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What was the major goal of reformers during the progressive era

Women Reformers in the Progressive Era Judith McDonough Looking at women activists of the Progressive Era can provide insights into both the problems of the period and the emerging role of women in public life. As the country moved into the twentieth century, society had to confront the effects of industrialization, the growing concentration of economic power, urbanization, and a great wave of immigration. These dramatic changes produced fears that traditional values were being undermined by the influence of wealth at the top and radicalism at the bottom. The desire to modify the harsher aspects of industrialization and to make government more responsive to the people resulted in the Progressive Movement. The reform impulse began in the late 19th century, gained momentum when Theodore Roosevelt became president in 1901, and continued through Woodrow Wilson’s presidency. The atmosphere of reform, combined with a broader job market and already changing lifestyles, gave rise to a new women’s movement. The growth of big business opened new fields for women, such as saleswoman and clerk, as well as bringing more women into the factory system. Mass production introduced household conveniences, which allowed more leisure time for middle class women. Educational opportunities expanded and a new generation of college graduates sought fulfillment in the world outside the home. However, women often found their efforts thwarted by a male-dominated society and a Victorian view of the female role. In most states, women could not vote, and in some states married women could not sign contracts without the consent of their husbands. As women tried to address the social problems of the day, they had to contend with the rather entrenched view that women were intellectually and emotionally inferior to men. The following sections depict how women organized to support social reform and to redefine the role of women at the last turn of the century. Settlement House Workers Many women resented the restraints society placed on them. Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago, typified the attitudes of the first group of college-educated women. Since family structures limited their freedom, many of these ambitious and socially-conscious women chose to defer marriage or remain single. Hull House provided an opportunity for these women to achieve personal satisfaction. Located in the center of an immigrant neighborhood, Hull House provided many services to the surrounding community. Its social workers offered classes and operated a gymnasium, playground, theater, and cooperative boarding house. Many women worked at Hull House, some remaining for several years, others staying a few years before leaving to get married. Similar communities, mostly run by women, sprang up all over the country.1 Hull House residents as well as other settlement house workers gradually moved into the political arena. Living in urban, immigrant communities they came to realize that the complex problems they were dealing with transcended local solutions. They became social reformers and championed legislation to end child labor, improve working conditions, address the problems of the cities, and support immigrants. Hull House became a center where reformers and radicals of every persuasion went to discuss their ideas. Labor agitators, anarchists and socialists visited Hull House, and free expression made it one of the intellectual centers of the Progressive Era. Jane Addams herself was involved in social reform, the suffrage movement, and the women’s peace movement. Since Theodore Roosevelt’s Bull Moose Party platform included a broad social program and supported a women’s suffrage amendment, Addams actively campaigned for him and spoke at the party convention in 1912.2 Many settlement workers chose a particular cause, researched the topic, and published findings in order to advocate change. Florence Kelly investigated sweatshop conditions and was instrumental in securing passage of Illinois’ first factory safety statute. She subsequently became the first factory inspector in the state. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis used her research in his famous “Brandeis Brief,” which was responsible for the Court’s upholding the legitimacy of an Oregon law limiting the hours of labor for women. In 1903, Kelly helped establish the National Women’s Trade Union League. The League included both working class and middle class women who supported unionization.3 All too familiar with the limitations placed on women as they tried to break into professions dominated by men, the settlement house workers created or moved into new fields, particularly those dealing with concerns of women and children. Julia Lathrop campaigned against child labor and pushed for a government agency to deal with the matter. Thanks in part to her efforts, a Children’s Bureau was established in the Department of Labor and Commerce in 1912. Lathrop became its first administrator and filled her staff with graduates of Hull House. In the area of health, Lillian Wald founded the Henry Street Settlement House in New York City for training nurses. She supported an independent nursing profession and a public health