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## Changing Social Spheres of Antebellum Women in America

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They were chained together and held in cages—beaten until they were quiet and driven mad by the horrible living conditions. Like many other reformers of her time, Dorothea Dix realized it was her mission as a Christian woman to save these inmates who were severely oppressed, and let God decide what to do with them. She travelled thousands of miles to see conditions in asylums around the country, only to be met with despair in the face of these horrid places. Dorothea Dix, along with many other reformers, led the way as women increasingly fought against the poor morals and destitution that plagued the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. In doing so, women began to join more movements and push into the public sphere.

As Sarah Josepha Hale, an editor for *Godey's Lady Book*, wrote, women were “God’s appointed agent of morality.”<sup>1</sup> In the time preceding the Civil War, women saw the country as a place of sin. This held particularly true in the cities. Problems such as prostitution and horrid prison conditions shocked female reformers, driving them past their male counterparts to take a stand for change. In doing so, women frequently involved themselves in the public sphere, a realm previously off-limits. The antebellum women’s moral reform movements greatly helped push women into the public sphere. Women increasingly saw it as their mission to help the fallen people of the cities. It was the country’s negligence, these reformers determined, which allowed these atrocities to happen to people of good social standing, who fell through the cracks of decent society.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have written about women in the public sphere for decades. Following the American Revolution, many women were pushed from the public sphere, especially from partisan activities and relegated to the home.<sup>3</sup> Though their exit from the public sphere was sudden, women remained active in the community. Historian Mary Beard argues antebellum women had more influence in and out of the public sphere than was understood later.<sup>4</sup> Women from that period are often portrayed as the victims of a patriarchal society. While, this assumed oppression in many cases was accurate, Mary P. Ryan, another prominent historian, argues that even in their separate spheres, women were able to exert a substantial amount of influence on the public sphere, especially while working together in reform movements.<sup>5</sup>

Antebellum Americans defined the public sphere as being active in the community, for example, being part of local politics. In the time of antebellum America, those allowed in the public sphere were typically only white men. Slavery was still a reality for African Americans, and women of any race were denied the same political rights as men. Men held political rights—for example, the ability to vote or run for office—and had more opportunities in the workforce. Men were less likely

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<sup>1</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson Inc., 2000), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Lasser and Stacey Robertson, *Antebellum Women: Private, Public, Partisan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Mary P. Ryan, “The Power of Women’s Networks: A Case Study of Female Moral Reform in Antebellum America,” *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 66-86.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

to be involved in “domestic” work, leaving those duties to a housemaid, or, more likely, a wife. The private or domestic sphere was that of the home, not participation in public or political matters. Those involved in this sphere were women. The duties of a woman in antebellum America involved taking care of her husband, her children, and the home. According to a nineteenth-century magazine, *The S.G. Friends’ Intelligencer*, “It is at the home that a woman should love to shine. There her virtues are best known and there should she exert her powers to please and make those around her happy.”<sup>6</sup> Women often did not take part in the public sphere because they feared being seen as “unfeminine or unlady-like.”<sup>7</sup> Another way of discouraging women from leaving their duties at home was the use of religion. Though women were thought of as “God’s appointed agents of morality,” there was still pressure on them to be the “pure” citizens they always had been in their domestic spheres.

### Cracks in the Sphere

Prior to their involvement in reform movements, higher education helped push women farther into the public sphere. Those who participated in the moral reform movements needed education in order to properly stand for their cause. The ability to read and write helped women by allowing them to write proposals for their movements. Many women had only elementary reading and writing skills, but they made it another mission to educate the next generation in order to further advance women and their goals.<sup>8</sup> College education for women became more available after Oberlin Institute began educating both men and women in the 1830s.<sup>9</sup> By furthering their education, women took steps needed to venture into the public sphere. This helped women’s advancement because, though still in small numbers, more women were then able to have better jobs and more involvement in the public sphere.

In 1834, a new chapter of the moral reform movement against prostitution began with the creation of the New York Female Moral Reform Society (NYFMRS), an organization that greatly contributed to the advancement of women in the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> The mission of this group was to prevent prostitution in New York and to help “fallen” women themselves. A large part of the program’s initiative was to redeem prostitutes and convince them to join the moral reform movement; however, very few of the women in the NYFMRS were former prostitutes.<sup>11</sup> The women in this group were white, religious, middle-class members of society.<sup>12</sup> By leading the moral reform movement, the NYFMRS began slowly to break the walls of the domestic sphere by going to brothels in order to reform fallen women and encourage parents to instill a mindset against prostitution.

Though a significant portion of NYFMRS efforts against prostitution involved reforming already-fallen women, the group spent most of its time preventing women from falling into that position. One mode of prevention called on parents to “sow the seeds of chastity and virtue, and to build up a wall of principle around these little ones.”<sup>13</sup> By teaching children to value purity and

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<sup>6</sup> “Woman her Sphere and Influence,” *S. G. Friends’ Intelligencer*, 20, no. 2 (March 21, 1863): 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ginzberg, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Lasser and Robertson, 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Oberlin Institute also opened its doors to African Americans starting in 1835.

