

WOMEN IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

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This paper aims to provide an outline of women during the progressive era, providing an indication at how they tried to reform their society and at the same time change the ideas regarding the role of women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper further goes on to review the roles of these women such as the labor organizers, suffragettes, freedom activists among others.

The progressive era was the period in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that saw the formation of initiatives to combat political and commercial corruption and finding solutions to social problems such as education, labor issues and public health problems. The atmosphere of reforms due to effects of industrialization combined with the increased job market and shifting lifestyles gave rise to new movements that were led by women. Industrialization brought about growth of major businesses that gave rise to new job fields for women such as clerks. Such opportunities allowed women to bring about new generation of women whose main focus was not household activities. They became college graduates and started seeking fulfillment outside their homes.<sup>1</sup>

The effort of women during this era was however disenchanted by the male dominated culture including the Victorian society view of the roles of females. At the time, women were not allowed to vote and even in some states, wedded females could not sign contracts without approval of their partners. As they tried to fight social tribulations they found themselves competing with rather ingrained view that women were rationally and sensitively substandard compared to their male counterparts. This led them to form support groups leading them to become leaders of social and political movements from 1890 through 1920 giving rise to the progressive era.

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<sup>1</sup> Burnham, John C. 1973 "The Progressive Era Revolution in American Attitudes Toward Sex." *The Journal of American History* 59, no. 4 (): 885-908. doi:10.2307/1918367

Most women during this era did not like the manacles that the society had placed on them. This was exemplified by Jane Addams who then became the creator of Hull House that was based in Chicago. She was the pioneer in airing out the thoughts of the first group of the college educated females. Since family constructions were seen to limit the freedoms of these women, they chose to suspend marriages or remain unmarried. The Hull House offered opportunities for such women to achieve individual contentment.

Located at the middle of the immigrants' neighborhood, the Hull House started providing various services to the surrounding communities. These women offered and operated gymnasium classes, theaters and cooperative boarding houses. Similar organizations mostly run by females started springing up. The residents of the Hull House including various other settlement house workers steadily shifted into the political arenas. They started becoming social reformers and began championing the legislation of ending child labor, improvement of working conditions and support of immigrants. The Hull House was transformed into a center where the reformers and radicals went to discuss their political ideas. The house became among the intellectual centers of the progressive era.<sup>2</sup>

All too conversant with the limitations that had been placed upon them as they tried to break into the society and careers that had been dominated by men, most of the settlement house workers decided to create new fields that dealt with concerns particularly of those concerning women and children.

Jane Addams became concerned in social reforms, the suffrage movement and the women's peace movement. Other settlement workers chose particular causes. For instance Florence Kelly pioneered in the investigation of the sweatshop situation and was involved in

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<sup>2</sup> Conway, Jill. 1971 "Women Reformers and American Culture, 1870-1930." *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2: 164-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786409>

putting up of the first factory safety statute of Illinois and was later made the first factory inspector of the state. In 1903, Kelley assisted in the establishment of the National Women's Trade Union League. The league incorporated both the working class and middle class women who support unionization.<sup>3</sup>

Julia Lathrop on the other hand decided to campaign against child labor and even went on to push for the government agency to dealing with the issue. Her efforts led to the 1912's establishment of the Children's Bureau branch of the department of labor and commerce where she became its first proprietor.

In matters concerning health, Lillian Wald, founded a house that specialized in training of nurses- the Henry Street Settlement House. She was known for supporting independent nursing profession and public health services. Grace Abbot did an extensive research regarding the problems faced by the urban immigrants and went on to become the director of the Immigrants' Protective League. Women of this era helped in defining new areas of social study. Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckenridge assisted in the establishment of social work as legitimate academic field and even transferred the school of civics and philanthropy to the University of Chicago.

Women actively fought for the rights to vote since the 1848 meeting at the Seneca Falls. Their dreams were finally achieved in 1920 with the confirmation of the nineteenth amendment. The main organizers of the women suffrage movement during the progressive era comprised of Anna Howard Shaw, Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul. African Americans were also involved in the suffrage movement and were led by Ida wells-Barnett and church Terrell. The association however continued to be low as most white women

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<sup>3</sup> Conway, Jill. 1971 "Women Reformers and American Culture, 1870-1930." *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2: 164-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786409>

dreaded setting against the south and most of them shared the prejudicial outlook of the time. Ida wells-Barnett became the first founder of the African American women suffrage organization.<sup>4</sup>

When the president of the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA) Elizabeth Candy Stanton resigned as president in 1900, she was succeeded by Carrie Chapman Catt and several other new generations of women. After 4 years, Catt resigned and Anna Howard Shaw took over until 1915. Despite Shaw's hard work, NAWSA lost its impetus during her term in office.

