

“GUARDING INNOCENCE”
AGE OF CONSENT, GENDER, & PROGRESSIVISM

A Thesis
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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JULY 2016

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“GUARDING INNOCENCE”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper would not be possible without the support and assistance of so many people.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Catherine Rymph for helping me in every step of this project, including choosing a topic, research, writing, revising, and even completing all of the forms on time. She has helped me to learn how to think more critically about my topic, work independently, and analyze my sources on a deeper level. In addition, she has especially enriched my understanding of the Progressive Era and legal reforms. I would also like to thank Dr. Michelle Morris for serving on my committee and furthering my knowledge of gender and the foundations of women's political activism in America. Much appreciation is also due to Dr. Colleen Heflin for taking on my thesis with enthusiasm even though it is outside her field. I am extremely grateful for my fellow students' input on this paper, especially Chris Deutsch, who always asked me about my progress and suggested new sources to consider. Furthermore, I am forever indebted to my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Megan Boccardi, who was the first person to show me how interesting history could be and who believed in my ability to pursue a career in this field. Last, I would like to thank my family and my husband, Jimmy, for encouraging me when I felt defeated and understanding when I needed to write and forgo other activities.

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INTRODUCTION

The National Council of Women meeting in 1895 illustrated female power in American politics as well as their vast numbers and diverse opinions. Representatives from all different kinds of women's groups across the country attended the gathering. Frances Willard and Susan B. Anthony were just two of the leading women there.¹ Willard, the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, had catapulted her organization to popularity and prominence in the international progressive pursuit of moral reform. Anthony, a longstanding leading suffragist, had recently been drawn, along with the National American Woman Suffrage Association, into more diverse moral concerns in society. Furthermore, young female professionals, especially physicians like Rev. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, attended the meeting; they had pursued gender equality by earning their way into men's career fields and were only beginning their journey with women's groups and the social hygiene movement toward moral reform.² Largely under female leadership, the social hygiene movement, suffragists, and the WCTU came together at this meeting and in their subsequent age of sexual consent campaigns to achieve protections for young women against sexual violence.

At the end of the nineteenth century, age of consent legislation came under fire for setting standards too low. The youngest age of consent in the United States was in Delaware, where it remained at just seven years old until the turn of the century. In accordance with English Common Law, the widely accepted age of consent in America at

¹ Margherita Arlina Hamm, "The National Council of Women," *Peterson Magazine* 5, no. 5 (May 1895): 497-498.

² H. G. Cutler, "Why Do Women Want the Ballot?" *Forum* (June 1915): 716.

this time was ten years old, still alarmingly low in the eyes of progressives.³ The age of sexual consent is a separate and often different standard than the age of marital consent, which, during the early Progressive Era, was higher than the sexual age of consent in many of the states and other “civilized countries” that these reformers addressed. This disparity between the marital age and sexual age left young girls sexually vulnerable but unable to marry, which most reformers regarded as illogical and unacceptable.⁴ In addition, states did not trust an adolescent’s ability to make independent decisions on other legal matters, like owning property and making contracts; this age was often set at eighteen or twenty-one.

Near the turn of the century, numerous American progressive reformers, especially women, took notice of these low age of consent laws and were appalled. They condemned them as “a disgrace to America’s boasted civilization, a menace to the peace of our homes and the safety of our children, [and] a bar to our social and spiritual advancement.”⁵ These reformers argued that girls should be protected from immoral men who could take advantage of them sexually under these inadequate regulations. They also connected this issue to general rape laws and prostitution regulation, which they often assumed was an industry perpetuated by “white slavery.” An idea inflated by reformers in response to alarming exposés (see Chapter One’s discussion of William Stead’s “The Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon”), “white slavery” was the mechanism that allegedly supplied brothels with a constant source of new prostitutes through the capture of innocent white girls under the age of consent and forced them into servitude.

³ Dr. James Foster Scott, *The Sexual Instinct: Its Use and Dangers as Affecting Heredity and Morals* (New York: E. B. Treat and Company, 1902), 144.

⁴ *Ibid*, 143-144.

⁵ Vie H. Campbell, “Why an Age of Consent?” *The Arena LXV* (April 1895): 285.

According to reformers, raising the age of consent would consequently increase the severity and consistency of punishments for all sexual crimes and decrease the number of prostitutes.

Motivated by religious and moral values, these progressives sought to increase the age of consent to a minimum of sixteen years old across the country, with even higher ages up to twenty-one as some activists' ultimate goals. While most reformers would have preferred to attack the issue on a national scale immediately, the state-by-state approach was more realistic since women's issues often received mixed reactions from legislators of differing regions. In some states, they experienced rapid success, but in others, they fought well into the last years of the Progressive Era.

The WCTU was the first major group to take up the age of consent cause in the late 1880s. They devoted much of their time to this campaign, especially considering their unrelated primary focus on banning alcohol. WCTU members justified their activism by claiming it was part of their motherly duties to make the public environment moral and safe for their children. In addition, the WCTU, staunchly conservative in their views of sexual activity, constantly emphasized what they saw as protective benefits inherent in the increase of the age of consent, which would limit the sexual behavior of young people, especially women. Using its international network of subsidiaries extending all the way down to the local level, the WCTU petitioned, lobbied, publicized, intimidated, donated, and demonstrated its way to achieving age of consent reforms in the United States and other countries. The WCTU was and still is most often credited for these age of consent victories, even though other organizations frequently helped them with their efforts. Certainly the most religiously devoted organization involved in these

reforms, the WCTU went to extremes in their campaign at times, and they often let gender equality go by the wayside in favor of protectionism. Still, their focus in age of consent reform was always on making the United States and the world a more virtuous place as a part of their motherly duties.

Even though their political views sometimes clashed, suffrage organizations frequently collaborated with the WCTU in pursuit of age of consent reform since they adopted the cause around the same time. Although suffragists always centered their endeavors on gaining votes for women, they reasoned that women needed other political rights in order to possess full citizenship and agency. This idea became particularly evident after national woman suffrage was legally recognized in 1920, and suffrage organizations continued to fight for equal rights. This era spawned a new debate about whether women should be protected because of their sex, like age of consent laws usually did, or treated as equal to men in every way. Furthermore, suffragists observed the restrictions that came along with age of consent legislation, especially those limiting women's sexual freedom. These disagreements and observations, however, did not minimize the original motivations of the suffragists' age of consent campaign: to create a more moral and egalitarian society in which women had the legal power to defend themselves and fight for their own best interests.

A decade or two later, physicians joined the age of consent reform movement in pursuit of morality, gender equality, and social hygiene. Through their scientific knowledge, they argued that, in order for the human race to evolve and maintain dominance, morality and health must remain intact, especially when it came to the children who made up the future generation. Prostitution and sexual abuse diminished the

health and virtue of society, so social hygienists insisted that laws pertaining to these matters as well as sexual education be improved. Drawing strongly on Christian values, the social hygiene movement often held conflicting views on gender equality, employing detrimental gendered ideals while also placing female physicians in leadership positions. Like WCTU members and suffragists, social hygienists were also extremely concerned about eliminating “white slavery” and saw it as connected to age of consent reform. The social hygiene movement’s connection to eugenics further complicated its public image. The movement was split over whether eugenic methods were advantageous, but many physicians considered sterilization a just punishment for sexual crimes as well as a solution to mental deficiency. Nevertheless, the social hygiene movement, similar to the other two groups, was primarily driven by a desire for a moral society where sexual misbehavior was restrained.

All three of these groups of progressives sought the same result from age of consent reform: a more peaceful, virtuous, and respectful society where the future generations could grow up without hindrance or exposure to corrupt influences. Despite the differences in their other pursuits, these reformers could agree and even work together on this premise. This fact is evident in the writings of members of each group, where they openly praised one another and borrowed ideas. However, these progressive organizations held conflicting opinions about the future of American women and what new laws should do for them. Differences in perceptions of gender, sexuality, and even race influenced the disagreements amongst these reformers. While the WCTU wanted age of consent and suffrage to protect American women, some suffragists (the National Woman’s Party) set off in a new direction, seeking full equal rights in the Equal Rights

Amendment. On the other hand, a number of social hygienists argued that the best way to protect women and the rest of the American population was through improved sexual education and even the institution of sterilization policies for criminals and anyone they classified as “unfit.” In this study, I argue that these three groups visibly disagreed on many of these more specific issues, but they all concurred that age of consent reform had valuable potential benefits, especially when it came to the promotion of American morality.

For this project, I examined journal articles, books, newsletters, pamphlets, meeting minutes, letters, and newspaper clippings ranging from 1885 to the early 1930s. These sources reveal the rhetoric used by these reformers, whether they were addressing the greater public or other members of their organizations. The claims and ideas intimated in these sources are critical to this paper, but the specific language employed by reformers reveal much more about their beliefs, prejudices, and purposes in the age of consent campaign. For example, the term “white slavery,” which was used by members in all three of these groups, reveals the type of woman the reformers expected to save from sexual exploitation: white. Also, the scarcity of the use of the word “rape” by any of these reformers, and its rare strategic employment to stress severity when necessary, can suggest the intentions of the writer or speaker of the source, such as the intended audience or emotional response.⁶ This type of information enables me to make decisive

⁶ Instead of the word “rape,” most reformers, especially the WCTU, favored poetic phrases, such as “stealing a woman’s honor.” Suffragists preferred punchy expressions like “sex domination,” while the social hygienists often turned to more technical terms, like “sexual assault.” Certainly, these phrases expose racial and gendered assumptions as well as other beliefs that differed among the groups and individual members.

arguments about each group's purposes, especially when it comes to whether they advocated for women's rights or protection.

