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## Seeking Sexual Order: Moral Panic and the Politics of Prostitution During the Progressive Era

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Seeking Sexual Order:  
Moral Panic and the Politics of Prostitution During the Progressive Era

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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Dedicated to Leah Gometz

My dearest friend and closest comrade.



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And finally sending love to my older brother, who kindly proofread my work



**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

INTRODUCTION: SEX AND THE CITY .....pg 1

CHAPTER ONE—CONSTRUCTING THE WHITE SLAVE: CULTURAL  
REPRESENTATIONS OF MORAL PANIC.....pg 4

CHAPTER TWO—ALLIANCE AND DEFIANCE: FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF  
VICE.....pg 11

CHAPTER THREE—“WAYWARD WOMEN”: SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL  
CONTROL.....pg 25

CHAPTER FOUR—RACE AND THE WHITE SLAVE SCARE.....pg 32

CHAPTER FIVE—VENEREAL DISEASE AND VICE.....pg 36

EPILOGUE.....pg 44





**Introduction:**

## Sex and the City

In the late 19th-century and early 20th-century United States, rapid shifts in city life, industrialization, and immigration incited discourse regarding women's growing autonomy in the context of emerging networks of vice inside densely populated cities. Advocating for social change, reform activists such as Maude E. Miner, Jane Addams, Katherine Bement Davis, and Emma Goldman addressed the relationship between women's empowerment and sexuality, focusing heavily on social issues such as prostitution (also referred to as "White slavery" during the progressive era), sex education, and venereal disease. Due to the steady rise in immigration as well as the swift industrialization of cities, fears regarding the rise in commercialized vice sparked heated political and cultural debates among American citizens. Although the implementation of protectionist policies meant to advocate for women became more fervent during this period, discourse surrounding "vices" such as prostitution, gambling, and drinking stretches back to the 1830s, when reports of country girls moving to the city to find work began to litter the press (Connelly 29). As cities became more industrialized, tensions raised by the growing number of women joining the workforce only intensified in the following decades, especially during and after the Civil War when women joined anti slavery and suffragist movements (Connelly 29). Statistics have also shown that the number of women in the US workforce increased from 1.7 million to 8.28 million between 1870-1920 (Abrams 438). The expansion of women into the public sphere generated immense tension between moral reformers and governmental organizations who now understood that the social mobility of women was not

nearly as curtailed as had been previously believed, challenging the notion that a woman's role was limited to childbearing and home making (Connelly 29).

Women's entry into the workforce wasn't the only factor that contributed to newfound middle-class anxieties regarding the place of women in society. The expansion of the entertainment industry also furthered public fears. The establishment of dance halls, picture shows, and amusement parks frequented increasingly by women posed a threat to the Victorian ideology that relegated women to the home and domestic tasks (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 599). Large cities such as New York and Chicago invested heavily in the development of entertainment venues, which offered more opportunities for young Americans to socialize in new settings, introducing novelty into their everyday lives, and paving the way for new sexual and social norms (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 599). This was a defining moment for young women whose newfound access to dating and the pleasures of the city challenged the commonly held belief that women were "passionless and pure" (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 599). Important too, was the division between middle and upper class perspectives on womanhood and working class perspectives. Though reformers such as Miner and Addams emphasized that the sexual morality of a woman was dependent on "purity" and virginity, many working class women in New York didn't consider virginity to be the ultimate symbol of morality, nor did they equate premarital sex to prostitution like older generations did (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 599). It was actually common for working class women to exchange sexual favors with men for gifts and entertainment in the city (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 599). Despite general acceptance of these social arrangements among the working class, middle and upper class reformers didn't see much of a difference between these acts and prostitution (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 599). I will explore the consequences of these divergent attitudes in subsequent chapters.

A combination of factors—such as women entering the workforce and enjoying increasing freedom and pleasures outside of the private sphere—sparked an expansive discourse propagated by Christian purity groups, prison reformers, healthcare officials, feminists, and politicians. My first chapter explores the cultural underpinnings of the phrase “White slavery,” highlighting the role that literature and film played in constructing cultural narratives about prostitution and human trafficking. Chapter two looks closely at early feminist interpretations of commercialized vice while comparing and contrasting various approaches to eradicate the “social evil.” Chapter three delves into women’s reformatories of the early 20th century, focusing specifically on the Bedford Hills Women’s Reformatory and the moral policing of women deemed “sexually deviant.” This chapter also analyzes the racial stereotypes which affected who was perceived as “capable” of reform and who wasn’t. The fourth chapter looks at white slavery trials during the era of the Mann Act, and how the act was used to target racial minorities. The final chapter investigates the social hygiene movement and the mission to slow the spread of venereal disease.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Constructing the White Slave: Cultural Representations of Moral Panic

In order to understand why prostitution generated such substantial discourse during the Progressive Era, one must draw one's attention to the cultural influences of the period, as well as to the origin of the term "white slavery."

The term was first used in America in the 1840s when leaders of the labor movement and Democratic politicians drew comparisons between chattel slavery and wage labor (Donovan 18). During this period, it referred exclusively to working class men (Donovan 18). However, the association between white slavery and prostitution emerged from England in the late 1830s to early 1840s, when British social purity groups began raising awareness about class and sexual exploitation (Donovan 18). British purity organizations specifically focused on stories of young girls who had been forced into prostitution in order to advocate for raising the age of consent (Donovan 19). It wasn't until the founding of the Christian Temperance Union that white slavery entered prominent public discourse in the US.

As this use of the term "White Slavery" became more widespread, film makers, artists, and authors began incorporating representations of the "white slave" into their creative works, though one of the most culturally impactful of these depictions was in the realm of literature. Literary depictions of the White slave have their roots in two popular genres that merged during the late 1890s through the 1910s: captivity narratives and seduction narratives (Donovan 17). Captivity narratives date back to colonial times, when settlers told stories of Native Americans who abducted young, white women (Donovan 17). Oftentimes, these stories used first person "accounts" of abduction to justify violence against indigenous peoples while also reinforcing the

stereotype of the “savage” Native American and the pure, helpless white woman (Donovan 17). Seduction narratives date back to the early to mid nineteenth century, and often told of wealthy men who preyed upon the economic insecurity of working class women to have sex with them, only to later betray them (Donovan 18). Though there are some differences between these narratives, they both served a similar purpose. Oftentimes, the stories recounted in both genres resulted in an outcry for control. Within captivity narratives, men were able to exert control over the social mobility of women by imploring that they remain close to home for their own safety, whereas seduction narratives allowed moral reformers to weave together their own stories about the dangers of sexuality and prostitution (Donovan 17-18). It was as these literary tropes combined that the White slavery narrative emerged.

Tales of the white slave were published by numerous authors ranging from prominent religious leaders and physicians, to moral crusaders and fiction writers (Donovan 17). Although many stories included essays from concerned individuals who conflated fictional accounts of seduction (frequently published in newspapers) with prostitution, other stories were written solely for entertainment. Regardless of the motives behind this genre, a majority of these books described the same stock character: a white, American girl from the countryside who is lured into the city by a fake promise of marriage or while in search of employment (Donovan 18). However, her dreams of freedom in the city are diminished once she falls victim to the white slave procurer (usually a black male, or eastern European immigrant), who promises employment (Donovan 18). An example of this can be found in Bayard Taylor’s *John Godfrey’s Fortunes* published in 1865, which told the story of a girl named Jane Berry, a poor country girl who ran off to New York with a villain who promised her marriage only to imprison her in a house of ill fame (Wyman 169). Forced into a life of sin, it wasn’t until she was rescued by

protagonist John Godfrey that she became free again (Wyman 169). Luckily for Jane, her experience as a “white slave” had not corrupted her in the same way that other narratives often lamented. Jane was redeemable; she had sewing skills and could find a job at the local dress store that would provide her an “honest living” (Wyman 169-170). In the final category of white slave tropes, young girls are forced into prostitution by means of physical or psychological coercion (Donovan 18). Regardless of the method in which they are procured, their fate remains the same: once they have entered the brothel doors, they cannot escape (Donovan 18).

