

## Another Mothers' Movement, 1890 to 1920

*The role of women's voluntary organizations in Progressive Era social reform*

**On July 19th, 1848**, Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented her *Declaration of Sentiments* at the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Stanton and other supporters of the early women's rights movement set in motion a wave of progress that moves us to this day. Yet the long struggle to win the vote for women is only one example of the extraordinary fortitude of 19th century woman activists.

Sympathy for Stanton's demand for enfranchisement was not universal—at a time when the ideology of domesticity was in full flower, the suggestion that women had inalienable rights and civic responsibilities was treated with derision by most men and many women. However, even women who openly rejected the appeal for women's suffrage were poised to expand their social influence beyond the boundaries of the domestic sphere.

During the Victorian and Progressive eras (1830 to 1920) millions of middle-class wives and mothers took part in grassroots political action through affiliation in women's voluntary organizations. Rather than challenging the status quo of male dominance, reform-minded clubwomen exploited the cultural ideology of their day—an idealization of womanhood that granted women moral pre-eminence and absolute authority in all matters related to the health and welfare of the family—to achieve their political goals.

From pure food and milk to better wages for women workers, reforms championed by women's groups during this period were aimed at protecting the well-being of mothers and children and preserving the maternal-child bond. These campaigns proved to be highly effective—so effective that the activities of women's voluntary organizations were central to the enactment of some of the earliest social policies in the United States.

### Women in a changing world

The rapid advance of industrialization, immigration and urbanization produced profound changes in 19th century family life—and a host of social problems of staggering proportions. While men shifted their attention to the worldly affairs of commerce and public life, women were expected to fulfill their half of the social compact through selfless dedication to motherhood and housekeeping. Wives and mothers were celebrated as the moral guardians of the household, and educators, politicians and clergymen frequently called upon mothers to apply their specialized talents to the betterment of the human race, one well-reared child at a time.

When viewed through a postfeminist lens, 19th century social conditions appear to be inordinately oppressive to women. Certainly, married women were deprived of the most basic rights of citizenship—a wife had no legal claim to personal property, or even to her own wages. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in her Seneca Falls *Declaration*, when a woman married she became “in the eye of the law, civilly dead.”

Paradoxically, the gendered division of power inherent in the ideology of “separate spheres” germinated new cultural attitudes that allowed women to flourish as social actors. The Victorian notion of “True Womanhood” upheld the “feminine” virtues of purity, piety, domesticity and submissiveness as the moral antidote to the corrupting influence of the free market. An emphasis on care-giving as a “sacred” duty provided homemakers with a sense of higher purpose, and women were urged to develop mastery over all things in the private domain. Furthermore, the popularization of domesticity through novels, homemaking manuals and magazines such as *Godey's Ladies Book* and *Ladies*

*Home Journal* prompted women to cultivate a resilient collective identity based on the ideal qualities of motherhood.

The combination of moral empowerment, feminine mastery and collective identity was a potent mix for conceptualizing a broader political role for middle-class mothers at a time when women and children from less fortunate families were suffering the devastating consequences of urban poverty. Although women were chided to direct their growing sense of social agency to home, church and charity, dutiful wives and mothers began organizing for the common good as early as 1830.

### **Banding together**

By enflaming the maternal sentiment of respectable clubwomen, female voluntary groups spearheaded a number of successful reform campaigns in the name of “social housekeeping.” Club leaders recruited volunteers to collect information on target issues (which occasionally required members to visit the work floors of factories or conduct door-to-door surveys in impoverished neighborhoods). Calls to action were disseminated through a vast network of state and local affiliates, and club members advanced campaigns at the regional level by coordinating public lectures, letter writing campaigns, and petition drives. Maternal activists also harnessed the power of the press by submitting letters and essays decrying the reprehensible conditions afflicting American mothers and children to newspapers and magazines.

By the turn of the 20th century, women had organized to promote the abolition of prostitution; women’s suffrage (achieved in 1920); temperance and prohibition (national prohibition was enacted in 1919, and later repealed); dress reform; juvenile justice and prison reform; equal wages, shorter work hours and occupational safety for working women (the U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau was formed in 1920); pensions for widowed and destitute mothers (passed into law in 40 states between 1911 and 1920); a centralized program to improve maternal and infant health (resulting in the creation of the U.S. Children’s Bureau in 1912 and the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921); the Pure Food and Drug Act (1911); child labor reform; compulsory school attendance; civil service reform; public kindergartens, urban playgrounds; and free public libraries.

The ranks of woman who rallied behind the maternalist agenda originated from two distinct sectors. Middle- and upper-class married women were frequently mobilized through membership in national women’s associations. Organizations such as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, The Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the National Congress of Mothers (which became the Parent-Teacher Association in 1908), and the National Consumer’s League were at the forefront of Progressive era reform movements. Women of color formed the National Colored Women’s Association in 1896 to support reform related to race issues. By 1900, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union was represented in every state, with more than 168,000 dues-paying members and over 7,000 local associations; in 1911, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs had over one million members.

