Women in the Progressive Era

A Unit of Study for Grades 9–12

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National Center for History in the Schools,
UCLA
INTRODUCTION

I. APPROACH AND RATIONALE

Women in the Progressive Era is one of over seventy teaching units published by the National Center for History for the Schools that are the fruits of collaborations between history professors and experienced teachers of United States History. They represent specific issues and “dramatic episodes” in history from which you and your students can delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying crucial turning points in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected issues and dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow’s history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, private correspondence, literature, contemporary photographs, and paintings from the period under study. What we hope you achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to have your students connect more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of “being there,” a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian’s craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

II. CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: 1) Unit Objectives, 2) Correlation to the National History Standards, 3) Teacher Background Materials, 4) Lesson Plans, and 5) Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 9–12, they can be adapted for other grade levels. The teacher background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific “dramatic moment” to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.
I. UNIT OVERVIEW

One of the most important (and least appreciated) aspects of industrialization and urbanization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the appearance of a new American woman who challenged deeply rooted traditions about the role of women and the family. Women appeared in growing numbers among American wage-earners, in higher education, in the professions and the lively arts, and in politics. As activists and social reformers, women significantly shaped the culture of a period historians have labeled “the Progressive era.”

II. UNIT CONTEXT

The history of women from 1890 to 1920 is inextricably tied to the larger framework of the history of the labor movement and social reforms of the Progressive era. This unit should follow the study of the economic and social changes brought on by industrialization, immigration, and the rise of the cities.

III. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY


This unit likewise integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards including: reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration in which historical developments have unfolded (Standard 1, Chronological Thinking); draw upon visual and literacy sources (Standard 2, Historical Comprehension); examine the influence of ideas, consider multiple perspectives (Standard 3, Historical Analysis and Interpretation); interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created (Standard 4, Historical Research); and, formulate a position or course of action on an issue (Standard 5, Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision making).

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

♦ To examine the social conditions which led to women’s assumption of wider roles in the public arena during the Progressive era.

♦ To examine the impact of higher education for African American women and for white middle-class women.
To investigate the methods women used to exert influence in the public arena, including the women’s club movement, settlement houses, and labor organizations and to identify areas of social reform in which women’s activism resulted in significant changes.

To identify the differences and resulting tensions between middle-class women reformers and their working-class clients.

To identify individuals, organizations, and events that led to popular acceptance of birth control and suffrage.

IV. **Unit Background Materials**

In the 1890s the character of American reform movements changed. Although Americans had always been intent on correcting society’s failings, turn-of-the-century reform displayed a new attitude toward change and new methods by which women and men improved their society. An increasing acceptance of the Darwinian account of a universe of chance and accident began to replace religious faith in a purposeful universe and stimulated debates on the positive or progressive nature of some forms of conflict and change. As religious leaders and philosophers constructed a new philosophy to accommodate faith and science, a new generation of professionally trained reformers (which included an exceptional group of women, the first generation of American college women) were in the vanguard of a national reform movement.

Among the more visible signs of the changes brought on by industrialization and urbanization was the appearance of a new woman in the late nineteenth century. Elite women, the wives and daughters of middle-class families, and working-class women—both native-born and immigrant—entered the public arena with greater self-assurance and determination to attain recognition of their status as citizens and wage-earners.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, large numbers of women actively pursued a variety of social reform programs through organized activities. Drawing on the traditions of female charitable and reform associations of the earlier years of the century and the movements of the 1840s and 1850s to advance their own position in American society by a call for equal rights, women’s organizations of the late nineteenth century targeted specific social goals—suffrage, child-labor legislation, pure food and drug acts, labor organizing, consumer protection, prohibition, and expanded educational and career opportunities.

A passionate commitment to the cause of social justice fueled the new reform movement. The reformers had faith in the ability of reformed social institutions to correct abuses caused by the corruption of power in both government
and business. Efficiency, organization, cooperation, and a search for order were the hallmarks of Progressivism. Progressive reformers, motivated by religious faith and moral outrage, openly challenged accepted attitudes towards the rights of workers; the privileges and legal protections enjoyed by large corporations; the role of women in the workplace, home, and body politic; public education; municipal government; race relations; and morals in their effort to preserve capitalism and democracy.