In a similar way that captivity and seduction narratives influenced the American populace to discourage the social mobility of women for the purpose of safety, the sensationalist tropes of the white slavery genre evoked sympathy for the pure soul who must suffer (Wyman 170). Unlike popular Victorian discourse which constructed all prostitutes as a sinful, “fallen” woman whose immorality would ultimately lead to her death, stories such as *John Godfrey's Fortunes* raised questions about the social redemption of such women, women who would otherwise be outcasted. Narratives like the one written by Taylor inspired somewhat of a more compassionate outlook on women who found themselves in the vice trade, additionally providing a basis for other novelists to explore the cultural meaning of prostitution.

Not only did novelists construct their own fictional stories about white slavery, but they also began to see white slavery as a real social threat for helpless and pure, middle class, American women. Books written by police officers, members of the Florence Crittenton Mission (an organization dedicated to social welfare), and authors such as F.G Terrel and Leona Prall Groetzinger recounted the “true” realities of white slavery in the United States, often including statistics to back their claims (Donovan 19). However, it should be noted that the statistics used in these books often contradicted one another, making it difficult to understand the scope of

white slavery. In Terrel's 1908 book *Shame of the Human Race*, Terrel reported that "at present time, it is impossible to compute the number of white slaves in the country. It's safe to say there are thousands" (Donovan 19). Though his estimates were general, others offered specific numbers to draw attention to prostitution. Former police chief of New York City Theodore Bingham estimated that 2000 women were trafficked into the states and enslaved in brothels, while FBI director Stanley Finch estimated that "no less than 25,000 girls are annually procured for this traffic" (Donovan 19). Such estimates provide a glimpse into the exaggeration of the white slavery, and the lack of consensus among reports provided by different authors is evidence that the white slave panic was shaped by cultural narratives and assumptions rather than scientific, evidence based studies.

Defining what counted as white slavery remained equally as inconsistent as the numerical reports of white slavery. In Bingham's *The Girl That Disappears*, Bingham acknowledges the lack of consistency among the American populace by stating "in the minds of one part of the public every woman of the underworld is a 'white slave'. Another half of the population scots the idea that *any* woman is a white slave, and there we are" (Donovan 20). The inability to reach a consensus when defining white slavery was furthered by fictional books that used the phrase to refer to many different scenarios. In some cases, authors wrote about the abduction and drugging of chaste women, whereas other stories used the term to describe seduction and betrayal (Donovan 20). For example, *We and Our Neighbors* by Harriet Beecher Stowe told of a well meaning servant named Maggie, who left her abusive mistress to find work in a store (Wyman 173). While working for the store, Maggie succumbs to the "luxury" of a man who continuously showers her in promises, seducing her during the process (Wyman 173). Once he grows bored of his conquest, he enslaves her in a house of prostitution for years until she is rescued by a



sympathetic Christian woman (Wyman 173). The “white slave” in literature also referred to prostitution more broadly, especially in cases where the only incentive for joining the vice trade was poor economic conditions. One book that explored this theme was *The Evil That Men Do* by Edgar Fawcett. In his book a character named Em found a job as a sewing woman, fighting a losing battle with starvation because of the low pay (Wyman 174). Em was constantly flooded with thoughts about her immoral friends who had better clothes and more sufficient food in comparison to her, all because they gave up “an honest living” to pursue a career of vice (Wyman 174). After reflecting on the loss of self respect she would have for herself, she decided that entering prostitution would be better than facing the kind of starvation and exhaustion she experienced in her current job (Wyman 174). The various examples of white slave stories display the lack of consistency when defining what counted as “white slavery” and what didn’t, which resulted in reform efforts to target the many ways white slavery could manifest. Stories with characters like Maggie, who were endangered in situations that didn’t initially appear to be a threat (like working in a dress shop and falling in love with a man she *thought* she knew), provided leverage for reformers to target multiple aspects of city life by claiming that the white slave could be procured anywhere, even in situations that seemed safe.

Literature wasn’t the only form in which the white slave was constructed. As picture shows became more common, the film industry began portraying the horrors of white slavery in a more modernized and visual way. An example of this is George Leone Tucker’s *The Traffic in Souls*, which was released in theaters in 1913. The film follows the story of the Barton family, consisting of the father, an unsuccessful inventor, the oldest daughter Mary, the younger daughter Lorna, and the wealthy William Trubus (Ferdinand 1). Early on in the film, Lorna is put in danger when she is spotted by the manager of a prostitution ring at the candy store she worked at

(Ferdinand 1). Lorna is then kidnapped by wealthy social climber William Trubus, who hides his deceitful, ill intentioned behavior by fronting reformist organizations such as the International Purity and Reform League (Ferdinand 1). After Lorna is kidnapped, her older sister Mary tracks down the manager of the prostitution ring and Trubus in an office and uses an eavesdropping device her father invented to learn that Lorna is inside. Shortly after, Lorna is saved and police officers raid the brothel where she was held captive (Ferdinand 2). The film ends with a mob of outraged citizens attacking Trubus for his hypocritical involvement with both a social purity organization and a prostitution ring, and the immediate death of Trubus' wife, who passes away from the shock and shame she felt after learning of her husband's double life (Ferdinand 2).

After the film was released, several hundred people were turned away because theaters had reached maximum capacity (Lindsey 352). This led to multiple theaters within New York City to host daily showings to combat the crowds that were gathering on the city streets (Lindsey 352). The film generated so much attention that police officers were called to manage the crowds growing outside of theaters such as the Republic Theater (Lindsey 352). At the height of its success, the film generated around 5000 dollars in weekly box office grosses, suggesting that nearly 15,000 New Yorkers had gone to see the film per week (Lindsey 352). Attempting to capitalize on the success of the white slave genre, rival theaters began showing similar films in their theaters in addition to the *Traffic in Souls*, hoping to draw greater crowds. Films such as the *Inside of the White Slave Traffic*, *The Exposure of the White Slave Traffic*, and the *House of Bondage* frequently competed for public attention, one of which even copyrighted the phrase "white slave" (Lindsey 352). The *Traffic in Souls* provides a clear look into sensationalist forms of media that capitalized off of the fear and intrigue of concerned Americans. However, it is additionally crucial to note that film as a medium for communicating the white slave story did

not always consist of purely fictional material. Some white slavery film makers attempted to take the approach of white slave literature that included essays and statistics. Films such as *The Exposure of the White Slave Traffic* included stills and lectures raising awareness against the social evil (Lindsey 352).

Literature and film are only two of the many mediums used by Americans to convey the horrors of white slavery. Within literature, authors from various backgrounds with diverse levels of authority in American society were able to construct narratives about prostitution and trafficking by drawing on social panics of the past. An example of this is the way authors successfully drew upon captivity narratives which had roots in racial anxieties, to limit women's accessibility to the public sphere. Within film, directors were able to impose a visual element to the American imagination, while also reestablishing the idea that white slavery is a threat by the frequency in which films about the topic were produced within such a short span of time. One must acknowledge the way that cultural representations of white slavery have contributed to progressive era discourse if one wishes to also understand the responses reformers took to oppose the "social evil."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Alliance and Defiance: Feminist Interpretations of Commercialized Vice

When feminists examined the rapid spread of vice in the city, they focused their attention on the role of prostitution in women's subordination. They saw prostitution as a systematic, long lasting cycle of oppression utilizing tactics of possession and dominance to keep women in positions of socially inferiority (Gordon and Dubois 9). Women such as Maude E. Miner, a social worker and prominent reformer during the Progressive Era, was one of many activists who used the phrase "white slavery" to express the atrocity of prostitution in the city. Miner viewed prostitution as a result of multiple factors including but not limited to loose morals and in more extreme instances coercion. In her 1912 essay, "The Problem of Wayward Girls and Delinquent Women," published in Volume 2 of the journal of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York, Miner wrote:

[There are] many women soliciting on the thorough-fares of our city who meet others who are frequenting "call houses" and massage parlors and cafes, they hear that it is "easy" and are induced to enter the life. Others come in through the influence of the procurers and white slave traffickers, who under the promise of marriage, by "fake" marriage and even at times force and violence secure young girls for a life of prostitution.