A second group of reformers consisted of unmarried professional women with connections to the settlement house movement. Settlement houses were residential centers established and staffed by educated, middle-class men and women to provide outreach and social services to the urban poor. Hull House in Chicago (founded 1889) was one of the largest and most successful settlement projects in the U.S., and many women who trained at there—including Jane Addams, Florence Kelly and Grace Abbott—were prominent in the maternalist reform and suffrage movements.

Although clubwomen and social work professionals led dramatically different lives, they shared a core belief that women were naturally endowed with a special aptitude for tending to the welfare of others. While married women applied this ideology to their private obligations, settlement women used it to justify a dedication to public service. The two groups ultimately formed a powerful coalition committed to resolving some of the most pressing social problems of the time.

The strength of this relationship is evident in the interaction between the U.S. Children's Bureau and the General Federation of Women's Clubs in the early decades of the twentieth century. When Julia Lathrop (who began her career in public service at Hull House in the early 1890s) was appointed to head the newly formed U.S. Children's Bureau in 1912, her primary mission was to track and reduce infant mortality. Since municipal records were known to be woefully inaccurate in reporting either live births or infant deaths, Lathrop launched a nation-wide birth registration campaign. One of her first official acts was to enlist members of GFWC in the task of recording every birth in their home communities and reconciling the findings with local officials. Clubwomen were also charged with organizing public events in honor of the Children Bureau's National Baby Week. Due to their zeal for protecting the health and welfare of children, maternalist reformers were referred to (and sometimes ridiculed) as "baby savers" by the popular press.

### **The power and problems of maternalist reform**

Historians consider the maternalist reform movement instrumental to the development of the modern U.S. welfare state. But by conceptualizing the source of women's political power as an extension their domestic roles, and by advocating public policies favoring the family's sole dependency on the wages of a male head of household, maternalist reformers also succeeded in institutionalizing a class-bound idealization of motherhood that set the standard for future social programs based on a gender-biased standard of the "family wage."

Infant mortality—which, according to estimates, was as high as 30% in poor urban communities in 1900—declined rapidly after 1930. How much the work of the Children's Bureau and maternalist reformers contributed to this reduction has been questioned by scholars who observe that overall improvements in urban sanitation systems and public health regulations were probably far more effective in preserving the lives of babies than the Bureau's national campaign to mass educate mothers in the basic of infant care and feeding.

Although "maternalism" has been portrayed as a branch of early feminism, there remains some debate about whether the objectives of maternalist reformers were entirely compatible with the women's rights agenda. Certainly, the maternalist reform movement opened a new path for women's political empowerment, and many (but not all) leaders and organizations associated with the maternalist cause were also staunch supporters of women's suffrage. But because maternalism valorizes women's selfless care-giving and insists on social recognition of women's rights based on an idealization of maternal influence on shaping the character of future generations, it may be problematic to view classic maternal activism as a true form of feminism.

Nevertheless, the maternal reform movement during the Progressive Era deserves a place in our historical awareness of women's activism—both for the capacity of the maternalist ethic to engage a population that was formally disenfranchised from the mainstream political process, and for the unprecedented number of social reforms secured through the support of women's voluntary organizations.

Social and cultural conditions at the end of the 19th century presented certain women with a unique opportunity to seize the moment as their own. Although the political presence of women's voluntary groups faded significantly after the first quarter of the 20th century, many woman reformers who were attuned to the maternalist ethic continued to work for social progress, including Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins (FDR's secretary of labor, the first woman to hold a position on a presidential cabinet, and one of the principal authors of the Fair Labor Standards and Social Security acts).

If there is a larger lesson to take away from the episode of maternal activism during the Progressive Era, it may be that contemporary mothers' activists should be wary of the temptation to rework the valorization of motherhood into a platform for social action. But we should never be ashamed to emulate the extraordinary resourcefulness of our foremothers who banded together over one hundred years ago to advance their own maternal cause, or dismiss the power of their determination to shape a better world.

*Judith Stadtman Tucker*  
*March 2004*

**Suggested reading on mother's activism in the Progressive Era:**

Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Yale University Press, 1987

Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935*, Oxford University Press, 1991

Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare and the State, 1890-1930*, Illini Books, 1995.

Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, Harvard University Press, 1992

**Related articles on the MMO:**

*Morality or Equality: Maternal thinking and the social agenda*

[http://www.mothersmovement.org/features/mhoodpapers/maternalism/morality\\_equality.htm](http://www.mothersmovement.org/features/mhoodpapers/maternalism/morality_equality.htm)

---

*Author: Judith Stadtman Tucker*

*Title: Another Mothers' Movement, 1890 to 1920: The role of women's voluntary organizations in Progressive Era social reform*

*The Mothers Movement Online, March 2004*

*Reproduction for publication or compensation is prohibited without prior permission.*

*www.mothersmovement.org*

*Contact: editor@mothersmovement.org*