While women in the northern cities and western regions fought for equal rights and a wide range of social reforms, African American women in the South and in northern cities organized to fight for these same causes—but also fought against a rising tide of racism that was disenfranchising male voters, replacing slave codes with oppressive Black codes, establishing segregation as a rule, and creating an unprecedented climate of violence against free African Americans.

Since emancipation, African-American women, struggling to organize family life, had been active in their communities through the formation of mutual aid societies, benevolent associations, educational and literary societies, and church groups. Black club women shared common Protestant Christian values with white women, although as documents will show, they consciously avoided identifying their organizations as “sister” organizations.

The disappointing struggle over the Fifteenth Amendment exposed the racism of many white feminists’ programs as well as the sexism of some leading abolitionists. White women leaders often claimed that white women were more deserving of the vote than black men. In the end, the Fifteenth Amendment granted the vote to all men, regardless of race, and excluded all women. Nevertheless, women never abandoned the struggle for woman’s suffrage but turned their attention to the grim labor situation facing the majority of black working women.

Similarities between the black women’s club movement, white middle-class reform organizations, and working-class women’s activism are limited, despite the rhetoric of common purposes, claims of feminist solidarity, and the sentiments of many individual members, or the efforts of the socialist movement to overcome the divisions of class, race, and gender. Alliances between organizations were preempted by the movements’ separate programs based upon each one’s subordinate role in relation to the dominant culture.

There were many contradictions in the reform programs of the Progressive era. The purpose of this unit is to expose students to the broad and diverse movements in which women played a central role. Students should understand how groups of women fought against a dominant culture, yet at the same time drew upon the assumptions of that culture to exclude other women. In short, there was no unified women’s outlook during this period. Instead, women’s perspectives varied across lines of race, class, and religion.
VI. Lesson Plans

1. Women Get Organized
2. Education and the Modern Woman
3. Rebel Girls: Working Class Women
4. Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement
5. The Debate Over Women’s Suffrage
Leading iconoclasts of the nation will attend their annual banquet and frolic at the Ford Town Hall, Boston, Mass. A feature at the meeting will be the attendance of Mrs. Margaret Sanger, fresh from raid on New York clinic. Adhesive tape will seal her lips that they may not preach birth control while in Boston, Mass. But she will be permitted to write on blackboard. Miss Edythe S. Tichell applies the adhesive tape to lips of Sanger.

Reprinted courtesy of The Bettman Archives.
LESSON ONE
WOMEN GET ORGANIZED

A. OBJECTIVES

♦ To identify women’s use of organized activities as a means of effecting social change during the Progressive era.

♦ To identify the special role that African American women assumed in the “social uplift of the race.”

♦ To examine the emphasis Progressive reformers placed upon the need for social reconstruction beginning with improvements in housing, education, and employment opportunities.

♦ To examine the similarities and differences between white middle-class women’s reform organizations and those formed by African American women.

♦ To identify individuals, organizations, and events which led to social reform in the Progressive era.

B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The most common means by which Progressive women advanced social goals was organized activities. Since the end of the Civil War women had sought to bridge the gap between their domestic ideals and politics through clubwork. Through clubwork women developed organizational talents and established impressive networks among local and municipal reform groups which led to the national organizations of the Progressive era. In the mid-1870s the largest women’s organization of its day, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), led by Frances Willard, brought together women from different classes and races under the banner of “home protection.” The organization’s top priority was the prohibition of liquor, as they cited excessive consumption of alcohol by men as the leading cause of suffering and poverty among women and children. The WCTU eventually expanded its reform agenda to include suffrage (they argued that women needed the vote to protect their homes and families from the problems caused by alcoholic men), labor unions, social hygiene, and politics.

By the 1890s American women had organized into a large number of organizations pursuing a variety of ends—suffrage, child-labor legislation, consumer protection, labor organizing, prohibition, and, among African American women, the anti-lynching movement.
C. **Lesson Activities**

1. **Springboard Activity:**
   Ask students to take turns reading aloud from **Document A**, “The Women’s Clubs Embrace Reform.” Once they have read this, have the class brainstorm the names of a variety of voluntary organizations that exist today. These should include student organizations, political organizations, clubs, associations, and family groups. Having drawn up a list of organizations, have students describe the common characteristics of these clubs. The teacher might ask how many students either belong to one of the organizations or know someone that does. Discuss with students the importance of organizations in achieving goals for their members. Also ask students why people belong to clubs, drawing the students’ awareness to the individual’s need to belong to a part of a larger group. Conclude by noting that this need was just as strong in the past as it is today.