(136)

In this essay, Miner draws our attention to her deepest concern about commercialized vice: the probability of women being coerced into the sex trade without being able to protect themselves. Here, Miner advances the view that the development of urban life has dire consequences for

women who frequent the city. To Miner, the development of urban life for the progressive era woman puts her at risk of endangerment through her interactions with others, especially ill-intentioned men and other women who have already been “enticed” into the life. Though not directly discussed by Miner, the idea that women might find the path to prostitution to be “easy” is connected to the economic situation of many women in the early 20th century. Most jobs occupied by women in the early 20th century were in factories or clothing stores which paid extremely low wages and included hours that often exceeded an eight hour shift. Acknowledging the grueling working conditions led many reformers such as Miner and Jane Addams to caution that the weariness accompanying exploitative working conditions leads women to desperation when searching for work that could provide a decent livelihood. Despite sympathizing with women who fell victim to deceptive social pressures suggesting that prostitution was somehow “easier” than other work, Miner remained vociferously concerned with the morality of women entering the vice trade and the likelihood of women remaining lifelong prostitutes, even after attempts at reform. Her concern is displayed in her views on the penal system and the way she grappled with the “social evil” of prostitution.

One display of this is her involvement with the New York Night Court. The Night Court was formed after prison reformers began to recognize the injustices that individuals faced when arrested after the courts closed at four pm (Whitin 181). Women arrested for streetwalking after the courts closed were detained for twelve hours or more, and the option of bail was only accessible to women who could afford it, leaving poor women much more likely to be convicted than those who could secure bail (Whitin 181). As an officer of the Night Court, Miner advocated for the “segregation of vice” and condemned the probation system for allowing

women convicted of prostitution to easily return to the seductive underworld of sexual exploitation, at one point stating:

There are girls who have been arrested twenty times and never sent away. Instead of benefiting them, that harms them. The only thing they really fear or care for is imprisonment in a reformatory or elsewhere. I don't know if that would reform them, but it would prevent great numbers of young girls from entering the life. As it is now, the girl of the street tells the working girls that there is no danger; she won't be sent away. (7)

Here, Miner expresses her discontent with the penal system for sentencing women to probation instead of sentencing them to something that would deter them from the possibility of becoming prostitutes again. To Miner, who believed that women were "enticed" into a life of prostitution, being sentenced to probation would not solve the social evil because it would allow the women convicted to return to their ways once they were released from the penal system. Additionally, Miner believed that "bad company" influenced exhausted, working class women with loose morals to become prostitutes. Therefore, the prostitute on probation posed a moral threat to the woman trying to earn an "honest living" by simply existing as an example of how the penal system inefficiently punishes prostitutes, potentially influencing the working girl to choose a life of vice. Despite her concern with the growing population of women on probation, she remained skeptical of the effectiveness of reformatories in changing women. Although she saw reformatories as a long term solution which could deter women from prostitution by virtue of being segregated from others, it is made clear that she didn't believe the reformation of these

women was likely. Miner questioned the effectiveness of both reformation and probation, a perspective drastically different from other social reformers who believed true reformation was possible, such as Katherine Bement Davis who will be explored in further chapters.

Miner wasn't the only reformer focused heavily on "morally weak" women at risk of being seduced by bad social influences; reformers like Jane Addams echoed similar sentiments. However, unlike Miner who emphasized the pernicious influence of bad social actors on "fallen" women, Addams' analysis of prostitution also included a more explicit exploration into potential economic factors. Despite Addams' exploration into economic factors, it should also be noted that she often downplayed the role of economics and preferred to take a moral standpoint. This is made clear in her book, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, published in 1912.

In order to fully understand the perspective Addams presents in her book, it is crucial first to acquaint ourselves with her background. Jane Addams was born in Illinois in 1860 and though not much is known about her early childhood, records show that she attended the Rockford Seminary in her home state at the age of seventeen (Phillips 50). Rockford had its roots in Presbyterianism and was created when two pastors and members of their congregations decided there was a need to establish a female seminary that would be distinct from degree-giving male colleges (Phillips 50). The aim of Rockford was to "develop moral and religious character in accordance with right principles, so that it may send out cultivated Christian women in the various fields of usefulness" (Phillips 50). However, the curriculum of Rockford made it clear that the "various fields of usefulness" were limited to the domestic sphere or missionary work (Phillips 50).

Though Addams' educational background was shaped by Christian indoctrination, Addams did not consider herself religious nor did she express any faith in God (Phillips 51).

Instead, she directed Rockford's Protestant teachings into a more secularized, humanistic focus on ethics and service to others (Phillips 51) to address issues faced by women and children.

Through attempting to understand Addams' background at Rockford and the way that she channeled her religious schooling into her advocacy for social reform, one can recognize how education inspired the humanitarian efforts she would advocate for years down the line.

This is shown in *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, which explores multiple dimensions of what she calls the "social evil" of prostitution, including the economic and moral dimensions. In chapter three of her book, she echoes the same moral sentiment of Miner by painting prostitution as something that only stands out as an option for women with weak morals. However, unlike Miner who saw prostitution solely as a result of moral deficiency, Addams paid close attention to the economic factors which might lead to a woman's decision to enter the vice trade. Addams claimed specifically that working women might find prostitution to be enticing simply because the low wages women received didn't match up with the standard of living that working women wanted to maintain (Addams 20). One must note that during this period, factory working conditions demanded long, tiring hours making it probable to Addams that women would enter prostitution in hopes of better conditions and higher wages. This belief stemmed from a Chicago Vice report that stated that "the average girl earns very much more in such a life than she can hope to earn by any honest work" (Addams 20). Addams also drew upon aspects of the Vice report which relayed that the average woman received six dollars a week for her labor (amounting to nearly three hundred dollars a year) in comparison to women who entered "an illicit life," earning nearly twenty-five dollars a week, nearly four times as much as a factory worker (Addams 20).

Although Addams provided a brief economic explanation for the reason women may



may feel compelled to enter prostitution, she also argued against the legitimacy of women involved in commercialized vice for economic reasons. In her piece, she even stated:

Although economic pressure as a reason for entering an illicit life has thus been brought out in court by the evidence in a surprising number of cases, there is no doubt that it is often exaggerated. A girl always prefers to think that economic pressure is the reason for her downfall, even when the immediate causes have been her love of pleasure, her desire for finery, or the influence of evil companions. (21)

What is interesting about such a proclamation is that she actively acknowledges various court cases which have provided evidence that economic factors *have* played a role in entry into prostitution, but continues to argue that women are deceiving themselves and using economics as an excuse for the true reason they become prostitutes. Her use of language also points to a moral standpoint. Attributing prostitution to the “downfall” of a woman while arguing that entry into commercialized vice is a result of hedonistic tendencies showcases the influence that Victorian ideals of female morality had on Addams. Being that women were predominantly confined to the private sphere and expected to be mothers and good wives, the idea that a woman might seek a life of “excitement” or participation in the public sphere challenged the preconceived notion that women should be dutiful mothers and wives. Addams develops this view stating that “the honest girl will live as a wife and mother, in contrast to the premature death of the woman in the illicit trade.” Here, she also explicitly focuses her attention on the danger of prostitution, which also plays a significant role in her interpretation of prostitution.

One way she advocated for the protection of prostitutes was by supporting sex and moral education. Believing that humans are inherently “indifferent” to the social evils of commercialized vice and its normalization in society, Addams advocated for the importance of educating older children about biology and hygiene, and additionally the dangers of sexuality when uncontrolled, especially male sexuality (Addams 29). During the Progressive Era, male lust was seen as untamable, thus posing a threat to both men and the whole of society (Walkowitz). In *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, she remarks:

The efforts to obtain pleasure or to feed the imagination are thus converged upon the senses which it is already difficult for young people to understand and control. It is therefore not remarkable that in certain parts of the city groups of idle young men are found whose evil imaginations have actually inhibited their power for normal living... Could the imaginations of these young men have been controlled and cultivated, could that desire have been directed into wholesome channels, could these idle boys have been taught that, so far from being manly they were losing all virility, could higher interests have been aroused and standards given them in relation to this one aspect of life, the entire situation of commercialized vice would be a different thing. (31)

She goes on to assert that the lack of formal education has dire consequences for both boys and girls. To Addams, young women were not being warned of the “dangers of amusement” and young men were dangerously resorting to learning about sex from other young boys, instilling a selfish perspective toward sexuality. In turn, the unsavory miseducation boys received from one

another provided “no wholesome counter-balance of knowledge” which led men to hold degrading attitudes towards women (Addams 31-32).