While the historiography on age of consent reform is limited, this study can easily be situated in the broader historical field of women and reform. Monumental scholars, like Nancy Cott and Eileen Boris, have addressed the role of women in progressivism. Cott insists that the Progressive Era laid the foundation for modern feminism because it showed women how much they could achieve through activism and revealed future feminist concerns.⁷ Meanwhile, Boris examines the methods of female progressives, arguing that they exploited their prescribed gender roles and justified their reform activities through their duties as mothers; my research strongly supports this argument.⁸ Other historians tackle the controversy among female reformers experienced when choosing to either accept or reject the traditional gender norms, which also comes to light in this analysis.⁹ Within my study, I reference works more closely related to my subject matter by historians such as Mary E. Odem, Ruth Rosen, Estelle B. Freedman, David J. Pivar, Constance A. Nathanson, Jane E. Larson, and more. These scholars have published extremely influential studies on topics including the WCTU, anti-prostitution, Frances Willard, suffragists, anti-suffragists, social purity, and adolescent sexuality, but none of these projects have explicitly focused on age of consent while comparing the approaches of different progressive reform groups.

⁷ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁸ Eileen Boris, "The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the 'Political,'" in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of the Welfare States*, eds. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 213-245.

⁹ See works such as: Ellen Carol DuBois, "Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Transformation of Class Relations among Woman Suffragists," in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, eds. Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 352-372; Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

On the other hand, the historiography of the Progressive Era is extensive and has been developing for over half a century. This historical discussion has included both extensive praises of progressives and condemning criticisms. Some critical historical works on progressivism condemn reformers for being too conservative and actually constricting democracy worldwide; this is certainly argued by present-day scholars such as Jackson Lears and Heather Cox Richardson.¹⁰ Historians, like Peter G. Filene in the 1970s, also argue that progressives disagreed too much to make real changes and, in the end, there was a lack of true social equality achieved during the Progressive Era.¹¹ However, several recent historical works, like Maureen Flanagan's *America Reformed*, assert the democratic goals as well as the real transformative power of the progressives.¹²

As a result of these previous historians' queries, this study examines the motivations, concerns, methods, and gendered perceptions of the selected reformers. In addition, I explore the disagreements and consistencies amongst the progressives. Through my analysis, I conclude that age of consent reformers truly transformed the issues they targeted, legally protecting young women from sexual advances they often neither invited nor understood. Agreeing on the moral necessity for age of consent reform in the beginning, the WCTU members, suffragists, and social hygienists ended up having different opinions of the future of these laws once they were put into effect. While these regulations sometimes backfired by restricting women's personal freedoms,

¹⁰ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper, 2009); Heather Cox Richardson, *West From Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Peter G. Filene, "An Obituary for 'The Progressive Movement,'" *American Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1970).

¹² Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s-1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For an argument that fuses the previous two, see Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

it is clear that age of consent reformers truly intended to make America a safer, more virtuous place for everyone, especially women.

CHAPTER 1

The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union’s “Honorable” Crusade for Age of Consent Reform

“Men and women of conscience and conviction, shall these immoral laws stand? Shall the wellsprings of immorality flow on while we maintain a criminal silence? We are confronted by a duty which, though unpleasant, is nevertheless of supreme importance. We must inaugurate a holy crusade... The conscience of this nation must be awakened.”¹

In 1895, progressive journalist B. O. Flowers called on both men and women to act upon their Christian values and fight for age of consent with these strong words. He especially spoke to Christian women when he asserted that this fight may be “unpleasant,” as women would have to step out of their traditional comfort zones into roles of public, political activism. At the same time as Flowers wrote this, however, women were already answering his call to action and had been answering it for at least a decade. As the new century dawned, “questions of sexual morality had become a major vehicle for the organization and politicization of women,” especially in female progressive groups like the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.²

The WCTU was given “the almost exclusive credit of raising the average ‘age of consent’ laws throughout the civilized world from the barbarous ten years limit.”³ While this organization was one of the most morally conservative groups that campaigned for age of consent reforms, they embraced much more progressive political ideas and

¹ B. O. Flowers, “Wellsprings and Feeders of Immorality: Second Paper, Lust Fostered by Legislation,” *The Arena* XI (December 1894–February 1895): 175.

² Constance A. Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women’s Adolescence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 134.

³ Isabella Webb Parks, “The Objects of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” *Christian Advocate* 70, no. 20 (May 16, 1895): 308.

employed more extreme tactics than expected. Ultimately, however, the WCTU adopted an ideology centered primarily on the protection of young girls and, in particular, their chastity, no matter the girls' personal sexual inclinations.

The American WCTU was formed in 1874 by middle class women who "overcame [their] natural timidity" and desired moral reform and collectively engaged in political activism, voluntarism, and church-going.⁴ They gathered together to pursue "peace in the heart, the home, the church and the nation," believing that "women can do much in helping forward the practical application of these principles" both publicly and privately.⁵ They began expanding their mission beyond temperance and supporting causes like the woman's suffrage movement as early as 1879.⁶ The members of the WCTU argued that they "have taken up the various side lines of work because, as we pushed on, they seemed means necessary to the accomplishment of our greater central purpose. Especially was this true of the suffrage department."⁷

The WCTU grew exponentially over the years; local chapters sprang up everywhere in a strategic attempt to have a branch of the organization in every congressional district. Adding to this, they formed a hierarchy including state WCTU chapters that all fell under the authority of the national organization.⁸ When certain state

⁴ Mary Aline Brown, "Organized Mother Love: Environments and Incidents of its Inception," *Arthur's Home Magazine* 46, no. 5 (May 1897): 244; Ella A. Boole, "Woman's Place in Public Life," *The World's Moral Problems: Addresses at the Third World's Christian Citizenship Conference* (Pittsburgh: National Reform Association, 1920), 79.

⁵ Hannah J. Bailey, "Third Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Department of Peace and Arbitration," in *Minutes of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union at the Sixteenth Annual Meeting* (Chicago: Woman's Temperance Publication Association, 1889), 301.

⁶ Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830-1930," in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* eds. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 61.

⁷ Parks, "The Objects of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union," 308.

⁸ Sklar, "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power," 61.

chapters had success, the national WCTU encouraged fruitless states to follow their examples and methods.⁹ In addition, the WCTU followed a “do everything” policy, which their president argued “was not of our choosing, but is an evolution, as inevitable as any traced by the naturalist, or described by the historian.”¹⁰ Dedicated to the idea that “the land is full of bloody crimes and the city of violence” beyond mere alcoholism, they continually sought to expand their influence, creating different departments dedicated to various issues.¹¹ By 1896, the organization had established thirty-nine departments, the majority of which did not have explicit connections to their initial concern of temperance. These departments worked tirelessly to provide social services where the government lacked assistance structures, including prison reformatory programs, the installation of matrons in women’s prisons, the building of playgrounds, creation of school savings banks, and drafting of new laws concerning “industrial education and vocational guidance, child labor, liquor and narcotics and cigarettes, gambling, curfew, polygamy, segregation of prostitutes, labor, and all similar problems.”¹² They also investigated suspiciously immoral situations and fought for woman’s suffrage.¹³

As they expanded, the WCTU’s ideology also evolved to include women’s education, citizenship, individualism, maternalism, home-making, “winning souls for Christ,” and public moral reform.¹⁴ However, they looked down upon the “extreme

⁹ Helen H. Gardener, “A Battle for Sound Morality, or the History of Recent Age-of-Consent Legislation in the United States,” *The Arena* XIV (September–November 1895): 29.

¹⁰ Frances E. Willard, *Do Everything: A Handbook for the World’s White Ribboners* (Chicago: The Woman’s Temperance Publishing Association, 1895), 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² Mary Ritter Beard, *Woman’s Work in Municipalities* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1915), 225.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Boole, “Woman’s Place in Public Life,” 77.

feminist – who is not always feminine.”¹⁵ WCTU members believed in distinct and real gender differences and thought that laws should reflect these distinctions.¹⁶ They also continued to rely heavily upon their association with faith, thriving amongst churchwomen and receiving much aid, whether physical, political, or spiritual, from church communities.¹⁷ Furthermore, they justified their support of temperance and its connection to anti-rape legislation through biblical passages, even citing stories about David to show that “fermented drinks promote lust.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, the WCTU did not limit itself to one type of Christian church, claiming to be “an undenominational body,” which made it popular with a wide variety of churchgoers.¹⁹ Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the WCTU had solidified its place as the largest women’s organization, even establishing branches in at least thirty different countries.²⁰ Their strategic expansion and rigid hierachal structure aided their success. Even suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper referred to the WCTU as “the most perfectly organized body of women in existence” in 1902.²¹

According to her contemporaries, Frances Willard was largely responsible for developing the WCTU beyond its original purpose. Beginning in the late 1800s, Willard

¹⁵ Boole, “Woman’s Place in Public Life,” 78.

¹⁶ Jane E. Larson, “‘Even a Worm Will Turn at Last’: Rape Reform in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 9, no. 1 (May 8, 2013): 3.

¹⁷ “World’s Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” *Christian Advocate* 70, no. 8 (February 21, 1895): 120; Some preachers thought that the WCTU’s petitions and requests for donations were actually taking up too much of their attention, distracting them from their duties to the “general Christian culture... in his morning sermons.” W.C. Bitting, D.D., “New York Letter,” *The Watchman* 76, no. 10 (March 7, 1895): 8.

¹⁸ Dr. and Mrs. Wilbur F. Crafts, *World Book of Temperance* (Washington, DC: The International Reform Bureau, 1911), 212.

¹⁹ “Raising the Union Signal on the Wrong Fort,” *Christian Advocate* 70, no. 23 (June 6, 1895): 354.