2. **Within Cooperative Learning Groups** (one to two days):
   Divide the class into small groups and assign to each group either **Document B**, **C**, or **D** listed below. In addition, have each group read **Document E**. Then have students assume the role of a journalist writing for a local newspaper and write an editorial using their assigned document as a focus. Once they have written the editorials, have a member of each group read their editorial to the class. Compare the various editorials and discuss.

   **Document B** (Group 1): “Charlotte Perkins Stetson Praises Women’s Achievements in Club Activity and Professional Careers” (1898)

   **Document C** (Group 2): Booker T. Washington’s “The Club Movement Among Colored Women of America”

   **Document D** (Group 3): “Letter from Florida Ruffin Ridley” (1893)

   **Document E** (shared by all groups): Excerpt from Grover Cleveland’s “Defense of True Womanhood” (1905)

3. **Alternative Activity:**
   Divide the class into groups of four. Then have one person in each group read **Documents B, C, D, and E**. Once they have read the document quickly, have them re-read it, underlining the author’s main points. Then have the groups compare and discuss the documents, paying particular attention to the following issues:
   a. What are the goals or aims of clubwork in your document?
   b. To what kind of clubs does your document refer?
   c. How do the clubs in your document achieve their goals?
   d. What impact do the women’s clubs in your document have on society?
The Women’s Clubs Embrace Reform, 1904

Outwardly, for twenty years, the woman’s club remained an institution for the culture and pleasure of its members; but within, the desire for a larger opportunity was gradually strengthening. Parliamentary practice gave women confidence in their ability to lead larger issues to a successful conclusion. The inherent longing for power, coupled with confidence in the wisdom and beneficence of whatever women should do, brought the leaders of the club movement to a conception of social service. To effect this, further organization was necessary. It was then, in 1890, that a union of individual clubs was formed into a chartered body, known as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs.

Securing the passage of laws is the extreme instance of what organized women have accomplished through the medium of public opinion. Many other concrete illustrations drawn from local conditions might be given; but they would all serve to illustrate that the woman’s club is determining the mind of the community in its relation to many educational, philanthropic, and reformatory questions.

The federation of one of the more enlightened states has recently undertaken to enter the field of direct politics. I quote the advice it gives to its constituents:

“Before senators and representatives are even nominated, it is very essential that club women look up the record of the various candidates in their districts, and satisfy themselves as to their position regarding women upon boards of control of state institutions. Find out how they voted last year. Information will be gladly furnished by members of this committee. Then strive to create a sufficient public sentiment in your own locality to defeat, at the party caucus, any nominee known to oppose women representatives upon Boards of Control.”

Six years ago the General Federation undertook to help the solution of certain industrial problems, notably to further organization among working women; to secure and enforce child labor legislation where needed; to further attendance at school; and to secure humane conditions under which labor is performed. State federations have acted in accordance with the General Federation’s plans to appoint standing industrial committees, procure investigations, circulate literature, and create a public sentiment in favor of these causes. In Illinois this indirect power was of much aid in securing a Child Labor Law. In other communities something has been accomplished by way of enacting new laws or enforcing existing ones, showing that organized women readily avail themselves of the chance for indirect service in promoting the intelligent efforts of the federations.

Charlotte Perkins Stetson Praises Women’s Achievements in Club Activity and Professional Careers (1898)

The women’s club movement is one of the most important sociological phenomena of the century,—indeed, of all centuries,—marking as it does the first timid steps toward social organization of these so long unsocialized members of our race. Social life is absolutely conditioned upon organization. The military organizations which promote peace, the industrial organizations which maintain life, and all the educational, religious, and charitable organizations which serve our higher needs constitute the essential factors of that social activity in which, as individuals, we live and grow; and it is plain, therefore, that while women had no part in these organizations they had no part in social life. Their main relation to society was an individual one, an animal one, a sexual one. They produced the people of whom society was made, but they were not society. Of course, they were indispensable in this capacity; but one might as well call food a part of society because people could not exist without eating as to call women a social factor because people could not exist without being born. Women have made the people who made the world, and will always continue so to do. But they have heretofore had a most insignificant part in the world their sons have made.