Although Addams perspective of prostitution manifested in a complicated and contradictory ways, reasoning that there were moral, educational, and economic factors that resulted in “fallen” women and dangerous men, she is not the only Progressive era reformist that acknowledged potential economic factors. Women such as Emma Goldman also emphasized the role economics played in prostitution while additionally challenging the moral perspective that many social reformers and the majority of society held.

To fully comprehend Goldman’s perspective, it’s crucial to acknowledge the role her childhood played in the revolutionary politics she would later advocate for. Emma Goldman was born in the German-Russian province of Kurland to Jewish parents and a father actively involved with the government (Havel). From a young age, she was exposed to various injustices that caught her attention. She was familiarized with the way that Christian official’s harassed and persecuted Jews such as her father, the unfairness of exempting the upper class from joining the military at the expense of the lower class, and the sexual exploitation of female servants who often found refuge in the Goldman home (Havel 2). Her exposure to social injustice only intensified when she and her family immigrated to St. Petersburg, Russia. When Goldman was thirteen, Russia underwent a massive political change, igniting a profound divide between Russian autocracy and revolutionary Russian intellectuals (Havel). It comes as no surprise then, that Goldman would come to espouse socially progressive views, especially when witnessing the way men and women united against Russia’s oppressive government (Havel). Goldman also had begun studying Russian, familiarizing herself with revolutionary students and political

ideologies (Havar). Inspired by her newfound ideas, she immigrated with her sister Helene to America, assuming that life would be easier in “a free land and glorious Republic” (Havar).

However, Goldman quickly became disillusioned with American life. She rapidly came to the realization that the situation of unequal power was similar to the oppressive government she had escaped from. Having found a job at a factory that paid her 2 dollars a week for labor that hadn't yet been motorized, while also beginning work in the early hours of the morning and ending late at night, she grew frustrated with the state of capitalism and economic oppression (Havar). Goldman also couldn't help but observe the way that women were not only exploited economically, but also sexually by their supervisors (Havar). Oftentimes, foremen saw their workers as sexual commodities, trapping women in a position where they had to comply with sexual advances, otherwise risking losing their job and finding themselves on the street as an “undesirable element in the factory” (Havar). Observing both economic and sexual exploitation and later affiliating her politics and activism with anarchism and socialism, she quickly devoted her energy and strength to emancipation from wage slavery (Havar). This devotion can be seen in her essay “The Traffic in Women,” published in 1910.

Avoiding the moralist perspective of Miner, Addams, and other reformers, Emma immediately criticizes what she calls a “crusade.” Though not voicing support for prostitution, her frustration with moral reformers and growing public concern with vice is apparent in her view that although prostitution isn't a new phenomenon, attention is only drawn when it feels culturally relevant to others. She states “the “righteous” cry against the White slave traffic is such a toy. It serves to amuse for a little while, and it will help to create a few more fat political jobs—parasites who stalk about the world as inspectors, investigators, detectives, and so forth” (Goldman 171-172). The way that Goldman frames attitudes towards prostitution draws attention

to the fact that progressive-era arguments against White slavery were inspired by cultural elements that deemed prostitution relevant in that period. Her frustration with this way of thinking can be attributed to acknowledging that those around her were not getting at the true root of the problem and instead were taking moral stances that undermined the role of economic exploitation and capitalism.

Goldman also critiques the assertion that women become prostitutes as a result of loose morals by framing what she calls “the sex question.” She notes:

It is a conceded fact that women are being reared as a sex commodity, and yet she is kept in absolute ignorance of the meaning and importance of sex...yet it is nevertheless true that so long as a girl is not to know how to take care of herself, not to know the function of the most important part of her life, we need not be surprised if she becomes an easy prey to prostitution, or to any other form of a relationship which degrades her to the position of an object for mere sex gratification. (180)

Here, it becomes evident that it isn't immorality which drives women into the sex trade, but rather that women fall prey to prostitution because they are unaware of the dangers of sex, especially in regards to their own liberation. Being that it was taboo for women to talk about sex, it is no surprise to Goldman that a woman's ignorance of sex could easily position her as a sex object in various kinds of relationships. She even goes on to chastise the moral panic surrounding prostitution by arguing that the same people who cry out about the immorality of women who sell their bodies turn a blind eye to the way that marriage functions as a transaction of sex for financial safety:

To the moralist prostitution does not consist so much in the fact that a woman sells her body, but rather that she sells it out of wedlock. That this is no mere statement is proved by the fact that marriage for monetary considerations is perfectly legitimate, sanctified by law and public opinion, while any other union is condemned and repudiated. (180)

By pointing to the societal double standard, Goldman illustrates the hypocrisy of moralists who haven't critically analyzed the way in which their judgements only rest on those who exist beyond the boundaries of what is deemed socially acceptable. This is not the only time feminists have exposed the hypocrisy of moral crusaders. Suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony made similar arguments in the mid nineteenth century when questioning the sanctity of the marital institution and advocating for divorce laws (Hogan 40). Between 1856 and 1870, Stanton gave speeches to multiple legislative bodies and women's rights conventions to speak out against "man marriage," which included sexual domination and marital rape (Hogan 41). At the National Woman's Rights Convention Debate of 1860, Stanton shocked crowds by arguing that "man marriage" wasn't sacred at all and that it was instead "a little more than legalized prostitution" (Hogan 41). Crowds were appalled as she claimed that the modern wife "consents to live in legalized prostitution! Her whole soul is revolted at such gross association! Her flesh shivering at the cold contamination of embrace, held there by no tie but the iron chain of the law!" (Hogan 41). While Stanton persuasively compared violence within marriage and prostitution to dismantle the widely held belief that marriage is sacred, Goldman was able to

draw comparisons between prostitution and marriage to target the righteousness of reformers whose sympathy did not outweigh their degrading attitudes towards prostitutes.

Goldman asserts that “moral crusades accomplish nothing save driving the evil into secret channels, multiplying its dangers to society” (Goldman 192). She backs this claim by explaining that societies with more stringent methods of persecution result in even worse conditions for prostitutes (Goldman 192). Referring back to the days of Charles IX of France, she explains that after brothels were banned in France in 1560, the number of prostitutes only rose and the brothels that did appear became even more dangerous and hidden (Goldman 192). Goldman’s analysis of the dangers of state intervention also provides a glimpse into the harsh realities of the police response to prostitution. Goldman maintains that the prostitute is “at the mercy of every police man and miserable detective on the beat, the officials at the station house, the authorities in every prison” (Goldman 184). She details the story of the mistress of a brothel who was forced to pay monthly fines between \$14.70 to \$29.70, whereas the girls in the brothels were forced to pay fines \$5.70 to \$9.70 (Goldman 184). These numbers are the equivalent of being fined between \$174 and \$921 in the 21st century. Targeting prostitutes rather than procurers was a common practice among law enforcement in the early 1900s, and even laws written to address instances of “compulsory prostitution” resulted in harsher treatment towards prostitutes.

In 1907 for example, New York lawmakers enacted section 2460 of the penal code which made it a crime for individuals to “receive money for and on account of procuring and placing women in the custody of another person for immoral purposes” (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 601). Though the law “targeted” procurers, only a few intermediaries faced felony charges, most police officers actually charged women instead, apprehending them for “disorderly conduct,” a misdemeanor (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 601). Considering what is known about the

enforcement of anti prostitution laws through Goldman and modern scholars of the progressive era, it becomes evident the ways in which legislation during this period often yielded more consequences for the white slave than the actual procurers.