²⁰ Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism, 1887-1917* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 37; M.B.H., “The World’s Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” *Congregationalist* 82, no. 44 (November 4, 1897): 650.

²¹ Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, *The History of Woman Suffrage: Vol. IV, 1883-1900* (Indianapolis: The Hollenbeck Press, 1902), 1046.

took over as president of the WCTU and left a strong legacy that was pronounced by the expansion of the organization to encompass many different anti-vice issues. Her personal views pervaded the WCTU and became cemented in the organization's official ideology. Willard advocated "domesticating politics" and wanted members to bring their protests into the public realm; this went hand-in-hand with their support of woman suffrage.²² She also argued that women should not be shackled by dependency, and instead American society should "put a money value upon a wife's industry in helping to build and maintain a home."²³ A true progressive according to Michael McGerr's depiction, Willard criticized the upper class, questioning "Why does the great mass tolerate the wealth, leisure and culture of the few?"²⁴ She wholeheartedly believed that "the mass could make it different," starting with temperance and expanding out to other social reforms.²⁵ Furthermore, Willard claimed that men should not be allowed to make all the rules that women must follow, because a man would always consider his self-interest above the interest of the woman. She denounced old laws that favored men over women, including coverture, all-male juries, and the husband's right to physically discipline his wife.²⁶ Because of these outdated laws, Willard supported woman's suffrage and worked with suffragists toward common goals, like age of consent reform.

Despite these women's rights assertions, Willard and other WCTU leaders were always careful to assert the primacy of "womanliness" in their agenda.²⁷ They argued

²² Larson, "'Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,'" 24.

²³ "The National Women's Christian Temperance Union and Social Purity," *Philanthropist*, (February 1886): 6.

²⁴ Frances E Willard, "Common Joy," *The Watchman* 76, no. 25 (June 20 1895): 7.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁶ Frances E. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years: An Autobiography of an American Woman* (Chicago: Woman's Temperance Publication Association, 1889), 612.

²⁷ Larson, "'Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,'" 29.

that their movement was founded only on “organized mother love.”²⁸ Womanliness could be shown through housework, motherhood, and public support of sexual purity. Willard especially promoted this strategy, seeing the embrace of motherhood as an avenue to “mobilize mass numbers of women to undermine male domination.”²⁹ This eased conservative female activists’ anxieties about speaking out in public on sexual matters, since they were wary of damaging their reputations.³⁰ The WCTU even tried to play up its womanliness at national conventions, making the atmosphere “homey” with welcoming decorations, open discussions, and the inclusion of a “Children’s Night” where a youth choir sang for the members’ entertainment.³¹ Still, WCTU members stood up for their fellow women in most circumstances. They viewed “sexuality as a vehicle of power that in complex ways kept women subordinated in society.”³² Consequently, as Jane E. Larson’s insightful article reveals, they refused to “shun women ‘of bad character,’” which was expected of them as upstanding middle-class white women in American society.³³

Willard was so supremely popular that she was said to have “embodied Napoleon’s idea of imperialism. She was absolute ruler by the will of the ruled.”³⁴ She was a great speaker who also conveyed “ineradicable human sentiment” when she spoke

²⁸ Willard, *Do Everything*, 6.

²⁹ Suzanne M. Marilley, “Frances Willard and the Feminism of Fear,” *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 126.

³⁰ Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 29.

³¹ Jane A. Stewart, “White Ribbon Women in Convention,” *The Independent... Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* 48, no. 2504 (November 26, 1896): 17-18.

³² Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 4.

³³ *Ibid.* 31.

³⁴ C.B.S., “A World Temperance Meeting: From a Staff Correspondent,” *Outlook* 57, no. 10 (November 6, 1897): 563.

of tragedies and successes around the world.³⁵ Members of the WCTU revered her as a visionary. Willard worked in close collaboration with woman leaders from other countries, like Lady Henry Somerset from England, as well as those of different races and ethnicities in the United States, like Margaret Murray Washington of the Tuskegee Institute and Leonora Lake from the Irish Catholic Total Abstinence Society.³⁶ Under her leadership, the WCTU took control of the national age of consent campaign and achieved numerous successful state reforms. When Willard, “the queen of American womanhood,” died in early 1898, her followers were distraught, questioning whether the WCTU could continue on without her.³⁷ Even international female leaders, like Lady Somerset, expressed their grief over her loss and celebrated her legacy.³⁸ However, Willard had trained many of her long-term companions in reform so they could also lead the organization; plus, she had built up too strong and vast of a structure in the WCTU for it to not carry on with its mission.³⁹

During her period of influence, Willard instituted a “three-fold” mission of the WCTU, including “Temperance, Purity, and the Enfranchisement of Women.”⁴⁰ She and other members of the WCTU were inspired to take the purity issue seriously by English journalist William Stead’s 1885 expose about child prostitution, “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.”⁴¹ Stead argued that young girls were systematically tricked and forced into prostitution, or “white slavery.” He also emphasized the inherent class

³⁵ C.B.S., “A World Temperance Meeting,” 563.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Death of Frances E. Willard,” *Zion’s Herald* 76, no. 8 (February 23, 1898): 231.

³⁸ “Woman’s Christian Temperance,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* 76, no. 22 (June 2, 1898).

³⁹ Mary A. Livermore, “The Future of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” *Congregationalist* 83, no. 14 (April 7, 1898): 498.

⁴⁰ Willard, *Do Everything*, 46.

⁴¹ Ibid.

inequality in the system, claiming that “the daughters of the people must be served up as dainty morsels to minister to the passions of the rich” in London’s lustful society.⁴² This article roused an outrage in the populations of both the United States and England; purity reformers in both countries seized upon the popularity of the issue to start an age of consent campaign that flourished quickly.⁴³ The American WCTU took the lead on this issue almost immediately and created a Department of Social Purity, directed by Katherine Bushnell, to help abolish “white slavery” and reform the age of consent.⁴⁴ They specifically advocated for “‘prevention,’ ‘reform,’ and ‘legislation.’”⁴⁵ Their mission was “to redeem outcast women from a slavery worse than that of chains, and by better laws to secure protection to women and girls from the outrages of brutal and designing men.”⁴⁶

By 1895, Willard recognized that age of consent activism was gaining popularity faster than the temperance movement, so the WCTU shifted focus and circulated thousands of petitions in support of age of consent reform.⁴⁷ Speaking for the organization, Willard reasoned that the laws should punish men “whose indignities and outrages toward women are worse to their victims than death.”⁴⁸ Willard drew on examples of victimized women, like those in Stead’s example, to show that women could not rely on men to take care of them. As historian Suzanne M. Marilley explains, Willard strategically seized upon mothers’ fears, which inspired large numbers of women, even

⁴² William T. Stead, “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon I: The Report of the Secret Commission,” *The Pall Mall Gazette* (July 6, 1885): doi: <http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/pmg/tribute/mt1.php>.

⁴³ Sklar, “The Historical Foundations of Women’s Power,” 122.

⁴⁴ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 39.

⁴⁵ Willard, *Do Everything*, 47.

⁴⁶ Lillian M. N. Stevens, “The Work of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 32 (November 1908): 510.

⁴⁷ Sklar, “The Historical Foundations of Women’s Power,” 122.

⁴⁸ Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years*, 612.

the most traditional ones, to join the mass movement. This was something that the suffragists struggled to achieve with their primary emphasis on women's rights.⁴⁹

Women across the country, however, were easily convinced by the WCTU's appeals to support age of consent reform and took political action in droves. Hundreds of thousands of women signed Willard's petitions to change consent laws at the state level.⁵⁰ They also signed "purity pledges," in which both men and women vowed to respect women and help them "maintain the law of purity as equally binding upon men and women."⁵¹

From 1885 to 1900, the WCTU focused much of its energy on Washington D.C., even though they primarily sought age of consent reforms on a state-by-state basis. The group adopted this strategy because if the district's local laws improved, which were greatly influenced by congressmen, the WCTU could uncover the motivations and opinions of federal legislators. The organization could then plan their attack on the national age of consent accordingly.⁵² Also, as it influenced the politics of the Capitol, the WCTU gained publicity and alerted American society to the difficulties of passing age of consent reforms. This way, "the arduous character of [their] work will be realized."⁵³ By 1889, Washington D.C. was convinced to raise the age of consent, but only to sixteen. The WCTU sought a minimum age of consent of eighteen years old, which matched many other age of majority laws. Some WCTU members, such as the

⁴⁹ Marilley, "Frances Willard and the Feminism of Fear," 126.

⁵⁰ J. Shoshanna Ehrlich, "You Can Steal Her Virginity but Not Her Doll: The Nineteenth Century Campaign to Raise the Legal Age of Sexual Consent," *Cardozo Journal of Law and Gender* 15, no. 229 (April 3, 2009): 234.

⁵¹ Willard, *Do Everything*, 48.

⁵² Margaret Dye Ellis, "'It Was a Long, Long Way to Prohibition': Legislative Achievements of a Quarter of a Century," *The Union Signal* 44, no. 38 (October 17, 1918): 10.

⁵³ Woman's Christian Temperance Union of California, *Minutes of the Twentieth Annual Convention of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of California at Sacramento, Oct. 2nd to 6th, 1899* (San Francisco, Thos J. Davis, Printer, 1899), 23.

prominent reformer Margaret Dye Ellis, even aimed for the age of consent to be as high as twenty-one to guarantee the utmost protection for women. As a result, they kept pushing in places like Washington D.C. where they had already achieved smaller victories.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the successful reform in Washington D.C. led to numerous other localities reforming age of consent laws before the turn of the century.