<sup>10</sup> New York Female Moral Reform Society, *First Annual Report of the Female Moral Reform Society of the City of New York* (New York: William Newell, 1835).

<sup>11</sup> Carroll Smith Rosenberg, “Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America,” *American Quarterly*, 23, no. 4 (Oct., 1971): 562-584.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> New York Female Moral Reform Society, “An Appeal to the Wives, Mothers and Daughters of Our Land” (New York: Female Reform Society, 1836), <http://www.teachushistory.org/second-great-awakening-age-reform/resources/appeal-women-take-part-moral-reform>.

chastity, reformers believed, children would be less likely to find themselves in that situation. The NYFMRS also warned parents about the dangers of “neglecting their duty” to educate their children. The direct result of not teaching children about the horrors of prostitution, insisted the reformers, was the short road to prostitution. In addition to warning parents of female children, the NYFMRS cautioned parents of male children “from the theatre to the brothel, the transition is easy and natural; and now the voice of conscience is silenced.”<sup>14</sup> In teaching boys to value purity over lecherousness, reformers hoped to discourage the practice from being continued into the next generation. By encouraging parents to educate their children, women stepped outside the home to become activists advocating for reform in the city. This was a large step for women especially in the reform movement because their voices were being heard in communities larger than those of only housewives. Women reformers fought to save the nation from the immorality of prostitution.

Acting as “rescuers,” the NYFMRS portrayed prostitutes as women in need of help, even if help was resisted. In fact, resistance to the reformers’ help was often not understood by the reformers themselves, who assumed all women in that position did not make the active choice to be there, even the “high-end prostitutes and madams” who often led lives of luxury.<sup>15</sup> When prostitutes rejected the reforming efforts of the NYFMRS, the reformers took to staging “rescues” of the fallen women to help sway the public in their favor.<sup>16</sup> Seeking to help fallen women, the NYFMRS often went directly to the brothels in order to preach their moral ideals to both the women who worked there and their male clients.<sup>17</sup> This action was called “active visiting” by the moral reformers.<sup>18</sup> Today, these types of visits are recognized as being ineffective, likely because the reformers pushed their ideals on women who did not want to reform.<sup>19</sup>

Reformers often drove away business at the brothels, causing financial problems and growing resentment among the prostitutes. The moral reformers also opened a “House of Reception” for the women who were willing to move from their fallen ways.<sup>20</sup> This building was constructed to provide women with a place to live, so they did not need to stay in the brothels anymore.<sup>21</sup> The number of reformed women was often very low, so the House of Reception did not house many women, often less than twenty at a time.<sup>22</sup> The persistent efforts of the reformers largely went unnoticed by those they were trying to help.

In order to get the word out about the moral reform movement, the NYFMRS published a journal called *The Advocate of Moral Reform*. With this news source for reform movements, women dramatically stepped into the public sphere in a national—instead of just local—way. This news source symbolized much more than just the reform movement picking up speed throughout the country. It showed that women were able to successfully traverse the waters of the public sphere, where they were not able to have such influence some twenty years before. This periodical circulated throughout the United States as the “leading Evangelist journal,” amassing a reader subscription of 16,500 after only two years of publication.<sup>23</sup> One of the purposes for this journal was to keep the smaller reform movements throughout the country updated on events happening to the main

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Nicolette Severson, “‘Devils Would Blush to Look’: Brothel Visits of the New York Female Moral Reform Society, 1835 and 1836,” *Journal of Sexuality* 23, no. 4 (May 2014): 237-238.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenberg, 562-584.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ginzberg, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Rosenberg, 562-584.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> A. Cheree Carlson, “Creative Casuistry and Feminist Consciousness: The Rhetoric of Moral Reform,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1992):16-32.

movement.<sup>24</sup> The journal itself focused mainly on two things: pinpointing men as the cause of widespread immorality in America and calling for “a national union of women.”<sup>25</sup> With this message, the NYFMRS helped knit women together by proclaiming a common enemy. Many of the articles in *The Advocate* were stories aimed at women to prove their cause was worthy. One article stated rather precisely the goal of the organization: “The object of the Moral Reform Society is not so much to reclaim the vicious as it is to preserve the virtuous from the paths of the destroyer.”<sup>26</sup>

While redeeming fallen women, the NYFMRS also sought to level the public sphere playing field by indicting all parties involved in immorality as fallen people. Doing this, the NYFMRS made the case it was not just women to blame for the lack of morals in the society. In the eyes of the NYFMRS members, prostitutes were merely the “byproducts of men’s vices.” Males were the ones truly in desperate need of help.<sup>27</sup> Men involved in prostitution were regarded as unholy members of society who put these women in their positions of degradation. Dramas performed by the reform society emphasized the horrors of prostitution, and men were shown to be the direct cause of the vice.<sup>28</sup> The reformers put men who engaged in these lewd acts on the same level as the licentious women.<sup>29</sup> They called on virtuous women “to look down on licentious men as virtuous men now look down on licentious women.”<sup>30</sup> The loss of character associated with these acts was no longer placed solely on the women but the men as well. By association with prostitution, men were seen as fallen persons themselves. This allowed women reformers to argue that “licentious” men should be viewed the same as the prostitutes.