In many ways, Goldman's critique of the hypocrisy and superficiality within the moral crusade against the traffic in women calls for a deeper understanding of the realities of prostitution. After challenging the hypocritical position of crusaders, Goldman explains that the real reason women become prostitutes is solely because of their economic situation. She quotes Dr. Alfred Blaschko in *Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* to affirm her stance, who contends that "the development of industry with vast masses of people in competitive markets, the growth and congestion of large cities, and the insecurity and uncertainty of employment, has given prostitution an impetus never dreamed of at any period in human history" (Goldman 175). As America became increasingly industrialized, the prospect of finding a job (much less one that paid a livable wage) proved to be much more difficult than before. In such a case, it is understandable that women might seek out other ways to survive. In her final remark, Goldman sums up her argument by declaring "as to a thorough eradication of prostitution, nothing can accomplish that save a complete transvaluation of all accepted values—especially the moral ones—coupled with the abolition of industrial slavery," meaning that if one wants to rid of the social "evil," one must first critically reassess which values are socially accepted and which aren't (and why), and finally confront the social horrors of capitalism.

When looking at the way Miner, Addams, and Goldman chose to construct their arguments and stances towards prostitution, the significance of morality becomes increasingly apparent. Although all three were devoted to eliminating prostitution, sincerely believing that in doing so they could empower women, their perspectives provide insight into the minds of many



Americans during the progressive era. In both Miner and Addams' work, their perspectives drew attention to the independence women achieved as they gained access to commercialized entertainment. The growing number of women frequenting the city posed a threat for women and young girls who might fall victim to ill intentioned men and women. The fear expressed by Miner and Addams resulted in an inclination towards protecting and sheltering women, whether it be through advocating for sex education for the purpose of taming uncontrollable male sexuality, or advocating to send prostitutes to reformatories to keep them from returning to entering prostitution again. In both examples, the importance of sexual morality and purity remain a key factor in the way that feminists directed their social reform efforts. Despite the drive to interpret prostitution through the lens of morality shown by Miner and Addams, feminists such as Emma Goldman challenged their moralistic tendencies and advocated for a deeper analysis of social systems such as capitalism, while warning of the dangers of moral crusades. Regardless of their similarities and differences, their radical ideas allowed alliances to form between them and their insistence on ending the "social evil" of prostitution. However, the method in which they chose to examine prostitution also produced defiance towards the ideas of one another, especially when grappling with the role of morality and capitalism within concerns over prostitution. The examples provided in this chapter are only a few of the many ways feminists worked against commercialized vice, and the following chapter will look closer at the penal response to prostitution.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Wayward Women”: Sexuality and Social Control

As outlined in the previous chapter, many reformers took a moralizing stance when confronting prostitution, often resulting in activism that stressed protectionist politics and the need to reform “wayward” or sexually deviant women. The views promulgated by reformers like Miner, Addams, and Katherine Bement Davis aligned with Victorian concerns over proper sexuality and the danger women faced in public settings, thus granting reformers the authority to further police sexuality with the support of dominant Victorian thinking.

In the early twentieth century, it was common for women who engaged in sexual activity before adulthood or marriage to be classified as “sexual delinquents” (Gordon and Dubois 15). Not only were these women burdened with a stigmatizing label imposed by Victorian contemporaries, but oftentimes they were additionally labeled prostitutes regardless of whether or not they exchanged sex for money, putting them at risk of being arrested and sent to a reformatory. In order to understand what is meant when prison reformers like Katherine Bement Davis refer to prostitution, it is important to note that the word held multiple meanings.

The most widely accepted definition of prostitution was provided by Chicago Vice Commission report of 1911 which characterized it as any sexual activity that occurred in situations which they deemed dangerous for women, including but not limited to dance halls where women and young men became acquainted, unchaperoned dates, summer amusement resorts, and saloons (Connelly 17). The form of “prostitution” that occurred in these settings was referred to as “clandestine prostitution” which included any premarital or non monogamous female sexual activity, regardless of whether payment was involved or not (Connelly 17). This definition makes clear that prostitution was not confined to a market, but rather included any

sexual activity that was deemed immoral or scandalous at the time. This sentiment was echoed by various news sources, social groups, and physicians who claimed that prostitution was “promiscuous unchastity for gain...It is distinguished from concubinage, which is an inferior state of marriage, and from adultery and other sexual relations, in which the motive is passion” (the Encyclopedia Britannica), or “an insane impulse for the unrestrained gratification of the sexual functions of the body” (Connelly 17). One physician went so far as to argue that prostitution included women who cohabited with any man just for the pleasure it gave her (Connelly 18). Because of the lack of consensus when defining prostitution, law enforcement was able to target women who they deemed to be prostitutes solely because they didn’t conform to the Victorian ideals of acceptable sexuality.

The enforcement of acceptable Victorian gender roles and sexuality is reflected in the efforts of prison reformer Katherine Bemont Davis, a Vassar graduate whose career spanned from social work to penology and later to the study of sexuality and prostitution (Stage 152). Unsatisfied with the conditions of prisons at the time, Davis created a special reformatory which she felt would improve the conditions of incarcerated women as well as address the “special needs” women required that weren’t being met in other prisons (Odem, 353). Supporting the idea that the criminal justice system should take on the role of disciplining young women in a way that would pressure them to conform to sexual morality, Davis opened the Bedford Hills Women’s Reformatory in 1901, one of the leading institutions within the women’s prison reform movement (Bowler et al. 458). The goal of her reformation efforts was to rehabilitate female inmates through education and training meant to prepare women for a new, moral life outside of the reformatory (Bowler et al. 459). Acknowledging that “there is nothing the common prostitute fears so greatly as to know that if she offends and is caught, she will be subject to the possibility

of prolonged confinement,” Davis understood that the reality of prostitution often meant long term imprisonment for “delinquent” acts that in her eyes were not nearly as serious as the crimes being committed by men (Bowler et al. 466). Her response to such an issue emphasized the belief that a positive change in long term behavior could occur if inmates took part in rigorous training programs focused on housekeeping tasks such as sewing and knitting, cooking, gardening, and doing laundry (Bowler et al. 466). Davis believed that the work being done at the reformatory would yield good results, placing women in a position to find more morally acceptable work as servants once they left the reformatory on parole (Bowler et al. 460).

Although Davis was primarily concerned with addressing and reforming the sexually “immoral” woman who engaged in the social evil of prostitution, she missed a key element in understanding why these women became prostitutes in the first place. The reformatory primarily served young, working class women. Around 56% of these women had experienced the loss of a parent and only 14% had reported not needing to have worked a job prior to being incarcerated (Bowler et al. 463). As a matter of fact, all of the reported wages of the women at Bedford Hills fell below the minimum wage a woman could live off of in New York (Bowler et al. 463). Despite her research indicating a connection between prostitution and class, she remained adamant that “there would seem to be no economic pressure as a reason for entering an immoral life”. In research conducted on inmates that would later be shared with investors such as John D. Rockefeller, she found that there were four main reasons one might enter prostitution. The first category included familial reasons, consisting of explanations like “immorality of parents,” “no mother or father,” or “abuse,” whereas the second category focused on marital relations, attributing a woman’s entry into prostitution to having an “immoral husband,” “deserting husband,” or “husband who put her on the street” (Bowler et al. 464). The third category was

defined by “personal reasons” such as being surrounded by “bad company,” being “lazy and hating work,” or being deemed a “White slave” (Bowler et. al. 464). The fourth category did include economic reasons such as not being able to find work, however because Davis firmly believed in classifying individuals with the assistance of physicians, field workers, psychologists and psychiatrists, it was rare that women were placed in this category when their entry into prostitution could be explained by something more psychological.

Despite Davis’ attempts at studying and reforming these women, there were instances of pushback she faced from inmates at the reformatory. In an essay she published in 1906, Davis wrote about a bright, young inmate who remarked, “what right has society to say I shall do such and such thing?” (Bowler et al. 469). Horrified at the thought that some of her inmates couldn’t seem to make a distinction between what was deemed acceptable and what wasn’t, Davis searched for a way to evaluate scientifically whether or not inmates could be reformed (Stage 153). Women who were able to adapt and reform their behavior were permitted to remain in the domestic training program, while women who were deemed incapable of making such changes were placed in custodial care (Stage 153). The latter group was referred to as “moral imbeciles,” meaning that they displayed the same level of healthy intellect that other women in the reformatory displayed, but lacked moral sensibility (Bowler et al. 469). Davis held that women who lacked “morality” posed a serious threat for future generations, as a woman’s inability to reform meant that she could have her own “sexually delinquent” children resulting in social contamination (Bowler et al. 469).