To achieve these age of consent reforms without the legal right to vote, women in the WCTU used whatever political strategies they could, especially petitioning. They vigorously campaigned for signatures, sometimes getting thousands on one petition alone. Petitions allowed women an organized, strong voice for their opinions, and they irritated politicians by incessantly bringing these documents to them while they were concerned about other preferred bills. They also publicly shamed any lawmaker who opposed their age of consent efforts by writing about them in *The Union Signal* and other publications.⁵⁵ They used piercing words and phrases to rouse fear and anger in their readers, proclaiming things like “moral death is a greater misfortune than physical death.”⁵⁶ They also deplored the lack of consistent punishment for statutory rape in this same way, declaring, as one reformer did, that “laws are shamelessly unequal when they make the punishment for stealing away a woman’s honor no greater than for the purloining of her wardrobe.”⁵⁷ By using phrases such as “stealing honor,” reformers reinforced that rape was a crime deserving punishment and played up the significance of gendered societal notions, like the idea that women’s reputations hinged upon their

⁵⁴ WCTU of California, *Minutes of the Twentieth Annual Convention*, 23.

⁵⁵ Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 40.

⁵⁶ Vie H. Campbell, “Why an Age of Consent?”, 285. Campbell was president of the Wisconsin WCTU branch at this time.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

sexual purity. WCTU members utilized whatever public voice they could find to the fullest potential with intense rhetoric and condemning allegations.

Furthermore, women in the WCTU worked tirelessly to win the hearts and minds of the general population in addition to the legislators. They knew that convincing the average American of the good nature of their goals would lead to votes for their favored politicians as well as improved overall morality and piety in society. To spread its message, the WCTU encouraged their members to frequently engage in charitable projects, like sending flowers to shut-ins, visiting hospitals with baked goods, handing out Bibles and Christian songbooks, and donating clothing to the needy.⁵⁸ While completing all of these tasks, activists would teach about purity, temperance, protecting childhood, the dangers of polygamy, and other issues they deemed politically pertinent.⁵⁹ In addition, they used attention-grabbing, openly political techniques to make their presence and values known. In one instance in the early 1920s, the North Dakota WCTU president marched out onto a baseball diamond draped in an American flag because a game was being played on a Sunday, which was seen as both illegal and unchristian. The activist proclaimed that anyone who disobeyed these “red, white and blue laws” of the United States was certainly a “red,” playing on the anti-communist sentiments of the time.⁶⁰ It is clear that the WCTU members’ passion and commitment helped the organization succeed.

⁵⁸ WCTU of California, *Minutes of the Twentieth Annual Convention*, 64-66.

⁵⁹ Reverend Albert Sidney Gregg, “Temperance Women in Council,” *Zion’s Herald* 77, no. 45 (November 8, 1899): 1426.

⁶⁰ Anti-communism was especially potent at the time of this demonstration, which occurred only a few short years after the Bolshevik Revolution and the end of World War I. Mrs. Wilbur F. Crafts, “The History and Significance of the Stars and Stripes in a Flag Day Service,” in *Familiar Talks on That Boy and Girl of Yours*, ed. Dr. Wilbur F. Crafts (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1922), 396.

Another major strength of the WCTU was the popularity of its membership. Legislators at every level of government were forced to take the organization seriously because of its prominent numbers. Many lawmakers liked the WCTU and hailed its members as “the best women in the world” but would oppose their political objectives pertaining to women, like suffrage and age of consent. Other politicians vehemently opposed their efforts at every juncture.⁶¹ Some state legislators were bold enough to make fun of age of consent reformers by proposing mock bills which suggested “that the age of consent be raised to eighty-one years, that all girls be required to wear a chastity belt, or to mandate that all women *must* consent to sex after the age of eighteen.”⁶² These men also tried and failed to kick the crowds of WCTU spectators out of their meetings, claiming it was inappropriate subject matter for female ears. Ultimately, these efforts and resistance to rape legislation resulted in the WCTU members concluding that men would not protect women as they had always claimed, and women instead had to care for and protect each other. This further solidified their support for woman suffrage.⁶³ The WCTU also tried to change the standards of masculinity to include standing up for women rather than supporting male rapists, who they rebranded as unmanly and weak. This ideological strategy emphasized perceived male and female differences, pleasing the majority of WCTU activists while also calling for stronger rape legislation.⁶⁴

While some members of the WCTU participated casually, maybe even for primarily social reasons, other women took their roles in the anti-vice crusade very

⁶¹ *Extending the Right of Suffrage to Women: Hearings Before the Committee on Woman Suffrage, House of Representatives*, 65th Congress, Session 2 (1918), (statement of Carrie Chapman Catt, NAWSA president, New York), 32.

⁶² Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 41-42.

⁶³ Ibid, 44.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 45.

seriously. They frequently sacrificed time with their families or pursuits of careers in favor of seeking moral victories like age of consent reforms. Some women traveled to faraway conferences and spoke out on explicitly political issues that the WCTU was interested in, like the imperialistic war in the Philippines.⁶⁵ One reformer, Helen W. Stoddard, was a widowed mother of two and a professor at Fort Worth University before she made the decision to devote her time to fighting “white slavery.” As president of the Texas WCTU branch in the 1890s, she pushed for an increased age of consent in the state capital and even traveled to the World’s Convention of the WCTU in London.⁶⁶ Stoddard was just one of many women who stepped out of the more conservative political role of women to pursue what the WCTU perceived as the greater good.

In 1888, the WCTU brought this issue to Congress in a bill to raise the national age of consent to eighteen. Like many other age of consent reformers, the WCTU typically argued that the age should be set to the same as the age of property ownership for women, which was eighteen years old.⁶⁷ Although it ultimately failed, the proposal secured some support from legislators; Senator Henry William Blair presented the bill and declared that “girlhood and young womanhood are in absolute need of the protection of law.”⁶⁸ Bills like this one and the debate surrounding it often referred to young women as “innocent,” “girl-children,” “infants”, and “baby girls.”⁶⁹ While most female

⁶⁵ Gregg, “Temperance Women in Council,” 1426.

⁶⁶ Clara Christiana Morgan Chapin, *Thumb Nail Sketches of White Ribbon Women* (Chicago: Woman’s Temperance Publishing Association, 1895), 44.

⁶⁷ At the height of the WCTU’s campaign, especially in the early 1900s, some of the organization’s official documents advocated a goal age of consent of twenty-one years old, which they viewed as a more stable, mature age; Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 138.

⁶⁸ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record: 50th Congress, 1st Session* (February 20, 1888): 1326.

⁶⁹ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 123.

reformers, including many in the WCTU, aimed for age of consent to improve women's lives, these legislators frequently misconstrued the issue, painting young women as too weak and naïve to make their own choices.

The WCTU certainly fed into this portrayal at times, arguing that young women were incapable of feeling sexual passion outside the confines of love, which would "render sacred to them the act of sexual intercourse" and deter them from ever willingly submitting to immoral sex or prostitution.⁷⁰ Still, the WCTU was also aware that age of consent laws could be implemented to control young women's sexuality. Because of their stipulations and word choice, these laws were, according to historian Constance Nathanson, "'explicitly designed to deny to a girl the right to make decisions about her sexuality'" and protect them from "even their own ignorance or desire in this matter."⁷¹ Overall, WCTU members were motivated by a mixture of the "desire to protect young women from exploitation" and the desire "to control their burgeoning sexuality"⁷²

WCTU members were particularly worried that impoverished girls who had to go to work as children would lose their innocent childhoods since they were deprived of the "family protection" found in middle class, Christian homes.⁷³ The WCTU often united with labor activists to increase the age of consent and improve working conditions. Their agreement on these causes was based on the idea that the workplace was sexually dangerous for young girls.⁷⁴ Thus, age of consent reforms aimed primarily to protect young white working class women, who were perceived as particularly vulnerable to

⁷⁰ B. O. Flowers, "Prostitution Within the Marriage Bond," *The Arena* XIII (June-August 1895): 63.

⁷¹ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 123.

⁷² Ehrlich, "You Can Steal Her Virginity but Not Her Doll," 231.

⁷³ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 123.

⁷⁴ Leslie K. Dunlap, "The Reform of Rape Law and the Problem of White Men: Age-of-Consent Campaigns in the South, 1885-1910," in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 357.

middle class men, especially those who were supervisors at work.⁷⁵ Also, they argued that poor girls could be enticed by wealthier, older men with bribes. These age of consent supporters described a situation in which a man might offer a deprived young girl “a gold watch and chain and one of those diamond rings,” but only if she came upstairs with him first. After “the screams of the child” did not save her, “she left the room robbed of her virginity and started on the path of prostitution,” because that was what the evil man had made her become.⁷⁶ Clearly, the WCTU placed the blame for the corruption of young poor white females primarily on men.

WCTU members also disapproved of solely blaming women for other sexual issues like the spread of venereal disease. They denounced such double standards as “‘devilish.’” In their opposition to prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases, according to Ruth Rosen’s *The Lost Sisterhood*, the WCTU “emphasized male, rather than female, sexual misbehavior and attempted to regulate men’s sexual conduct by agitating for a single sexual standard.”⁷⁷ To proactively aid women already trapped in prostitution, WCTU members visited brothels and asked the women living there to pray with them.⁷⁸ They also invited prostitutes to come live at their missionary homes so they could get away from the life of sexual immorality.⁷⁹ However, if the prostitutes rejected this offer, the WCTU would sometimes resort to reporting the location of the brothel to

⁷⁵ Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 16-17.

⁷⁶ Flowers, “Wellsprings and Feeders of Immorality,” 170-171.

⁷⁷ Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 54.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 64.

