

To Overleap the Modesty of Nature.

The Emergence of Female Activism

By Anne Firor Scott.

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Many women were content to remain in the safe confines of the benevolent society; others responded to the electric atmosphere of the antebellum years with daring forays into public activism. The ideology of “true womanhood” convinced some women that they should exercise the moral power, said to be peculiarly theirs, only at home, but others were beginning to argue that their responsibility extended to the larger society. Though reformers often ventured forth in company with men, they exhibited a strong propensity to form all-women organizations, which they could run to suit themselves. Prostitution, the double standard, alcohol, and slavery were the social issues that first brought women into public notice. In undertaking to deal with such explosive questions they began to behave in ways hitherto considered not entirely proper and to invade territory long reserved for men. The opposition they encountered stimulated some women to think about their own restricted legal and social status.

Whatever combination of forces was attracting more men to active involvement in public life and making them less and less willing to defer to traditional leaders affected at least a minority of women as well. In the face of social developments that they saw as threatening to their families women began speaking in public, circulating petitions, and in other ways practicing active citizenship. One Rochester woman, after years of trying to deal with the most disadvantaged people in town through traditional benevolence, decided that charity was never going to change their—to her—deplorable behavior and proposed that women should go in a body to the city council demanding a workhouse “where idle and drunken mothers and fathers must go and work.” She was, more than she could know, foreshadowing the future. ²

For years historians have argued that rapid economic development and social change bred a pervasive anxiety and a strong desire on the part of comfortable citizens to control the behavior of the growing working class. While it is certainly true that well-established white Protestants often exhibited disdain for immigrants, black people, and almost anybody different from themselves, as well as distaste for the life of crowded slums, personal and literary documents do not support any easy generalization as to what men or women hoped to accomplish through their voluntary organizations.

The chronology varied considerably from place to place; as the population moved west women in new settlements tended to recapitulate the history of earlier communities in compressed form, combining older forms of activity with the new. In Cleveland, for example, the Female Charitable Society and the Female Moral Reform Society appeared simultaneously in 1837 when the town had barely two thousand inhabitants. Nearly two decades later San Francisco women, as we saw in the first chapter, combined practices developed in Boston and New York half a century before and adapted them to the peculiar needs of a gold rush city. While women in the longer-

settled areas were developing new forms of organization, benevolent societies continued to appear on the frontier.

By the 1830s change was visible in many places as women's moral reform, temperance, and antislavery societies took shape, and women factors' workers organized short-lived but vigorous efforts to improve their wages and conditions of labor. Here and there, middle-class women also took up the cause of working women's poor wages and difficulty in finding work. Black women, in a context of discrimination and deprivation, strove urgently to help themselves. All these groups had in common the desire to change behavior. There was considerable crossover in membership among organizations, nearly all had a high degree of religious commitment, and most encountered a greater or lesser degree of community opposition. Few escaped a degree of internal conflict.

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