Essential, too, was the role that race played in reformation efforts and Davis’ views on who could be reformed and who could not. Although prison reformers such as Miner and Davis focused their reform efforts primarily on the daughters of (White) European immigrants, there

remained an over-representation of Black women in the Bedford Hills reformatory (Lilley et al. 34). Black and White women often received different levels of the disciplinary scrutiny within the institution because Black women were not held to the same moral standards as White women (Lilley et al. 34). This is because black women were often stereotyped as sexually promiscuous in nature, therefore raising the question of whether they could be reformed at all. An example of the lack of disciplinary attention black women received are the tireless studies Davis conducted which majoritively focused on the behaviors of White women in the reformatory, oftentimes excluding Black women from the analysis (Lilley et al. 34). This could be attributed to the fact that the superintendents at Bedford Hills believed that Black women were by nature morally deficient, unlike White women who could be “fixed” (Lilley et al. 35).

In instances where White women actively rejected and resisted reformation, Black women were scapegoated for being a “dangerous and corrupting” influence (Lilley et al. 35). In order to discourage the resistance of White women, reformers brainstormed different ways to confront the crisis of racial mixing, one of which included the possibility of opening a second reformatory in a separate location to segregate Black and White women (Lilley et al. 36). Not only did the mere presence of Black women threaten Davis’ goal of reforming White women, but the romantic attachments and sexual relationships many women formed with one another also posed a threat (Lilley et al. 35). Although officials at Bedford didn’t show concern for Black women who engaged in romantic or sexual relationships with one another, officials at Bedford maintained that “a very considerable part of the disciplinary problems arises from the unfortunate attachments formed by the white women for black women” (Lilley et al. 35).

Though Davis directed most of her energy to regulating traditional gender norms and the sexual morality of White women (oftentimes excluding Black women in reform efforts due to

racial stereotypes), the history of socially reforming women through reestablishing gender roles extends beyond the founding of the Bedford Hills Women's Reformatory.

The founding of different boarding schools and group homes for "fallen women" in America dates back to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One instance of this is the creation of Magdalen homes, named by domestic Christian missionaries after the famous Mary Magdalen, a prostitute saved and redeemed by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Groups like the New York Female Reform Society (founded in 1833 by Lydia A Finney) dedicated to the eradication of both prostitution and the consumption of alcohol raided suspected brothels and houses and reported them to the police (Pivar 27). Despite the detainment of prostitutes to Magdalen homes, discourse surrounding whether these homes could properly "rehabilitate" women was constantly being deliberated. For instance, the First Annual Report of the New York Female Reform Society stated that although their mission was to "warn young women of their danger, to show all their duty in relation to this vice, with the hope that a barrier might be raised to stop the progress, the Redeemers kingdom there by extended", there was sentiment that "very few of those girls might be reclaimed, can be induced to enter a Magdalen asylum, while the great majority of those who are willing to seek a refuge there are sunk so low in vice as to warrant but little hope of their reformation. Those who are not so debased flatter themselves with the hope of a voluntary return to virtue at some convenient season, then go on sinning as it were" (NYFRS 9). It is through examples like these that we learn of the power and influence of moral reformatories and the powerful ways that the state policed and punished women who strayed from the ideal of female purity.

Years following the creation of the New York Female Reform Society and the establishment of the Bedford Hills Reformatory, the government continued to exert power in

addressing concerns over prostitution through the creation of multiple organizations, many of which continued to emphasize the dangers of prostitution on a moral basis. However, prostitutes and working class women were not the only individuals who were penalized for their connection and relationship to prostitution. Many Black men and women were targeted as procurers under legislation such as the Mann Act, one of the first anti trafficking laws passed in the United States. The following chapter will explore a few of the assumptions and repercussions of the act, and how the vague language used in the Mann Act allowed minorities to face new kinds state and societal prejudice.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Race and the White Slave Scare

Social tension between racially marginalized groups and White, middle class Americans remained high following the passing of the thirteenth amendment and the rise of immigration that the early twentieth century faced. During this time period, sexuality was heavily policed as a result of White supremacist ideologies and the fear that Blacks and Whites might mix resulting in the birth of mixed children (D’Emilio and Freedman 107). Because of the racial anxiety that permeated the minds of White Americans decades after the end of the Civil War as well as the rise in immigration, pressure for White women to remain pure and chaste became an even greater concern than before and multiple legislative measures were taken in order to curb the fear of racial mixing and the sexuality of White women.

One example of this is the Mann Act (otherwise known as the White Slave Traffic Act), which was passed by congress in 1910. The Act was passed during the height of the White slavery scare, and served the purpose of making “the interstate traffic of women for the purpose of prostitution a federal crime” (Scope of the White Slave Traffic Act). Though legislators initially claimed that the Act was intended to curb trafficking fears, the broad language in the document left room for harmful assumptions and various interpretations. Within the Mann Act, it is also specified that the interstate traffic of women is not limited to prostitution, but also any other “immoral purposes.” Because of the vague use of language, legislators and law enforcement officials projected their own interpretations when enforcing the act and how it should be used to police relationships that were marked unacceptable by society. One example of

this is the case of Jack Johnson, a Black boxer in the progressive era who was known for his many affairs and relationships with White women.

In 1912, a woman named Lucille Cameron had left her family to find employment in Chicago (D'Emilio and Freedman 202). Johnson, who was becoming increasingly well known as his boxing career advanced, had become closely acquainted with Cameron, promising her the possibility of employment through sex work (D'Emilio and Freedman 202). However, as Cameron's mother learned of her daughter's connection to Johnson, she promptly reported him to authorities and charged him with abduction (D'Emilio and Freedman 202). The trial sparked rage throughout the nation and various news sources influenced by social purity threatened and condemned him, especially in the south (D'Emilio and Freedman 202). Newspapers such as the Beaumont Texas Journal published threats targeting Johnson, stating that "the obnoxious stunts being featured by Jack Johnson are not only worthy of but demand an overgrown dose of southern 'hospitality' " (Gilmore 19). On the front page of the Fort Worth *Citizen-Star*, the author sarcastically wrote, "we bet we know one person that isn't singing "I Wish I Was in Dixie' " (Gilmore 20). Other news sources emphasized the "innocence" of Cameron, painting her to be a virtuous, pure woman deserving of sympathy in comparison to the "villainous" Johnson (Gilmore 28).

Although the two had married and Cameron had refused to testify against Johnson, the societal fury over this case disregarded any small details which may have alternatively concluded Johnson's innocence. The immediate response and backlash that this case caused was not only the result of the deeply embedded racism of the time, but also legal measures that had been taken years prior in order to curb the fears of white, middle-class Americans.

While the case of Jack Johnson displays one of the many ways in which Black men were criminalized by the vague language of the Mann Act, there were many instances where anti trafficking legislation was used to specifically target Black women, especially women who threatened the racial social order. Oftentimes, racial stereotypes regarding the promiscuous and sexually immoral “nature” of Black women were used as courtroom evidence against Black women who were accused of trafficking White women and children. One example of this is the case of Belle Moore, who was prosecuted under suspicion of trafficking two young girls.

Belle Moore was a mixed race woman who faced public and legislative scrutiny after the passing of New York’s 1907 compulsory prostitution law, the precursor of the Mann act (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606). In 1910, Moore was accused of selling Alice Milton and Belle Woods, two fifteen year old White girls (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606). Assistant district attorney James Bronson Reynolds stood before the court and detailed the two victims as “crying for their dolls and teddy bears, which they had left behind at home” (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606). During the trial, Reynolds also suggested to the press that Moore was likely responsible for the disappearance and possible murder of eleven year old Helen Hastings, despite a lack of evidence (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606).