⁷⁹ Parks, “The Objects of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” 308.

the police. They so desperately wanted to “save” these women that they would force them to abandon prostitution through imprisonment if necessary.⁸⁰

Frances Willard and Katherine Bushnell drew attention to the issue of prostitution in America by investigating “white slavery” practices in the lumber camps of Wisconsin and Michigan in the 1880s. The WCTU initially became suspicious of these lumber camps because of the kinds of workers they attracted. European immigrants flocked to these jobs, and the WCTU stereotyped these individuals as unchristian, barbaric, and immoral. Furthermore, the camps were widely known to have rough living conditions and host hundreds of prostitutes. WCTU members believed these women, both American and immigrant, to have been tricked into coming to the camp with a promise of employment, unaware of what the jobs really were. The lives that followed were extremely depressing for these women, resulting in high rates of imprisonment and suicide.⁸¹

Upon her investigation, Bushnell found “sixty ‘dens’ of prostitution and recorded ‘the histories of some 577 cases of degraded women.’”⁸² The State of Wisconsin tried to cover this up by conducting its own separate inquiry and denying it all, turning on Bushnell and accusing her of being unchaste instead. Bushnell eventually succeeded in getting a law passed to limit prostitution in Wisconsin, however, and it was named after her.⁸³ When WCTU members reported this incident in publications, they focused on the native-born victims rather than immigrants because American girls would be seen as more respectable and deserving of protection by their readers. The WCTU also aimed to

⁸⁰ Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 64.

⁸¹ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 40.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

improve the morality of the lumberjacks through missionary work; they argued that “‘by helping them spiritually we protect our own sex.’”⁸⁴ With their handling of this incident, the WCTU proved that they would go to great lengths, using various strategies and methods, to protect the morality and chastity of young women.

The WCTU ramped up its age of consent campaign in the 1890s and joined forces with many more groups, even bringing together protestant and Catholic leaders on the topic of “white slavery.”⁸⁵ In particular, the WCTU gained popularity amongst southern white women at this time, so more chapters emerged in this region. Willard personally accelerated this growth by touring the South and speaking about the WCTU.⁸⁶ Southern women who supported racial equality often were also concerned about sexual issues, so these liberal thinkers made up a considerable portion of the southern WCTU memberships.⁸⁷ However, there were certainly conservative and racist members in these local chapters as well.

Because of the diverse opinions of its audience in the South, the WCTU had to be careful with how it approached the age of consent issue. Talking about rape reforms in public was actually more controversial than when newspapers reported on alleged black male rapists.⁸⁸ Southerners were particularly uncomfortable with the WCTU attacking white men. While they may not have wholly denounced racism, according to a study by Leslie K. Dunlap, the WCTU did not play on “charged stereotypes about black rapists or immigrant brothel keepers” to propel age of consent reforms, which would have appealed

⁸⁴ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 42.

⁸⁵ Sara C. Bull, “An Honorable Record,” *Outlook* 51, no. 1 (January 5, 1895): 29.

⁸⁶ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 35.

⁸⁷ Dunlap, “The Reform of Rape Law,” 356.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 352.

to the majority of the population.⁸⁹ This is surprising since their campaign coincided with a surge in white supremacist rhetoric about rape. Instead, the WCTU remained focused on native-born white men and boys as potential aggressors who needed to rise above and sustain their respectability.⁹⁰

While the WCTU often worked in tandem with black activists in the South, even creating black branches of their organization, the partnership was rocky. One point of controversy was that the WCTU accepted and aimed to maintain the racial order in efforts to keep the peace; they believed this would help them get laws passed. The WCTU “held white men accountable for both intraracial tension and interracial conflict” as well as their sexual actions, but these attacks on white male sexuality were inextricably linked to male political dominance.⁹¹ Due to this challenge and the rise of segregation, the WCTU found it more favorable to allow white supremacy to continue in the South.

In the 1890s, Jim Crow began to assertively take over public spaces, and the WCTU became more strictly segregated and relegated black members to a lower status. By 1901, there were eight separate black branches of the WCTU.⁹² This was mostly done in response to racial tensions in southern branches of the WCTU.⁹³ Some WCTU members, however, rose above the complacency of the Southern majority when it came to racial issues. These particular women were inspired by black female activism and their harsh criticism of white women who failed to defend them from white male sexual abuse. One white WCTU member was inspired to pen numerous poems about sexual and

⁸⁹ Dunlap, “The Reform of Rape Law,” 353.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² J. W. Gibson and W. H. Crogman, *The Colored American From Slavery to Honorable Citizenship* (Atlanta: J. L. Nichols & Co., 1901), 252.

⁹³ Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 50.

racial double standards that pervaded American laws, leaving women, especially those of color, to blame for white men's sexual crimes.⁹⁴ For example, one Kentucky legislator opposed age of consent reform on the grounds that black women were "inordinately sensual," "lecherous," and "semi-civilized savage[s]."⁹⁵

Despite segregation efforts, there was a sizeable population of African American women within the WCTU and in many other black women's groups that supported social purity and temperance as well as major church organizations, like the national African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁹⁶ Yet they often avoided activities that supported age of consent reform.⁹⁷ This most likely resulted from the black reformers' distrust of white WCTU members combined with societal misconceptions of the wild black female sexuality. African American women who accused white men of rape were often not taken seriously by the courts because of these fallacies. Before age of consent reforms could help them, black female reformers needed to correct these false portrayals with racial uplift strategies.

As a result, African American WCTU members pushed their organization deeper into racial issues and away from merely women's concerns. They often advocated for racial uplift strategies nationwide and celebrated African Americans who earned the respect of whites, like those who achieved state employment or a clerk who worked in a white jewelry store.⁹⁸ They argued that it was illogical and unfair for states to criminalize interracial marriage but not interracial sex; this suspicious omission left black women

⁹⁴ Frances E. W. Harper, "The Contrast" (1854), in *The Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper*, ed. Maryemma Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20-21.

⁹⁵ Helen H. Gardener, "Opposing Views of Legislators on the Age of Consent – A Symposium," *The Arena* XIII (June-August 1895): 223.

⁹⁶ Gibson and Crogman, *The Colored American*, 176.

⁹⁷ Larson, "'Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,'" 48.

⁹⁸ Gibson and Crogman, *The Colored American*, 252.

unprotected from white male sexual agendas. Most white age of consent reformers did not necessarily want interracial sex, especially rape, to be legal either, but this may have been for different reasons. The Texas WCTU chapter president said in 1895 that the “Anglo-Saxon man needs the restraints of this law to help him realize the dignity and sacred heritage he possesses by being born into the dominant race of the world.”⁹⁹ While they agreed on some fundamental principles, words like this made African American women feel uneasy about working with the white WCTU too closely. The national WCTU may not have condoned it, but select white sexual reformers were not above using racial prejudices to further their campaigns in the South, even blaming black female rape victims for having low moral standards.¹⁰⁰

Another factor that complicated the relationship between white and black WCTU members in the South was the racial ideology of Frances Willard. Whether true or not, Willard had a reputation of being a racist. She displayed offensive opinions in some public speeches and writings, even going so far as to assert that “[t]he colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt.”¹⁰¹ In 1894, Ida B. Wells openly criticized Willard for her permissive treatment of racism. Before this, Willard had made a crude joke about lynching that touched a nerve with African American female activists, especially those in segregated WCTU chapters.¹⁰² Wells accused Willard of disregarding the rights of African Americans in favor of bolstering her own reputation with southern branches of

⁹⁹ Helen M. Stoddard, “The Age of Consent,” *Houston Post* (February 3, 1895); reprinted in Fanny L. Armstrong, *To the Noon Rest: The Life, Work, and Addresses of Mrs. Helen M. Stoddard* (Butler, IN: L. H. Higley, 1909), 62.

¹⁰⁰ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 143.

¹⁰¹ Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 50.

¹⁰² Ida B. Wells, “1894: May 21: Ida B. Wells to the Westminster Gazette,” in *Women’s Letters: America from the Revolutionary War to the Present*, eds. Lisa Grunwald and Stephen J. Adler (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 408.

the WCTU. Wells argued that these southern groups of women “emphasize the hatred of the negro by excluding him.”¹⁰³ Willard had a history of controversial views on African Americans, even directly holding the black population responsible for the failure of prohibition in the South because of their presumed depravity. According to Wells, “Miss Willard is no better or worse than the great bulk of white Americans on the negro questions” because “they are all afraid to speak out.”¹⁰⁴ In addition, the first black female-led newspaper, *Woman’s Era*, expressed their discontent with Willard and her whole organization about their indifference toward lynching.¹⁰⁵ As a result, the national WCTU struggled to maintain the support of their African American counterparts.

From racial tensions to low ages of consent, the WCTU repeatedly blamed male politicians for many of the problems they saw in society. They claimed that fathers had failed to protect their daughters with the laws they had passed, so the responsibility fell on mothers instead; “‘men alone will never gain the courage thus to legislate against other men.’”¹⁰⁶ Male lawmakers opposed the WCTU’s proposals because they feared that these laws would open up avenues for immoral young women to blackmail innocent men.¹⁰⁷ In 1885, the California WCTU branch had lobbied so fervently that they finally achieved a reform raising the state age of consent to fourteen years old. Because of lawmakers’ stubborn resistance, it took activists twelve more years of hard work to increase the legal age to sixteen.¹⁰⁸ Even immediately following successful but incremental reforms, members persisted, instigating a vigorous letter-writing campaign to

¹⁰³ Wells, “1894: May 21: Ida B. Wells to the Westminster Gazette,” 409.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Larson, “‘Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,’” 51.

¹⁰⁶ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 19.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

the state governments about raising the age of consent further.¹⁰⁹ Suffragists and labor groups joined them in these efforts to add more pressure to lawmakers and to “arouse the fears of the enemy.”¹¹⁰ This coalition of the WCTU and suffragists achieved their first joint victory in Kansas where lawmakers raised the age of consent to eighteen in the late 1880s.¹¹¹ It is clear that overcoming the persistent power of the male legislators took immense efforts by WCTU members as well as help from other age of consent activists.