The only form of organization possible to women was for long the celibate religious community. This has always been dear to them; and, as to-day many avoid undesired marriage for the sake of “independence,” so in earlier times many fled from undesired marriage to the communal independence of the convent. The fondness of women for the church has been based, not only on religious feeling, but on the force of the human longing for co-ordinate interest and activities; and only here could this be gratified. In the church at least they could be together. They could feel in common and act in common,—the deepest human joy. As the church widened its activities, it has found everywhere in women its most valuable and eager workers. To labor together, together to raise funds for a common end, for a new building or a new minister, for local charities or for foreign missions,—but to labor together, and for other needs than those of the family relation,—this has always met glad response from the struggling human soul in woman. When it became possible to work together for other than religious ends,—when large social service was made possible to women, as in our sanitary commission during the last war,—women everywhere rose to meet the need. The rise and spread of that greatest of women’s organizations, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, has shown anew how ready is the heart of woman to answer the demands of other than personal relations.

And now the whole country is budding into women’s clubs. The clubs are uniting and federating by towns, states, nations: there are even world organizations. The
sense of human unity is growing daily among women. Not to see it is impossible. Not to watch with pleasure and admiration this new growth in social life, this sudden and enormous re-enforcement of our best forces from the very springs of life, only shows how blind we are to true human advantage, how besotted in our fondness for sex-distinction in excess.

One of the most valuable features of this vast line of progress is the new heroism it is pouring into life. The crumbling and flattening of ambitions and ideals under pressure of our modern business life is a patent fact. We are growing to surrender taste and conscience and honor itself to the demands of business success, prostituting the noblest talents to the most ignoble uses with that last excuse of cowardice,—“A man must live.” Into this phase of life comes a new spirit—the spirit of such women as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony; of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and her splendid sisterhood; of all the women who have battled and suffered for half a century, forcing their way, with sacrifices never to be told, into the field of freedom so long denied them,—not for themselves alone, but for one another. We have loudly cried out at the injury to the home and family which are supposed to follow such a course. We have unsparingly ridiculed the unattractive and unfeminine among these vanguard workers. But few have thought what manner of spirit it must take to leave the dear old easy paths so long trodden by so many feet, and go to hew out new ones alone. The nature of the effort involved and the nature of the opposition incurred conduced to lessen the soft charms and graces of the ultra-feminine state; but the women who follow and climb swiftly up the steps which these great leader so laboriously built may do the new work in the new places, and still keep much of what these strenuous heroes had to lose.

It is not being a doctor that makes a woman unwomanly, but the treatment which the first women medical students and physicians received was such as to make even men unmanly. That time is largely past. The gates are nearly all open, at least in some places; and the racial activities of women are free to develop as rapidly as the nature of the case will allow. The main struggle now is with the distorted nature of the creature herself. Grand as are the women who embody at whatever cost the highest spirit of the age, there still remains to us the heavy legacy of the years behind,—the innumerable weak and little women, with the aspirations of an affectionate guinea pig. The soul of woman must speak through the long accumulations of her intensified sex-nature, through the uncertain impulses of a starved and thwarted class. She must recognize that she is handicapped. She must understand her difficulty, and meet it bravely and firmly.

But this is a matter for personal volition, for subjective consciousness. The thing to see and to rejoice in is that, with and without their conscious volition, with or without the approval and assistance of men, in spite of that crowning imbecility of history,—the banded opposition of some women to the advance of the others,—the female of our race is making sure and rapid progress in human development.

Booker T. Washington’s
“The Club Movement Among Colored Women of America”

Afro-American women of the United States have never had the benefit of a discriminating judgment concerning their worth as women made up of the good and bad of human nature. What they have been made to be and not what they are, seldom enters into the best or worst opinion concerning them.

In studying the status of Afro-American women as revealed in their club organizations, it ought to be borne in mind that such social differentiations as “women’s interests, children’s interests, and men’s interests” that are so finely worked out in the social development of the more favored races are but recent recognitions in the progressive life of the negro race. Such specializing had no economic value in slavery days, and the degrading habit of regarding the negro race as an unclassified people has not yet wholly faded into a memory.