After portraying the girls as innocent victims, prosecutors and investigators strengthened their case by describing Moore as sexually immoral (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606). George Miller, an investigator for the case, testified that Moore had been known to host frequent parties, entertaining the crowds by “dancing with her skirts up over her knees and higher” (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606). Investigators highlighted that attendees of these parties consisted of both White and “colored” individuals who would drink alcohol and “dance all hours of the night” (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606). At the end of the trial, Moore was convicted and given the

maximum sentence for violating the statute, no less than two and a half years and no more than five (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606).

Through courtroom storytelling, investigators had not only portrayed Moore as a vile woman who threatened the livelihood of two innocent young girls, but also a threat to the racial hierarchy for eroding social divisions between Blacks and Whites (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606). Since the prosecutors strategy centered around the way that Moore transcended racial boundaries through the diverse social gatherings she held, it becomes apparent that there were racially focused motives in early 20th century anti prostitution efforts (Donovan and Barnes-Brus 606). The cases of Jack Johnson and Belle Moore are only two famous instances of the way that anti trafficking legislation was used to target racial minorities. Feeding off of the fear of racial integration, courtrooms paid special attention to the “immoral” behaviors of Black men and women to convict them.

Although the Mann Act provides a glimpse into the moral motives behind federal anti prostitution initiatives, anti prostitution efforts that occurred outside of the government were beginning to take a more scientific approach. The following chapter will look into the work of the social hygiene movement which sought to slow the spread of venereal disease and to address the concerns of Americans regarding sexuality.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Venereal Disease and Vice

As was displayed in previous chapters, many progressive era social reform efforts centered on prostitution and the morality of those involved. The societal focus on prostitution took form in reformers efforts to modify the behavior of “sexually delinquent” women, passing legislation that targeted procurers and prostitutes, and in the explosion of literature and movies that explored the “social evil” of prostitution. Although well intentioned, many reformers approached prostitution in ways that were often contradictory. For example, Addams emphasized a socioeconomic explanation for entry into prostitution, but still questioned the “morals” of the women involved. However, the role of morality in criminal investigations of prostitution (whether in support of a moral approach or not), was not the only instance of conflict among reformers who wished to end the social evil. This chapter explores conflicting perspectives on prostitution among medical professionals who were becoming increasingly troubled with the rapid spread of venereal disease.

Many reform movements continued throughout the 20th century, but it was the social hygiene movement that played the most noticeable role in shaping middle class attitudes towards sex, especially when challenging the moral concern with prostitution (Burnham 885). During the Victorian era many middle class families discouraged any discussion of sex, regardless of whether the discussion took place at home, schools, or the Church (Burnham 886). In 1911 William T. Foster, the president of Reed college, critiqued the reluctance of middle class Americans to engage in conversations regarding sexuality, proclaiming that families which withheld information from children believed that they would remain ignorant and innocent

(Burnham 886). However, Foster challenged the policy of silence by highlighting that children would find ways to access information regardless of a parent's attempt to keep them "pure," whether it be through classmates, false advertisements, or obscene pictures (Burnham 886).

Because the discussion of sex was deemed taboo, both physicians and civilians lacked proper understanding of venereal diseases (Burnham 890). Many civilians of the early 1910s looked down upon those infected with sexually transmitted disease, attributing their illness to punishment from God for sexual immorality, whereas physicians believed venereal diseases like gonorrhea were as dangerous as the common cold (Burnham 890). Due to misinformation, many physicians also only treated illnesses like syphilis until noticeable symptoms subsided, not comprehending the longevity of the disease (Burnham 890). However, perspectives of venereal disease changed once rates of infection increased dramatically, revealing a large number of women who had been infected by their husbands (Burnham 890). The rise of venereal disease in children who had innocently "inherited" the disease from their parents at birth was also a concern for Victorians who were beginning to feel compassion towards those infected (Burnham 890). An report published in 1907 by the American Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis reflected the sentiments of Americans during this period, stating:

I invite your attention: first, venereal infection falls hardest upon innocent women and children, who have committed no indiscretion, but are infected by husband or father. Second, it is due to ignorance in probably a majority of cases that the disease is in first instance contracted. We must feel sure that in almost all cases it is ignorance that allows a man to jeopardize the health and many times the life of his wife or child by marrying while subject to venereal infection. (246)

Victorians referred to such cases as “infections of the innocent” which additionally included those who had contracted a disease through kissing, the use of wet nurses, or even towels (Burnham 890). Fearing that venereal disease would threaten both families and the average sexless person, physicians began rapidly publishing articles about sexually transmitted diseases and attending medical conferences (Burnham 891). Many medical commentators even advocated for the compulsory inspection of prostitutes (Burnham 891).

Due to the fear that rates of infection would only increase, physicians began organizing to find a social solution that would contain the spread of disease. One notable physician who took interest in preventing venereal disease was Prince A. Morrow, who studied medicine at New York University and was an active participant in training conferences in various European medical centers (Burnham 892). Morrow began his career as a dermatologist who had a deep interest in social diseases and a frequent presence at public health conferences, though the most influential conference he attended took place in Belgium in 1902 (Connelly 13). Inspired by the research and dedication he saw in European healthcare professionals, Morrow decided to start his own organization in the US that would specifically focus on venereal disease, which he named the American Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis (Connelly 13).

While working at the American Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis, Morrow drew many parallels between prostitution and venereal disease. Despite the connections between the two, he was not concerned with state regulation of women engaged in commercialized vice but rather with teaching the “gospel of continence” to young men, which he believed would reduce prostitution and the spread of venereal disease (Connelly 14). He also supported the idea of improving social conditions by raising wages and prosecuting men who had procured women

for the purpose of prostitution (Burnham 893). This differed drastically from previous organizations which focused on a woman's status as a prostitute, such as the American Purity Alliance (Connelly 14). Having witnessed mass hysteria that accompanied middle class fears of the innocent contracting sexually transmitted diseases, Morrow criticized the inefficiency of social panic and believed that such hysteria yielded little to no progress in efforts to fight venereal disease (Connelly 14). For Morrow, the most effective way to slow the spread of venereal disease was to reject the assumption that male sexuality was uncontrollable, and to advocate for continence (Connelly 14). This directly challenged the dominant practice of many physicians in the early 1900s who warned patients of the "dangers" continence posed to male health (Connelly 14).

Despite initial differences in how physicians treated patients, Morrow's dedication to eradicating venereal disease caught attention quickly. In 1906, reports listed fewer than 350 members belonging to the society, whereas in 1910 (during the height of the White slave scare), the society had grown to include 700 members, more than doubling in size (Connelly 15). To accommodate the rapid expansion of the organization, local and affiliate branches were established in other densely populated cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, and St. Louis (Connelly 15). Many women also joined the American Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis and worked as nurses, educators, and settlement workers for the organization (Muren 245). However as the population of the group expanded, Morrow realized the movement to reduce the spread of venereal disease could become even more influential if a centralized, national organization could arrange the activities of various social hygiene groups (Connelly 15). This took form in the founding of the American Federation for Sex Hygiene, founded in 1910 by Morrow (Connelly 15). The AFSH actively engaged with the public, stressing the importance of



sex education through various means. One example was an exhibition they sponsored in 1912, which stressed the need for sex education in order to combat venereal disease and the extent of prostitution in New York city (Connelly 15). Drawing the connection between prostitution and venereal disease, figures at the exhibition estimated that the number of prostitutes in New York were around 544,350, additionally claiming that for every three clandestine prostitutes, there was one public prostitute (Connelly 20).

Morrow however, passed in 1913 and the AFSH merged with the social purity organization the American Vigilance Association, renamed as the American Social Hygiene Association (Connelly 15). Between 1911 and 1916, vice investigations were organized in twenty seven cities and three states (Connelly 15). Although successful in gathering extensive information, vice commissions began to look for new ways of retrieving research. Up until the early-mid 1910's, many vice investigations were conducted by committees of civilians who wanted to improve issues within the city (Connelly 15). Believing that the study of venereal disease marked a new moment in the investigation of prostitution, the Syracuse Vice Commission stated in their report that "we must no longer depend wholly upon volunteer committees of citizens for the study and solution of modern city problems. These twentieth century civic evils must be handled by twentieth century methods if we expect to prevent their overwhelming us. They require steady work day by day, and year after year by educated, experienced and paid social workers" (Connelly 15). Recognizing that meaningful change would require professionals from numerous fields and a more centralized response, the Bureau of Social Hygiene was created.

