged women's group affiliation and instead encouraged various forms of individualism. Growing government capacity empowered women's activism before 1920, but the effectiveness of women's social agenda had already substantially declined before the New Deal of the 1930s. During the 1920s, it shifted away from social justice issues and towards a more narrow concern with women's rights (for example, the inclusion of women on juries) and clean government. After 1950, when married women between the ages of 35 and 55 entered the paid labor force in unprecedented numbers, women's activism declined even further. Thus, causes other than the expanded capacity of government explain the decline of women's activism in the second half of the twentieth century.

Is this decline irreversible? Though historians shy away from making predictions, I venture to say that new forms of voluntary association will probably emerge within American political culture. Perhaps they will be connected with the global processes that are driving so much contemporary change—massive immigration, for example, or the Internet. They are not likely to be generated by downsizing the state. On the

contrary, new forms of voluntary association are likely to need partnerships with the state to achieve their goals. If American political culture survives the global marketplace now gaining so dramatically in strength, it is likely to do so because those partnerships embody one of the most creative sites in American society.

—Kathryn Kish Sklar

Kathryn Kish Sklar, professor of history at the State University of New York-Binghamton, is the author, most recently, of *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830–1900* (Yale University Press, 1995). Sources: Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (Hill and Wang, 1967); John D. Cushing, "Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780–1833," *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 3, ser. 26 (1969); Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage from Property to Democracy, 1760–1860* (Princeton University Press, 1960); Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly*, vol. 23 (1971); Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900* (Temple University Press, 1981); Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (Yale University Press, 1985); Vida Scudder, "The Relation of College Women to Social Need," *Association of Collegiate Alumnae Publications*, series 2, no. 30 (Oct. 1890); Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (Oxford University Press, 1991); Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (Dutton, 1925); Eileen Boris, "'A Man's Dwelling House Is His Castle': Tenement House Cigarmaking and the Judicial Imperative," in *Work Engendered: Towards a New History of American Labor*, edited by Avon Baron (Cornell University Press, 1991); Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Harvard University Press, 1962); National Consumers' League annual reports, 1901–1904; Judith Walzer Leavitt, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform* (Princeton University Press, 1982); Clara Lemlich, "Life in the Shop," in *New York Evening Journal* (Nov. 28, 1909), quoted in *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, edited by Leon Stein (Quadrangle, 1977); Minutes, Consumers' League of Kentucky, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College; The Consumers' League of Ann Arbor, *Fourth Annual Report*, 1903; Mary I. Wood, *History of the General Federation of Women's Clubs for the First Twenty-Two Years of its Organization* (Dabor Social Science Publications, 1978; first edition, 1912); Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History*, vol. 73 (June 1986); Wendy Sarvasy, "From Man and Philanthropic Service to Feminist Social Citizenship," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State, and Society*, vol. 1 (Fall 1994); Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, eds., *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920–1940* (Greenwood, 1983); J. Stanley Lemons, *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (University of Illinois Press, 1973); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Yale University Press, 1987).