Despite these successful reforms, numerous lawmakers remained unyielding to the pressures for higher ages of consent. One watchful lawmaker in Nebraska named Dr. McKeeby was disgusted by the reforms, claiming that they were merely “built on sickly sentimentalism, advocated by women who have not the least idea of law-making.”¹¹² The male legislators who supported age of consent reforms asserted that their hesitant comrades’ negative reaction revealed the male fear of women widening their sphere of influence. Northern male politicians primarily argued that middle class men would be unfairly targeted by poor young women, while lawmakers in the south feared the power black women would have in courts over white men.¹¹³ They worried that men and even boys could be seduced by underage prostitutes of depraved character and later charged with violating the high age of consent.¹¹⁴ Some legislators also claimed that reformers, especially those coming from Christian ideologies like the WCTU, “have confounded in their own minds the two crimes of rape and seduction;” in Iowa, a lawmaker asserted that

¹⁰⁹ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 16.

¹¹⁰ Parks, “The Objects of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” 308.

¹¹¹ Anthony and Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 649-651.

¹¹² Nellie M. Richardson, “Report of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union State Superintendent of Legislation and Petitions,” *Arena* 14 (September 1895): 22.

¹¹³ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 31-33.

¹¹⁴ Gardener, “Opposing Views of Legislators,” 214.

these crimes must be separated regardless of the age of the victim and punished differently.¹¹⁵

The commonly cited excuse of “blackmail found expression not only in legislative halls, but among members of the medical community.”¹¹⁶ One doctor went so far as to deny that women could even be raped, arguing that “under ordinary circumstances no female who has arrived at the age of understanding, be she never so weak, so long as consciousness remains, can be forced against her will to participate in the act of copulation by a male be he ever so strong.”¹¹⁷ While most men did not go as far as to deny the possibility of rape, many of them still stubbornly opposed raising the age of consent.

Although there were some southern legislators who actually supported age of consent improvements and rape concerns, these individuals frequently lost their offices come reelection time due to the unpopularity of the issues. The more favored southern politicians argued that a young girl’s personal responsibility should not be dismissed, especially when pertaining to her sexuality.¹¹⁸ One Kentucky lawmaker claimed that a child could become responsible for her actions as early as two years old, so “the white girl of twelve anywhere throughout the civilized world, unless she is degenerate and imbecile, is abundantly qualified, so far as intellect is concerned, to protect her virginity.”¹¹⁹ Still, many legislatures considered reforms more and more over time in response to public pressures; “no state feels proud of a low position in the ‘Black List’”

¹¹⁵ Gardener, “Opposing Views of Legislators,” 213.

¹¹⁶ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 31.

¹¹⁷ C.C. Mapes, “Higher Enlightenment Versus ‘Age of Consent,’” *The Medical Age* XIV (1896): 107.

¹¹⁸ Dunlap, “The Reform of Rape Law,” 361.

¹¹⁹ Gardener, “Opposing Views of Legislators,” 221.

of age of consent laws,¹²⁰ which was actually printed next to an article by Frances Willard in an 1894/1895 issue of *Arena*.¹²¹

THE BLACK LIST OF STATES.	
Below we give the black list of states, showing the limit at which fathers, brothers and husbands have placed the age at which <i>a little girl may consent to her ruin</i> :—	
TEN YEARS.	Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina.
TWELVE YEARS.	Kentucky, Louisiana, Texas, Wisconsin.
THIRTEEN YEARS.	Iowa, New Hampshire, Utah.
FOURTEEN YEARS.	Arizona, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont, West Virginia.
FIFTEEN YEARS.	Delaware, Montana.
SIXTEEN YEARS.	Arkansas, Colorado, District of Columbia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Washington.
SEVENTEEN YEARS.	Florida.

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Therefore, in an attempt by more liberal lawmakers to bridge the ideological gap while passing the laws, age of consent reform was framed around the ideas of protection and chastity promotion rather than punishment of male perpetrators. They even attached chastity requirements to the age of consent, which “shifted the burden of proof back onto a woman, who would not only have to prove in court that she was in fact ‘chaste,’ but

¹²⁰ Gardener, “Opposing Views of Legislators,” 210.

¹²¹ Frances E. Willard, “Arousing the Public Conscience,” *Arena* XI (December 1894–February 1895): 201.

further that she had a ‘reputation’ of chastity.”¹²² The reputation constraint proved potent in court, especially when black women, who were stereotyped as promiscuous, attempted to bring rape cases. Removing racial hierarchy threats from the new laws made them more acceptable for southern lawmakers. The WCTU, however, did not agree with these stipulations because they believed men to be highly responsible for their sexual corruption. They specifically fought for age of consent reforms that would result in “the elimination of the phrase ‘of previous chaste character,’” which was a sticking point for many conservative and moderate legislators.¹²³ As a result of these conflicting views and how the population received them, the WCTU struggled to maintain a consistent message and favorable presence in the South.

These conflicts in the South did not hinder the overall popularity of the WCTU, however; by 1900, the organization had around 200,000 members. Although they had expanded their campaigns into many different arenas, they placed all issues of concern under the banner of “home protection,” defending their stance that women’s primary responsibilities remained in the home.¹²⁴ Still, their activism extended much further than that, with the age of consent campaign bringing WCTU members into the legislative process. With the dawn of the twentieth century, the WCTU was stronger than ever and celebrated numerous legislative victories at the state and local levels. In 1913 alone, the organization took credit for increased state ages of consent in Montana (eighteen), Missouri (fifteen for girls, seventeen for boys), and California (eighteen).¹²⁵ After these

¹²² Dunlap, “The Reform of Rape Law,” 361.

¹²³ Jackson Silbaugh, “Banner Legislative Record of the State of Washington,” *The Union Signal* 45, no. 14 (April 3, 1919): 15.

¹²⁴ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 134.

¹²⁵ Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, *Report of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union: The Fortieth Annual Convention* (Chicago: Woman’s Temperance Publishing Association, 1913), 87, 144, 361.

legislative victories, the WCTU continued to gain esteem as lobbyists and a political force; they felt that “woman is at last considered an honorable personage, not only tolerated but respected.”¹²⁶

As the American WCTU experienced more widespread success in the states, it became increasingly concerned with age of consent and morality in the international realm, cooperating with sister organizations in other countries and overseeing their progress. In the early 1900s, members at the WCTU’s world convention expressed concerns about the age of consent in several countries, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Norway. They also cited problems in colonies like British South Africa, where the age of consent was set sternly at thirteen.¹²⁷ This was disturbing to reformers since England had promptly raised its own legal age of consent to sixteen in the 1880s, but they declined to extend this reform to their imperial territories.

This setback reflects the fact that the American WCTU was actually much more successful and expansive than the British version of the organization. England’s WCTU was much smaller, more exclusive, and failed to make use of the department arrangement that the Americans utilized to provide public services to people in need. Overall, this “group lacked the militancy and the hegemonic power that flowed from the ‘Christian’ identity of the WCTU” and made them so successful in the United States.¹²⁸ Some historians argue that this may have resulted from the rigid class hierarchy and prejudice embedded in the British political system, which was not as severe for the American

¹²⁶ Silbaugh, “Banner Legislative Record,” 15.

¹²⁷ World’s Woman’s Christian Temperance Union Convention, *Report of the... Biennial Convention and Minutes of Executive Committee Meetings of the World’s Christian Temperance Union* (White Ribbon Company, 1906), 136-137.

¹²⁸ Sklar, “The Historical Foundations of Women’s Power,” 62.

WCTU. This explanation accounts for the British WCTU's concentration on issues concerning women of their own class rather than helping lower-class women.¹²⁹ Even as late as 1906, the international WCTU organization worried about the enforcement of age of consent in England. They argued that in some neighborhoods in Liverpool, "there is not a virgin of ten years of age, and often their own fathers have ruined them."¹³⁰ Still, the British and American WCTU worked closely together to address these issues.

After reforms in the United States took hold, however, the WCTU grew disappointed in the implementation of age of consent laws. They had expected male adolescents to be held to the same standards as young girls, but boys were still allowed to have sex whenever with whomever they wanted. Age of consent laws were also not being prosecuted adequately in the courts. In one Palmyra, Missouri case, a mentally disabled girl under the age of consent was raped by a gang of seven or more young men. They were taken to court but "proved the girl of previously unchaste character," so they were "turned loose to find the next victim for their hellish lusts."¹³¹ Accordingly, the WCTU pressured local courts to follow through on more statutory rape cases and locate the rapists.¹³²

Furthermore, women reformers argued that education was a critical next step for both parents and children, covering topics including eugenics, self-control, and Christian morality. They began to fault parental guidance and heredity for the bad character of the next generation, who were at risk of becoming "selfish, sensuous, self-indulgent and

¹²⁹ Sklar, "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power," 62.

¹³⁰ World's WCTU Convention, *Report of the... Biennial Convention*, 139.

¹³¹ Gardener, "A Battle for Sound Morality," 82.

¹³² Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 72.

criminal.”¹³³ In addition, they worried that secular education was failing to provide the moral structure that children needed and creating “demons” instead since “the increase in juvenile crime and depravity is in exact ratio with the spread of secular education.”¹³⁴ To combat all of these continuing issues, the WCTU aimed to delegate more, encouraging new organizations focused on women to provide emotional support to rape victims and help them gain confidence in the courtroom.¹³⁵ Reformers believed that implementation was ultimately struggling because young women were not taken seriously enough in court, so this step was crucial.