The negro as an “alien” race, as a “problem,” as an “industrial factor,” as “ex-slaves,” as “ignorant” etc., are well known and instantly recognized; but colored women as mothers, as home-makers, as the center and source of the social life of the race have received little or no attention. These women have been left to grope their way unassisted toward a realization of those domestic virtues, moral impulses and standards of family and social life that are the badges of race respectability. They have had no special teachers to instruct them. No conventions of distinguished women of the more favored race have met to consider their peculiar needs. There has been no fixed public opinion to which they could appeal; no protection against the libelous attacks upon their characters, and no chivalry generous enough to guarantee their safety against man’s inhumanity to woman. Certain it is that colored women have been the least known, and the most ill-favored class of women in this country.

Thirty-five years ago they were unsocialized, unclassed and unrecognized as either maids or matrons. They were simply women whose character and personality excited no interest. If within thirty-five years they have become sufficiently important to be studied apart from the general race problem and have come to recognized as an integral part of the general womanhood of American civilization, that fact is a gratifying evidence of real progress.

In considering the social advancement of these women, it is important to keep in mind the point from which progress began, and the fact that they have been mainly
self-taught in all those precious things that make for social order, purity and character. They have gradually become conscious of the fact that progress includes a great deal more than what is generally meant by the terms culture, education and contact.

The club movement among colored women reaches into the sub-social condition of the entire race. Among white women clubs mean the forward movement of the best women in the interest of the best womanhood. Among colored women the club is the effort of the few competent in behalf of the many incompetent; that is to say that the club is only one of many means for the social uplift of a race. Among white women the club is the onward movement of the already uplifted.

The consciousness of being fully free has not yet come to the great masses of the colored women in this country. The emancipation of the mind and spirit of the race could not be accomplished by legislation. More time, more patience, more suffering and more charity are still needed to complete the work of the emancipation.

The training which first enabled colored women to organize and successfully carry on club work was originally obtained in church work. These churches have been and still are the great preparatory schools in which the primary lessons of social order, mutual trustfulness and united effort have been taught. The churches have been sustained, enlarged and beautified principally through the organized efforts of their women members. The meaning of unity of effort for the common good, the development of social sympathies grew into woman’s consciousness through the privileges of church work.

Still another school of preparation for colored women has been their secret societies. “The ritual of these secret societies is not without a certain social value.” They demand a higher order of intelligence than is required for church membership. Care for the sick, provisions for the decent burial of the indigent dead, the care for orphans and the enlarging sense of sisterhood all contributed to the development of the very conditions of heart that qualify women for the more inclusive work of those social reforms that are the aim of women’s clubs. The churches and secret societies have helped to make colored women acquainted with the general social condition of the race and the possibilities of social improvement.

With this training the more intelligent women of the race could not fail to follow the example and be inspired by the larger club movement of the white women. The need of social reconstruction became more and more apparent as they studied the results of women’s organizations. Better homes, better schools, better protection for girls of scant home training, better sanitary conditions, better opportunities for competent young women to gain employment, and the need of being better known to the American people appealed to the conscience of progressive colored women from many communities.

The clubs and leagues organized among colored women have all been more or less in direct response to these appeals. seriousness of purpose has thus been the main
characteristic of all these organizations. While the National Federation of Woman’s Clubs has served as a guide and inspiration to colored women, the club movement among them is something deeper than a mere imitation of white women. It is nothing less than the organized anxiety of women who have become intelligent enough to recognize their own low social condition and strong enough to initiate the forces of reform.

Florida Ruffin Ridley, Corresponding Secretary of the
Women’s Era Club of Boston
to Mrs. Ormiston Chant (Unitarian Church)
Letter, 1893

Dear Mrs. Ormiston Chant:

A year ago this month the members of the Women’s Era Club of Boston, Massachusetts, were privileged to have you address them as a body. The occasion was the first public meeting of the club, and besides yourself Mrs. Louis Stone, Mrs. Cheney, Mrs. Diaz, and Mrs. Spaulding spoke. It is safe to say that all of these noble women and fine speakers no one did more than yourself in strengthening the impulse to good work; in giving fresh inspiration toward right living. Your name and that speech have been to us a refreshing memory. Think then the shock it has occasioned us to hear that through your efforts a resolution at the National Conference of the Unitarian Church denouncing lynching was defeated.

We feel assured and do truly believe that you opposed the resolution from a high and moral standpoint, but we also feel assured that your position on this subject is the result of influences entirely one sided and that you will at least be interested to hear the other side.