service. Grace Abbott, director of the Immigrants’ Protective League, did extensive research on the problems of urban immigrants.4 Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckenridge helped establish social work as a legitimate academic field, and were responsible for transferring the School of Civics and Philanthropy to the University of Chicago. Women helped define new areas of social study as legitimate professions, and worked to keep women in charge through a national network of support for each other’s endeavors.5 Suffragettes Women had been actively fighting for the right to vote since the Seneca Falls meeting in 1848. They finally achieved their goal with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Carrie Chapman Catt, Anna Howard Shaw, and Alice Paul were the major leaders of the women’s suffrage movement during the Progressive Era. African Americans such as Ida Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell were active as well. Nevertheless, the movement remained largely segregated because white women feared alienating the South and many shared the prejudicial attitudes of the time. Wells-Barnett founded the first African American women suffrage organization, and both she and Terrell worked hard to gain support for the amendment. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton resigned as president of the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1900, Carrie Chapman Catt and a new generation of women replaced her. Catt was president from 1900-1904, when she resigned to care for her ill husband. Anna Howard Shaw, an ordained Methodist minister and gifted orator, took over from 1904-1915. Although Shaw worked hard, she was not an efficient administrator, and the NAWSA lost momentum during her term of office. The movement was revitalized through formation of the Congressional Union in 1913. Alice Paul and Lucy Burns spearheaded the change, which was influenced by the more radical methods of the British suffrage movement. The new suffragettes picketed the White House and chained themselves to fences. Arrested for their actions, some protested by going on hunger strikes and suffered the ordeal of forced feeding as a result. Their tactics and the resulting publicity brought sympathy and renewed interest in the movement.6 When Catt returned to the presidency of NAWSA in 1915, the movement gained an efficient organizer whose “Winning Plan” to widen the campaign to the states that would have to ratify the amendment won widespread support.7 It took generations of dedicated women working together to get the Nineteenth Amendment passed. Opponents of the amendment were highly organized and well financed. Businessmen, Southern congressmen, Catholic clergymen and some upper class women were among the groups most strongly opposed. However, many male reformers supported women’s suffrage. When the amendment came to a vote in the House of Representatives in 1918, everyone knew it would be close. Given that the House then included one woman—Jeannette Rankin of Montana —among its 435 members, those men who supported the amendment felt obligated to be there—even even arriving on a stretcher. While the amendment passed the House 274-136 (the exact 2/3 majority needed to pass a constitutional amendment), the Senate did not approve it until a year later.8 Individual Freedom Activists Many Progressive women found themselves re-evaluating customs and attitudes, including the family structure, that seemed to stifle women’s freedom and independence. Margaret Sanger was an early champion of a woman’s right to limit the number of children she had. Working as a nurse in the Lower East Side of New York, Sanger witnessed the pain of botched abortions and the suffering associated with unwanted pregnancies. She pushed for the legalization of birth control, and opened the first clinic to advise women on birth control techniques in 1916. Her subsequent arrest for violating a federal law against the dissemination of birth control literature brought the movement national attention. Sanger continued the fight, and in 1921 she organized the America Birth Control League, which later became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Charlotte Perkins Gilman represented a faction of the women’s movement that stressed rights and individualism over service and duty. She believed economic dependence crushed women’s initiative. In 1898, Gilman wrote Women and Economics, espousing the view that women would neither reach personal fulfillment nor progress in society until they were free to pursue careers outside of the home. Like-minded women could be found in the Heterodoxy Club of Greenwich Village. Formed in 1912, its members referred to themselves as “feminists.”9 More than any other woman of the period, Emma Goldman addressed the issue of individual freedom. Anarchist and champion of the downtrodden, Goldman was consistent in her advocacy of women’s rights. In her magazine, Mother Earth, she criticized all institutions that stifled women’s psychological and sexual freedom, naming marriage as such an institution. In 1916, she spent 15 days in a workhouse for her speech advocating birth control. Usually under police surveillance of some sort, Goldman was arrested for interfering with the draft and sentenced to two years in jail during World War I. Upon