Some WCTU leaders acknowledged the legislative shortcomings of their reforms that some other progressives had recognized earlier and warned them about for decades. The famous muckraking journalist quoted in the beginning of this chapter, B. O. Flowers, argued in 1895 that activists like those in the WCTU who pushed for increased protective legislation for women only sought “to be coddled or flattered in [their] slavery.”¹³⁶ He insisted that women held fast to the illusion that they were free and acting of their own accord, but really they were just “unquestioningly” adopting the ideas of men in their lives, fathers, husbands, and pastors. Ultimately, he predicted that age of consent reforms would only lead to degradation and dependency.¹³⁷ Extremists like Flowers opposed rape so fiercely that they turned to the concept of abolishing the age of consent. This legislative action would negate the typical rapist’s excuse that his female victim was old enough to consent. Without an age of consent, the courts would assume that any woman

¹³³ Sara E. Wise, M.D., “Moral Protection for the Boys and Girls,” *The Union Signal* 45, no. 35 (September 25, 1919): 5.

¹³⁴ Frances Swiney, *The Awakening of Women, or Woman's Part in Evolution* (London: William Reeves, 1905), 171-172.

¹³⁵ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 73.

¹³⁶ Flowers, “Prostitution Within the Marriage Bond,” 65.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

who accused a man of rape had not consented, no matter her age. Radicals in the WCTU also argued that rape penalties should be increased. They insisted that “our moral code will never be higher than we strive to make it” and “impurity in the man or woman destroys the family and destroys the nation.”¹³⁸ Some even sided with social hygienists, arguing that three-time offenders should be treated as “sex maniacs” and sterilized.¹³⁹ Therefore, these varying groups of reformers’ often overlapped and adopted each other’s ideas, even the extreme ones, when they proved effective or promising.

The WCTU continued with its fight for age of consent reform into the 1920s and pushed for stricter rape penalties along the way.¹⁴⁰ They maintained a strong concentration on protecting women above everyone else, even white middle class men. The WCTU also advocated for “security, not rights, first,” as Marilley has revealed.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, according to many fellow progressives like women’s rights reformers, this concentration sometimes went too far, protecting young women to such an extreme degree that their personal freedoms, especially their freedom of choice, were hindered. In the long run, female activists, even the suffragists that the WCTU had previously partnered with in their pursuit of age of consent reforms, found that a number of the WCTU’s favored policies were rooted in patriarchal ideas. To the dismay of most reformers, especially the suffragists, this left women legally subordinate and still under the control of men many decades later.

¹³⁸ Campbell, “Why an Age of Consent?”, 285.

¹³⁹ Mary E. Teats, *The Way of God in Marriage: A Series of Essays Upon Gospel and Scientific Purity* (Spotswood, NJ: Physical Culture Publishing Co., 1906), 32.

¹⁴⁰ Dunlap, “The Reform of Rape Law,” 364.

¹⁴¹ Marilley, “Frances Willard and the Feminism of Fear,” 126.

CHAPTER 2

The Suffragists' Conundrum: Protection Versus Equal Rights

"If any man having improper relations with a girl not yet of age were, by our statutes, liable to the penalty of rape, that single act of legislation, properly enforced, would almost put an end to prostitution, and would encourage honorable marriage. But it is almost hopeless to secure such legislation by the votes of men alone."¹

As expertly explicated by Henry Blackwell, a suffragist, husband of Lucy Stone, and the co-founder of the American Woman Suffrage Association, the Woman's Suffrage Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was concerned with much more than just getting the vote. Suffragists also had a broader agenda that included housing regulations, education, better working conditions, the incarceration system, general health standards, and women's sexual rights. The vote was a way to ensure that these other issues had a greater chance of being resolved since American women voters would change the elections of legislators and leaders. Suffragists had faith that solving all of these problems, especially the lack of woman suffrage and the low age of consent, would improve overall American morality and give women legal agency in their lives rather than leaving them subjected to patriarchal standards and the gendered roles that society dictated.

Both leading national suffrage organizations, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell's AWSA, supported raising the age of sexual consent. They believed that a

¹ Henry B. Blackwell, "Equal Suffrage vs. Prostitution" in *The National Purity Congress: Its Papers, Addresses, Portraits*, ed. Aaron M. Powell (New York: The American Purity Alliance, 1896), 425.

higher age of consent would further women's rights in both the public and private sphere. By having an age of consent that was too low, legislators exposed girls in their "first few years of early womanhood, when [protection] is most needed."² The majority of suffragists advocated for an age of consent that matched the age at which a young woman could make decisions regarding her property, which was eighteen.³ Stanton condemned legislators for the extremely low age of consent, arguing it infringed upon women's bodily rights and resulted in "the wholesale desecration of childhood."⁴

AWSA's publications also commonly featured articles encouraging members to support age of consent reform in any way they could. Suffragists all over the country could be found distributing literature about the age of consent, asking for signatures on petitions, and appealing to politicians.⁵ They even suggested to legislators that they could gain the support of future women voters if they passed bills to increase the age of consent.⁶ Age of consent reforms were a high priority among suffrage associations at the local, state, and national levels because they saw these reforms as another means of was overcoming the subjugation of women. In order to change the gendered power dynamic, they had to confront "the inherent inequality of the sexual relation itself," rather than merely seeking protection for women as the WCTU had done.⁷

² Emily Blackwell, "Age of Consent Legislation," *Philanthropist*, 9 (February 1895): 2-3.

³ Louise de Koven Bowen, *Safeguards for City Youth at Work and at Play* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 224.

⁴ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Preface," in Helen Hamilton Gardener, *Pray You, Sir, Whose Daughter?* (Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1892), viii.

⁵ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 16.

⁶ Bowen, *Safeguards for City Youth at Work and at Play*, 224.

⁷ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1058; Scott's article provides historians with a new way to look at the actions of women's rights activists, especially suffragists, who sought change in legislative arenas like age of consent in order to transform the standards of gendered power. Examining political and sexual relations between women, even those that had existed for centuries, through the lens of gendered power helped suffragists plan their pursuit of change, which Scott still advocates today in her work in gender history.

Some foreign women's activists influenced American suffragists to take on the issue of sexual consent. One prominent figure was Emmeline Pankhurst, a leading British suffragette who succeeded in securing women's voting rights in England in 1918. She visited the United States on multiple occasions to discuss her career in activism, and she spoke in large venues such as Carnegie Hall about the benefits of woman suffrage. During her time as a suffragette, Pankhurst also wrote articles for American popular magazines, like *Good Housekeeping*. Pankhurst described her experiences working in a registrar of births and deaths in Manchester, England taking census records at the turn of the century. Encountering working class women and children most often, Pankhurst recalled how "little girls of thirteen [would] come to my office to register the births of their babies, illegitimate of course. In many of these cases I found that the child's own father or some near male relative was responsible."⁸ Even though the national age of consent had been raised to sixteen, the lack of enforcement in Pankhurst's country allowed guilty men to easily lie their way out of rape convictions. Also, if a young mother mistreated her baby or attempted to abort it, she risked being hanged for murder in Great Britain, despite the circumstances that got her pregnant in the first place.

Pankhurst implored American suffragists to take up the issue of age of consent and statutory rape in addition to their unrelenting struggle to be "freed of their political shackles" so they could attain "full power to work their will in society."⁹ The existing gendered power dynamic, in Pankhurst's opinion, had restricted women from having any pull in both British and American societies, which could only be resolved by the

⁸ Emmeline Pankhurst, "The Making of a Militant," *Good Housekeeping* 58, no. 2 (February 1914): 178-179.

⁹ *Ibid*, 179.

achievement of woman suffrage. She also asserted the political needs of the poor, female workers, children forced into labor, and the education system. Pankhurst's words were intended to shock, horrify, and encourage suffragists, and they worked. Leading American suffragists such as Lucy Burns and Alice Paul were inspired by Pankhurst's advice.

Pankhurst had such a widespread influence on the American campaign for woman suffrage that opponents bitterly drew attention to her actions, which they perceived as criminal and deceptive. Even though suffragists attempted to attract general public approval by emphasizing motherhood and the home, opposition to woman suffrage still thrived throughout the United States. Organizations known as "anti-suffrage leagues" contended that the vote would lead to child abandonment, free love, rampant divorce, and financially autonomous women.¹⁰ Anti-suffragists actually used women reformers' age of consent successes against the suffragists, arguing that women had achieved these laws without the vote; as a result, they insisted woman suffrage was unnecessary and actually could be detrimental to these reforms.¹¹ Even women who made their careers working in politics such as Alice Mary Robertson, a representative in Congress from Oklahoma in the 1920s, opposed any "all-woman political organization" and woman suffrage.¹² While she believed women should be political, Robertson maintained that women should remain focused on the home and not on making new laws, of which the United States had "too many" already.¹³ The disapproval of a woman in political office undoubtedly

¹⁰ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 61.

¹¹ Susan Goodier, *No Votes for Women: The New York State Anti-Suffrage Movement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 49.

¹² Marguerite Mooers Marshall, "Woman's Place in Politics: An Interview with Alice M. Robertson, the Only Woman Representative in Congress," *Woman's Home Companion* 48, no. 10 (October 1921): 15.

¹³ Ibid, 15.

complicated the suffragists' attempts to bring more women into their various reform campaigns.

In a letter in *The Woman Patriot*, the president of a group called the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage doubted Pankhurst's morality and genuineness in her visits to the United States. The anti-suffrage activist alleged that Pankhurst was the opposite of a "stabilizer," intending only "to meddle in our internal politics" and "force ratification of the Federal suffrage amendment."¹⁴ Another opponent accused Pankhurst of starting a rebellion and leading an "attack on property" in England, insinuating that she would surely do the same if allowed to continue speaking in the United States.¹⁵ Clearly, the opposition's focus on criticizing Pankhurst revealed her powerful effect on the American Woman's Suffrage Movement as well as age of consent reform.