Women involved in this movement broke from their domestic confines by entering the realm of politics in America. Their political causes included prostitution itself and lobbying for the eradication of the practice by both men and women. By joining together in the fight to help “fallen” women, reformers also took on the double standard that effected the prostitutes of American society. They demanded men take responsibility for their actions instead of placing the blame wholly on woman, who were likely compromised as a result of a man’s impure actions. In doing so, women took a stand against the social norms already in place in order to help women advance. This would lead to further challenges to the separate sphere in years to come.

## Prison Reform

Prostitution reform was not the only moral reform movement in Antebellum America. Another important movement was that of prison reform. In the same regard as prostitution reform, women involved in prison reform saw their work as helpful to those in need, which caused them to press outside their private spheres. The prison reform movement started slowly in the 1820s when it was discovered female inmates were not separated from their male counterparts and not given the care needed to survive well in the prison settings.<sup>31</sup> In prisons, female inmates were not protected from abuses from their male guards.<sup>32</sup> These circumstances greatly stirred women of the country to act in favor of their fallen counterparts by helping to reform prisons. Early reformers pressed for female matrons to supervise women inmates in order to provide protection.<sup>33</sup> In the 1840s, a half-way house for released prison inmates was constructed in New York, which contained a female

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Rosenberg, 562-584.

<sup>26</sup> “Object of Moral Reform Societies,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, 4, no. 14 (July 16, 1838): 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Ginzberg, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Nicolette Severson, 226-246.

<sup>29</sup> New York Female Moral Reform Society, *First Annual Report*.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ginzberg, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

department led by Abby Gibbons.<sup>34</sup> This house allowed former inmates a place to stay temporarily while in the process of finding a permanent home and work. According to *Godey's Lady Book*, women “are particularly well fitted for the care of delinquents and defectives.”<sup>35</sup> This statement insisted that women, partly by virtue of their femininity, were fully capable of handling the public sphere.

Many antebellum women grew interested in asylum reform and the care of the insane, but one who was particularly important to the cause was Dorothea Dix. Asylums in the nineteenth century were not well kept. Diseases riddled the premises, and conditions for the insane were deplorable.<sup>36</sup> The people of antebellum America did not seem terribly concerned with the well-being of the insane or “idiotic” men and women; this is largely because they believed the insane were sinners and living in these conditions was their punishment.<sup>37</sup> Dorothea Dix travelled thousands of miles throughout the United States to survey conditions in asylums.<sup>38</sup> During her travels, she saw many of those committed to the asylums in awful living situations. Dix saw inmates locked in cages, chained to the walls, “beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience.”<sup>39</sup> She took it upon herself to help these poor people, but the process was a long and arduous journey, as she needed to go through the proper channels to get funding for her mission. Dix spoke to legislators around the United States in order to achieve her goal of better conditions for these poor people. She evoked religious virtues to spread her work throughout the country. Dix called on men and women both to look into their hearts and see it was not their place to judge; that power was left only to God himself. Her work to help the insane vastly improved living conditions in the asylums, which in turn helped those who lived there to lead healthier lives. Though Dix’s work may not have sparked an uprising of women reformers to eventually take their place in the public sphere, her work did show women were entirely capable of leading change in America. For a woman to go through the proper channels for change in Antebellum America would have been quite difficult, as many believed women should not be a part of the public sphere. Dix was able to prove women were capable of much more than just being in the home by becoming a part of something much larger than herself in order to help in a major way.

The women involved in these reform movements did not join for the sole reason of breaking into the public sphere.<sup>40</sup> Often women reformers had no ambitions to break out of their separate worlds, rather they only sought to help those in need of their attention. Still, some viewed their work as a precursor to what could be accomplished with more access to the public sphere. The ability to vote and be taken seriously in the public arena was a great cause to reformers such as Susan B. Anthony, who joined with gusto the abolitionist and women’s rights causes.<sup>41</sup> She knew women would be able to make important contributions, but in order to help fully, women needed more access to what was considered to be the public sphere.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Emily E. Williamson, “Woman's Work in Prison Reform,” *Godey's Magazine* (April 1897): 414.

<sup>36</sup> Dorothea Dix, “Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts” (Boston: University Park Press, 1843).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas J Brown, *Dorothea Dix: New England Reformer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> Dorothea Dix, “Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts.”

<sup>40</sup> Lasser and Stacey Robertson, xvi.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.