The Bureau of Social Hygiene was founded in 1911 and was primarily funded by John D. Rockefeller, who had served as a foreman on a New York grand jury investigating an alleged

“white slave trafficking” case in the city (Connelly 15). The BSH was a professionally staffed, permanent organization to study prostitution and sex (Connelly 16). To conduct research, the Bureau received 5,800,000 dollars over a thirty year period for the “study, amelioration, and prevention of those social conditions, crimes, and diseases which adversely affect the wellbeing of society, with special reference to prostitution and the evils associated therewith” (Bullough 115). In the years following, the Bureau conducted research on multiple aspects of prostitution including the study of policing, legal statuses, and the psychology of delinquent women, even enlisting the assistance of Katharine Bement Davis (Connelly 16).

Davis and Rockefeller became acquaintances in 1911 when Davis was still working as a superintendent at Bedford Hills (Stage 152). Davis, who had grown increasingly interested in finding ways to scientifically evaluate which inmates could be reformed and which should be placed in custodial care, reached out to Rockefeller in hopes that he would assist in creating a facility at Bedford where psychologists, sociologists, and doctors could classify inmates (Stage 153). Approving Davis' vision, Rockefeller funded her 200,000 dollars from the BSH to create the Laboratory of Social Hygiene at Bedford's (Stage 153). Not only did the establishment of the Laboratory fit Davis' mission to enable the reform of inmates, but the establishment of the Laboratory also fit the BSH's pragmatic stance between regulation and abolition. Unlike other social hygiene organizations that drew upon well known cultural and moralistic narratives to support their argument for an abolitionist approach, Rockefeller believed that the appropriate response to prostitution should not be “sensational, or sentimental, or hysterical,” but rather “should operate with deep scientific as well as humane interest in a great world problem” (Harris 6). The neutral stance on prostitution that Rockefeller favored allowed him to call for a more

scientific approach when attempting to study the most effective methods of reform and prevention (Harris 6).

After spending a few years studying the inmates at Bedford Hill's under the inquisitive eye of the BSH, Davis retired from her work at Bedford's and was hired as one of the four directors of the Bureau in 1913 (Stage 153). By then, the vision of the Bureau had split. Rockefeller remained focused on closely studying prostitution, whereas Davis grew increasingly interested in public health and funding research on venereal disease (Stage 154). Similar to Prince A. Morrow, Davis believed one of the best ways to confront venereal disease was through education. In order to embark on her next social cause, Davis requested 2,000 dollars from the BSH to conduct her own study of sexuality in the United States (Stage 154). Concerned with what sexual behavior should be seen as "normal," she studied the sex lives of 2,000 married and widowed women (Stage 154). However, it should be noted that much like the research she conducted at Bedford, which excluded women of color from her analysis, her study at the BSH also excluded black women. Davis' conception of "normal" limited her pool of participants to white, middle class women; many of whom had higher levels of education than the average American woman at the time of the study in 1920. Regardless, her study did provide some insightful results that contradicted previous knowledge of women's sexuality in the progressive era (Stage 157). Prior to her research, many Americans held the belief that "natural" women could feel no sexual desire, but her study put such a myth to rest when 74% of the women she studied reported that they experienced frequent and satisfying sexual relationships with their husbands (Stage 157). Additionally, the results of her study revealed that frequent intercourse did not lead to infertility like some social hygiene organizations claimed, nor did the use of contraceptives (Stage 157). Once Davis concluded her research she published it in a book

entitled *Factors in the Sex Lives of 2,000 Women*, which received tremendous controversy (Stage 158). Regardless, her study resulted in disputes between her and members of the BSH who held conservative views and continued to hold onto the moral leanings of earlier social hygiene groups. Her work also fell out of line with the Bureau's focus on prostitution. Subsequently, Rockefeller asked her to retire from the BSH in 1927. Her research was dismissed as "unscientific" and three years later the BSH closed for good (Stage 158).

The social hygiene movement paved the way for multiple new outlooks on venereal disease and American sexuality. One of the most notable changes was the scientific approach physicians and reformers took when studying venereal disease, which challenged multiple Victorian myths regarding sexuality and health. Despite the newfound knowledge physicians had when treating venereal disease and studying sexuality, the movement faced internal conflict when some members remained loyal to social purity movements of the past and others became increasingly interested in pursuing research without a moral basis. Looking back at Davis' research at the BSH, one might wonder how the results of her study may have differed had her research included a larger, more diverse demographic. One might also question the relevance of Morrow in the modern age, and how his belief that men should be prosecuted for the purchase of sex acts has presented itself in the 21st century. By looking at the way reformers responded to questions of sexuality during the progressive era, it becomes easier to contextualize modern arguments surrounding prostitution, sexually transmitted disease, and sexual education.

## EPILOGUE

The progressive era marked an influential moment in American history. Expeditious industrialization coupled with evolving social norms allowed many Americans to reflect on both the meaning of the societal changes they were witnessing, and commonly held values of the time. Insightful connections are drawn when reflecting on the reform efforts of progressive era activists and the way we have continued to engage with social issues regarding sexuality. In the same way that the progressive generation grappled with the reality of women's liberation, sexual exploitation, and violence, feminists of the late twentieth century onwards have remained equally as concerned with the connection between sexuality and liberation. However, whereas the analysis of prostitution in the early 20th century remained overwhelmingly negative, the topic of sex work in the modern age has become a polarized debate among feminists. Though not all feminists of the progressive era preferred to conceptualize prostitution through a moralistic lens, the vast majority of them were critical of the possibility of liberation through sex work. This is one difference of the modern age: some feminists of the modern age do believe that such work can be empowering.

Another interesting comparison between the 21st century and the progressive era are the methods in which reformers chose to respond to prostitutes themselves. Although many Victorians looked down upon the prostitute for their immorality, blaming the woman for her "downfall," some reformers challenged the commonly held belief that women were at fault for their situation, or that they should be punished for their involvement with prostitution. For instance, Morrow critiqued the societal belief that male sexuality was uncontrollable, and supported the idea of holding male clients accountable rather than the prostitutes themselves. The stance Morrow takes closely resembles the Nordic model for prostitution, which criminalizes the

purchase but not sale of sexual services (Skilbrei and Holmstrom 480). The legislation passed by Scandinavian countries was created specifically to change attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and prostitution (Skilbrei and Holmstrom 481). What is interesting about both the Nordic model and the white slave scare is the way that the ideas expressed by reformers have remained relevant in the modern age.

Another similarity between the progressive era and today are the flawed figures reported on sex trafficking. During the progressive era, Americans mainly relied on the many books published that offered statistics on the white slave traffic. However, definitions of white slavery were broad and the figures presented in books often contradicted one another, making it difficult for Americans to decipher the factual scope of the issue. Modern estimates on sex trafficking remain just as flawed. For example, a recent study of 42 books of sex trafficking found that 78% had cited one of three flawed sources without acknowledging the limitations of their sources (Lerum and Brents 18). Reliable data is also difficult to achieve due to inconsistent definitions of human trafficking. For instance, many anti prostitution activists assert that nearly all individuals in the sex trade are coerced or trafficked, therefore equating all prostitution as trafficking (Lerum and Brents 18). Additionally, the term trafficking has been used to describe various scenarios that often seem completely unrelated to one another. An example of this is the way that some legal documents classify illegal immigration as trafficking, regardless of consent, or the way that some social conservatives equated cases of kidnapping and sexual abuse to trafficking (Lerum and Brents 18).

The examples provided above are only a few of the many parallels one can draw between human trafficking discourse in the modern age and the white slave scare of the progressive era. These comparisons provide a glimpse into the relevancy of the question of sexual exploitation

and gender equality, and the many ways politicians and activists have pushed for both social change and control.

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