her release in 1919, she along with numerous others identified as radicals were deported as victims of the “Red Scare.”10 Labor Organizers Some women devoted their lives to the labor movement, becoming involved in some of the most violent labor conflicts of the era. Mary Jones, the “Miner’s Angel”# 148; (also called “Mother Jones”) was a member of the Socialist Party and an organizer for the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Coal mining conditions at the time were deplorable: hours were long, the pay low, and safety features inadequate. The annual death toll from explosions and mine cave-ins alone was tremendous. But in the conflict between coal companies and labor organizers, most of the weapons were on one side. When miners went on strike, they were commonly evicted from company housing and spent the remainder of the strike in tent communities. Coal companies hired detectives and mine guards ostensibly to protect their property, but in reality to break the strike. They brought in strike breakers, often new immigrants in search of work. And, they called on willing courts to issue blanket injunctions to prevent almost any union activity. Mother Jones was in her eighties when she participated in the West Virginia strike of 1911-12 and the Colorado strike of 1913-14. Both times she was arrested. The Colorado strike was the scene of the “Ludlow Massacre,” where a contingent of National Guardsmen and mine guards (acting for the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company owned by John D. Rockefeller) fired machine guns into miners’ tents and then set them on fire. Two mothers and eleven children died as a result of that attack. Congressional investigations of both strikes criticized the company use of guards and detectives, and cited their brutality as the major factor in the escalation of violence.11 Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, also a Socialist Party member, was an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Founded in 1905, the IWW hoped to form one union composed of workers throughout the world. In 1909, union leaders—Flynn among them—tried to organize lumberjacks and migrant farm workers in the American Northwest. Since they were refused admittance to company property, they tried to reach the workers at transportation centers. In retaliation, cities of the region passed ordinances prohibiting public speaking on the streets. Flynn and the IWW then led a free speech campaign, some of whose participants were beaten and jailed for violating city laws. Although the IWW failed to organize the lumbermen, it did win a major strike of mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912. The strike demonstrates the interconnections established among women Progressives. Because the IWW could not adequately support the striking workers and their families, Flynn—with the help of Margaret Sanger—arranged for some of the children to be taken care of by families in New York City. But when the children attempted to leave Lawrence, the police attacked parents and children. The resultant publicity generated sympathy for the mill workers, and the company settled. Although the IWW encouraged workers to participate in civil disobedience but not violence, it never could shake its image of radicalism and was constantly under attack. The union was essentially destroyed in the “Red Scare” after World War I. Flynn managed to stay out of jail at the time, but for joining the Communist Party in 1936, she was sentenced to two years in jail under the Smith Act during the 1950s. She survived the first “Red Scare,” but not the second.12 Kate Richardson O’Hare was an ardent supporter of unionization who credited Mother Jones with making her an activist. But her own main efforts were on behalf of the Socialist Party. She worked for the National Rip-Saw, a regional monthly of the Socialist Party published in St. Louis. She was elected to the National Executive Committee, and also served on the International Socialist Bureau. O’Hare’s opposition to the First World War caused her to be arrested. At her trial, the prosecutor told the jury that, although O’Hare was not a criminal, she was a dangerous woman because she was “shrewd and brainy.”13 In prison, she became friends with Emma Goldman, and after O’Hare’s release, she and her husband organized a children’s crusade to protest the detainment of the parents still jailed. Her stay in prison made O’Hare a champion of prison reform. In 1938, Governor Culvert Olson named her assistant to John Clark, Director of Penology, to help reform the California prison system. Muckrakers The Progressive Era introduced muckraking journalism. “Muckrakers”—a term first applied with derision—wrote for popular journals and publicized such issues as political corruption, corporate greed, poor labor conditions, and social inequities. Ida Tarbell and Ida Wells-Barnett were examples among women. Tarbell’s History of the Standard Oil, first published in article form by McClure’s Magazine, exposed the unfair business practices employed by this corporation to drive out competition and create a monopoly. Although, for the most part, the Progressive Era neglected African Americans, Ida Wells-Barnett became prominent for her attacks on Jim Crow America, black voter disenfranchisement, and lynching. When a