We, as members of the Women’s Era Club, believe we speak for the colored women of America. We have organized as have our women everywhere to help in the world’s work. Not only by endeavoring to uplift ourselves and our race but by giving a helping hand and an encouraging word wherever they may be called for. As colored women we have suffered and do suffer too much to be blind to the suffering of others, but naturally we are more keenly alive to our own suffering than to others. We therefore feel that we would be false to ourselves, to our opportunities and to our race should we keep silent in a case like this.

We have endured much and we believe with patience; we have seen our world broken down, our men made fugitives and wanderers or their youth and strength spent in bondage. We ourselves are daily hindered and oppressed in the race of life; we know that every opportunity for advancement, for peace and happiness will be denied us; that in most sections Christian men and women absolutely refuse not only to live beside us and eat with us, but also to open their churches to us; we know that our children, no matter with what tenderness they have been reared, are considered legitimate prey for insult; that our young girls can at any time be thrust into foul and filthy cars, and no matter their needs, be refused food and shelter.

We feel deeply the lack of opportunities for culture brought by the Public Libraries, the Concert and Lecture Halls, which are everywhere denied us in the South. We view these things with amazement, but realizing that prejudice can only be eliminated by time and our general progress, we have tried to bear these indignities put upon us by a professedly Christian people with the fortitude and dignity of real Christians.
All this we have borne and do bear with no more or less patience but in the interest of common humanity, in the interest of justice, for the good name of our country, we solemnly raise our voice against the horrible crimes of lynching as practiced in the South, and we call upon Christians everywhere to do the same or be branded as sympathizers with the murderers. We here solemnly deny that the black men are the foul fiends they are pictured; we demand that until at least one crime is proven upon them that judgement be suspended.

We know positively of case after case where innocent men have died horrible deaths. We know positively of cases that have been made up. We know positively of cases where black men have been lynched for white men’s crimes. We know positively of black men murdered for insignificant offenses. All that we ask for is justice—not mercy or palliation—simply justice. Surely that is not too much for loyal citizens of a free country to demand.

We do not pretend to say that there are no black villains. Baseness is not confined to race. We read with horror of two different colored girls who were recently assaulted by white men in the South. We should regret any lynchings of the offenders by black men but we shall not have occasion. Should these offenders receive any punishment at all, it will be a marvel.

We do not brand the race because of these many atrocities by white men, but because lynching is not visited upon this class of offenders, we repudiate the claim that lynching is the natural and commendable outburst of a high-spirited people. We do not expect that white women feel as deeply as we. We know of good and high-minded women made widows, of sweet and innocent children made fatherless by a mob of boys “looking for fun.” In their names we utter our most solemn protest. For their sakes, we call upon workers of humanity everywhere, if they can do nothing for us, in mercy’s name do not raise their voices against us.

*Florida Ruffin Ridley*
Corresponding Secretary


Ida Barnett Wells
Ida Wells recorded the above letter in her autobiography.

Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-107756
Grover Cleveland’s Defense of True Womanhood, 1905

*Woman’s Clubs Not Only Harmful, But a Menace*

I am persuaded that without exaggeration of statement we may assume that there are woman’s clubs whose objects and intents are not only harmful, but harmful in a way that directly menaces the integrity of our homes and the benign disposition and character of our wifehood and motherhood; . . . I believe that it should be boldly declared that the best and safest club for a woman to patronize is her home. American wives and American mothers, as surely as “the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world,” have, through their nurture of children and their influence over men, the destinies of our Nation in their keeping to a greater extent than any other single agency. It is surely not soft-hearted sentimentalism which insists that, in a country where the people rule, a decisive share in securing the perpetuity of its institutions falls upon the mothers who devote themselves to teaching their children who are to become rulers, lessons of morality and patriotism and disinterested citizenship. Such thoughts suggest how supremely great is the stake of our country in woman’s unperverted steadfastness, and enjoin the necessity of its protection against all risks and all temptations.

*The Real Path of True Womanhood*

I am in favor of according to women the utmost social enjoyment; and I am profoundly thankful that this, in generous and sufficient measure, is within their reach without encountering the temptations or untoward influences so often found in the surroundings of woman’s clubs.

For the sake of our country, for the sake of our homes, and for the sake of our children, I would have our wives and mothers loving and devoted, though all others may be sordid and heedless; I would have them disinterested and trusting, though all others may be selfish and cunning; I would have them happy and contented in following the Divinely appointed path of true womanhood, though all others may grope in the darkness of their own devices.

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