The association was however invigorated through the formation of the Congressional Union of 1913. Two women, Alice Paul and Lucy Burns through the radical influence of British suffrage movement managed to spearhead the change. The new suffragettes decided to demonstrate against the White House by chaining themselves to the fences. They were detained for their actions but it did not hinder some of them from going on hunger strikes. Their renewed tactics and protests brought great publicity leading to improved interest in the association. Catt came back to presidency in 1915 hence widening the campaigns to the states. When the nineteenth amendment finally came to a vote in the House of Representatives in 1918, most people felt that it would be close hence great attendance. The amendment finally passed the house with 274-136 but the senate did not endorse it until a year later.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Conway, Jill. 1971 "Women Reformers and American Culture, 1870-1930." *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2: 164-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786409>

<sup>5</sup> Piott, Steven L. 2006. *American Reformers, 1870-1920: Progressives in Word and Deed*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Most of the progressive women were faced with the dilemma where they needed to re-evaluate themselves, their traditions and outlook including family structures that seemed to suffocate the autonomy and sovereignty of women of the time. Margaret Sanger championed in the movement regarding the right of a woman to control the number of children they bore. Working as a nurse, Sanger witnessed the pain of botched abortions and suffering women underwent due to unwanted pregnancies. This caused her to push for the legalization of the birth control even going on to open the first clinic that advised women on birth control practice. She was subsequently detained for the violation of federal laws against broadcasting of birth control literature which brought the movement to the nationwide attention. Sanger's continued fight led to the introduction of the American Birth Control league that later became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.<sup>6</sup>

Some women during this progressive era decided to devote their lives to the labor movements where they got involved in the most violent labor conflicts of the time. Among such women was Mary Jones (also known as Mother Jones) who was a member of the socialist party and organizer of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) during the time the coal mining conditions were deplorable and death tolls from explosions and mine Cave-ins was very high. Miners were however not allowed to demonstrate or strike and if they did, they got evicted from company's housing to live in tents. Mine guards were hired by the companies to break the strikes and protect the property. Mother Jones despite her old age

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<sup>6</sup> Flanagan, Maureen A. 1990 "Gender and Urban Political Reform: The City Club and the Woman's City Club of Chicago in the Progressive Era." *The American Historical Review* 95, no. 4: 1032-050. doi:10.2307/2163477.

participated in the West Virginia strike of 1911 to 1912 and the Colorado strike of 1913 and 1914.<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was also a socialist party member who was among the organizers of the Industrial Workers of the World of 1905 (IWW). Flynn had hoped to form one union comprised of workers all through the world. Despite the fact that her plans did not succeed, her campaigns gained great momentum in supporting the rights of workers and supported civil disobedience. Kate Richardson O'Hare was also an enthusiastic devotee of unionization who accredited Mother Jones motivating her to activism. However her main drive was on behalf of the Socialist Party. She became a member of *National Rip-Saw* and was nominated to the National Executive Committee, and further served on the International Socialist Bureau.<sup>8</sup>

The progressive era saw the introduction of the muckraking journalism. Muckrakers wrote for popular journals where they publicized matters of political corruptions, corporate greediness, poor labor conditions and social inequities. Women muckrakers comprised of Ida Tarbell and Ida Wells- Barnett.

Despite the fact that most part of the progressive era did not incorporate black Americans Ida Wells- Barnet became known due to her attacks on the Jim Crow American movement, lynching and black voter disenfranchisement. Three of her friends got lynched leading to her research on lynching's and published her findings in the muckraking journals.

Before the progressive era peace activist movements were dominated by men who only focused on international law and stability. After the occurrence of the World War 1,

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<sup>7</sup> Novkov, Julie. 2001. *Constituting workers, protecting women: gender, law, and labor in the Progressive Era and New Deal years*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 63

more women became involved in peace movements. The silent parade that comprised of 1500 women walked down the 5<sup>th</sup> avenue in 1914, marking the beginning of the contemporary peace movement. Fanny Garrison Villard chaired the Women's Parade Committee. The new peace leaders did not focus on international laws but stood for Progressive reformers, feminists, social workers, and social gospel clergies.

In conclusion this outline of women in the progressive era has portrayed a glimpse at ways in which women tried to restructure the society and at the same time changing the perception and views about the role of women in the male-dominated society.

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