mob in Memphis hanged three of her friends, Wells-Barnett began a one-woman crusade to end the practice of lynching that defined the parameters of life for black Americans in the South. She believed her friends were lynched not for the usual reason given of protecting white womanhood, but because they were successfully competing with white store owners in the community. She researched lynchings and published her findings in muckraking journals.14 Peace Activists Prior to 1914, peace organizations were dominated by men, and their emphasis was on international law and stability. With the outbreak of World War I, more women entered the movement as peace groups proliferated and their focus changed. A silent parade of 1,500 women down Fifth Avenue in New York City in 1914 marked the birth of the modern peace movement. Fanny Garrison Villard, the daughter of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, chaired the Women’s Parade Committee.15 The new peace leaders represented Progressive reformers, feminists, social workers, and social gospel clergy. They viewed the search for peace as a natural extension of the reform movement. In 1914, Lillian Wald and Paul Kellogg, editor of the journal Survey, established the American Union Against Militarists, the foremost opponent of military preparedness. Jane Addams and Carrie Chatman Catt organized the Women’s Peace Party (WPPP) in 1915. It advocated calling upon neutral countries to mediate peace between the warring nations of Europe, and sent delegates to the International Congress of Women. This Congress proposed the voiding of secret treaties, the nationalization of armament industries, and the end of government protection of overseas investments. During the period of U.S. neutrality in the war, Progressivism remained ascendant and peace groups were respectable.16 Once America entered the war, the major peace groups accepted the irreversible and supported the war effort. Many peace proponents supported the ideals that drew America into the war, and felt the war would bring about a better society both domestically and internationally. Carrie Chapman Catt pulled the suffragettes out of the WPP in 1917, and encouraged women to actively support the war effort in order to help them win the vote. Jane Addams and a few other ardent pacifists refused to sanction the war, but remained relatively silent, and Addams worked for the Department of Food Administration directed by Herbert Hoover. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia increased fears of radicalism, and any leftist orientation now became suspect. Overall, the war sounded the death knell of the Progressive Movement as superpatriotism became the order of the day. Despite the changed atmosphere, women re-activated the peace movement after the war ended. Five days after the signing of the Versailles Treaty, Jane Addams and Dr. Alice Hamilton toured Germany with members of the American Friends Society, and returned home to help organize the first private food shipments to the vanquished nation. In 1919, the remnants of the Women’s Peace Party became the American Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the first feminist peace organization of the modern era.17 Under the leadership of Addams, the WILPF criticized the harsher aspects of the Versailles Treaty and supported the establishment of the League of Nations. However, her trip to Germany and support of the League of Nations made her a target of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which associated internationalism with “UN-Americanism” and placed Addams on their “subversive” list.18 The fears engendered by the war and exacerbated by the “Red Scare” gradually subsided, and Jane Addams was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Conclusion This overview of women in the Progressive Era has provided only a glimpse at how women attempted to reform society and simultaneously change ideas about the role of women at the last turn of the century. The multiple interests of these women reflect various aspects of the social unrest that characterized the period. Helping students to reflect on the perspectives and achievements of women of the Progressive Era can broaden their understanding of gender, race, and class issues during that historical period. The subject also invites comparisons of the position of women then and now, as we stand on the brink of the 21st century. Notes 1. Robyn Muncy, Creating a Female Domain in American Reform 1890-1935 (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13. 2. Jane Addams, The Second Twenty Years at Hull House (New York: The Macmillan Company), 30-31. 3. Rosalind Rosenberg, Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century (New York: Hill and Wang 1992), 50. 4. Lela B. Costin, Two Sisters for Social Justice: A biography of Grace and Edith Abbott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 78. 5. Muncy, 88-89. 6. Rosenberg, 69. 7. Jacqueline Van Voris, Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life (New York: The Feminist Press at City University), 134. 8. Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick, Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the U.S. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 283. 9. Rosenberg, 63-64. 10. 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