Since they already possessed the support of women who wanted equal rights by the 1910s, suffragists expanded their appeal to women who were still uncomfortable with abandoning their traditional roles. Suffragists argued that the vote was necessary, even for more traditional women, to defend their positions as mothers, wives, and productive community members.¹⁶ The Woman's Suffrage Movement and its leaders frequently worked in close coordination with the Women's Christian Temperance Union in their pursuit of age of consent reform, even though the WCTU was more rooted in the idea of women remaining in the traditional home role. Still, the majority of WCTU members supported woman suffrage and age of consent reforms, and several suffragists advocated

¹⁴ Mary G. Kilbreth, "Whitewashing Miss Pankhurst," *The Woman Patriot, Issues 3-4*, ed. Minnie Bronson (Washington, D.C.: Woman Patriot Publishing Company, 1919), 3.

¹⁵ Charlotte Rowe, "Mrs. Pankhurst's New Pose," *The Woman Patriot, Issues 3-4*, ed. Minnie Bronson, (Washington, D.C.: Woman Patriot Publishing Company, 1919), 4.

¹⁶ Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 29-30.

for temperance.¹⁷ In a way, age of consent served as the main issue that brought these women reformers together. Suffragists actually convinced hesitant temperance advocates to back woman suffrage because the men in Congress at the time were “sexually self-interested,” and the vote would provide women with a chance at political self-defense in the future.¹⁸ Moreover, these issues went hand-in-hand because, in order to influence sexual morality and ensure the prosecution of male offenders, women needed authority over who was elected to be judges and legislators.¹⁹ This claim was bolstered when states began granting women the right to vote and, shortly after, instituting higher ages of consent and rape laws favoring female victims; one such law was California’s establishment of a minimum one year prison sentence for convicted rapists in 1912.²⁰

The first major age of consent victory for the coalition of the WCTU and a woman suffrage organization occurred in Kansas in the late 1880s. Through strenuous lobbying efforts, the two groups persuaded the state lawmakers to grant Kansas women the right to vote and raise the age of consent to eighteen. This process was not without its setbacks, however; after only two years, Kansas politicians were already attempting to set the age of consent back to twelve years old. These legislators argued that the higher age of consent would lead to wrongly convicted men, and they reasoned that the unjust law was “the product of meddling women who did not know their place in society.”²¹

This type of opposition occurred in states all over the country, but the South was the most obstinate. Southern objections from politicians and citizens alike were

¹⁷ Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 35.

¹⁸ Ibid, 44.

¹⁹ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 73.

²⁰ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 139.

²¹ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 30-31.

motivated by a need to protect white male sexual privilege as well as racial fears; one Kentucky legislator protested that “the laws would put the ‘negro female on the same plane as the white female,’ and black women would unfairly target white men in rape cases.²² In 1913, seven southern states still maintained an age of consent of fourteen, and two others even kept their legal age at ten years old.²³ Even when states did pass higher ages of consent, they sometimes were weighed down by requirements for girls to be chaste before the rape incident. This was a problem in cases of recurring rape, since “a girl should not be at the mercy of a man because it has happened that some time in her past career she has been injured by some other man.”²⁴ Furthermore, suffragists claimed that girls should be protected even if she had once consented to immoral sexual behavior.²⁵ Despite these political challenges, reformers from both groups incessantly petitioned for every locality to have an acceptably high age of consent.

Age of consent remained a top concern in the next few decades for suffragists. They identified a few specific types of individuals as those who were successfully stalling the age of consent reforms. Suffragists frequently blamed the “grown men in legislative halls” for the predicaments of young girls.²⁶ These politicians complained that a high age of consent provided young women with “unlimited ‘blackmail’” for whenever they wanted to compel a male suitor to do their bidding.²⁷ They also condemned businesswomen who perpetuated the system of “white slavery” in order to

²² Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 142.

²³ Ibid, 139.

²⁴ Alice Stone Blackwell, *The Woman Citizen, Volume 4* (New York: The Woman Citizen Corporation, 1919): 848.

²⁵ Ibid, 863.

²⁶ Anna Garlin Spencer, “The Age of Consent and its Significance,” *The Forum, Volume 49* (Forum Publishing Company, 1913), 418.

²⁷ Ibid, 418.

profit off of wicked male desires. According to suffragists, these women fooled young girls into joining the industry where they would be forced to live out the rest of their lives since “the harsh judgment of the outside world... opens no way of escape.”²⁸ When it came to age of consent, anyone who compromised the sexual safety of young women was seen as part of the problem in the eyes of the suffragists.

Because suffragists became more and more involved in the political arena towards the end of the 1900s with their charitable organizations, protests for progressive causes, and organized campaign for suffrage, they started to believe they could produce real results, including national, state, or local legislation.²⁹ They saw themselves as leaders of a movement for all women’s rights, so much so that they created their own method to analyze legislative progress in states. A diagram called the Wheel of Progress revealed which states were the most progressive based on their laws on women’s and children’s labor, prostitution, temperance, education, mother’s pensions, guardianship, and age of consent.³⁰ Not only did this reveal the backwardness of some states, it also exhibited the confidence and determination of the suffragists as they neared the fulfillment of their main goal.

²⁸ Spencer, “The Age of Consent and its Significance,” 420.

²⁹ Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 70.

³⁰ Blackwell, *The Woman Citizen*, 44.

STATES WITH
SOME FORM
OF EQUAL
GUARDIANSHIP LAW

Best

California
Idaho
Missouri
Montana
Oregon
Utah
Virginia
Washington

Not So Good

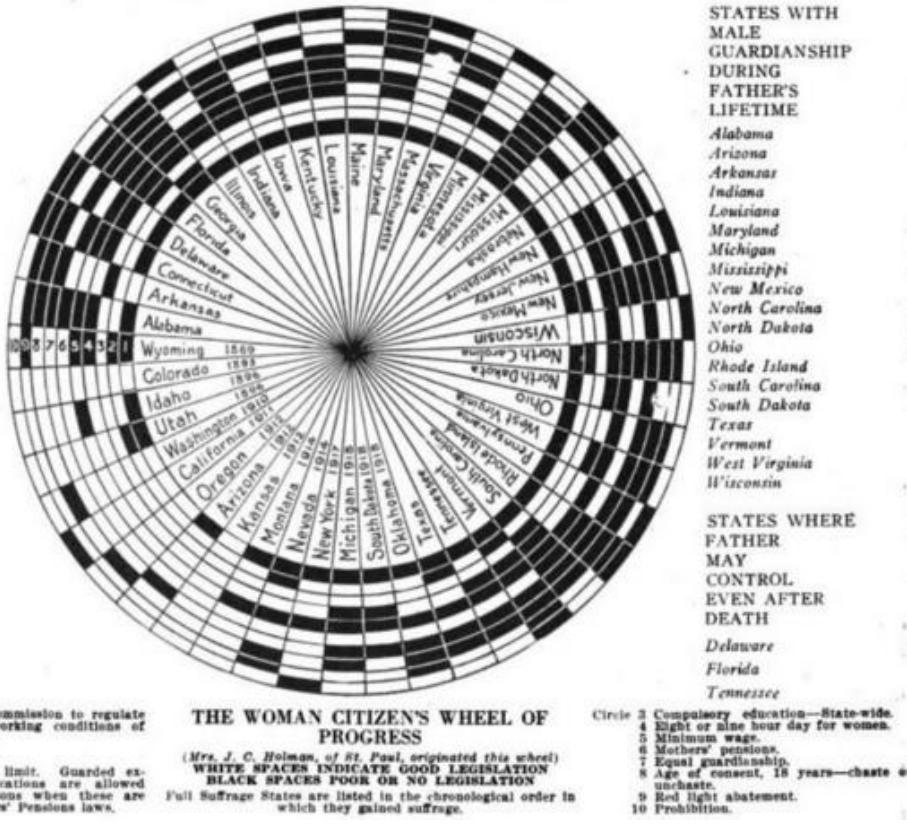
(“blanket laws”)
Colorado
Connecticut
Illinois
Iowa
Kansas
Kentucky
Maine
Massachusetts
Minnesota
Nebraska
Nevada
New Hampshire
New York
Wyoming

STATES WHERE
MOTHER HAS
SOME PROTECTION

Oklahoma
Georgia
New Jersey
Pennsylvania

Circle 1 Industrial Welfare Commission to regulate hours, wages and working conditions of women and children.

2 Child Labor—14 year limit. Guarded exemptions during vacations are allowed and poverty exemptions when these are neutralized by Mothers' Pensions laws.



STATES WITH
MALE
GUARDIANSHIP
DURING
FATHER'S
LIFETIME

Alabama
Arizona
Arkansas
Indiana
Louisiana
Maryland
Michigan
Mississippi
New Mexico
North Carolina
North Dakota
Ohio
Rhode Island
South Carolina
South Dakota
Texas
Vermont
West Virginia
Wisconsin

STATES WHERE
FATHER
MAY
CONTROL
EVEN AFTER
DEATH

Delaware
Florida
Tennessee

- Circle 3 Compulsory education—State-wide.
4 Eight or nine hour day for women.
5 Minimum wage.
6 Mothers' pensions.
7 Equal guardianship.
8 Age of consent, 18 years—chaste or unchaste.
9 Red light abatement.
10 Prohibition.

This positive outlook corresponded with the attitudes of the other progressives.

Suffragists truly believed they would win the fight for suffrage as well as their pursuit of age of consent reform. Even though reformers knew that passing higher legal ages of consent might not change the behavior of criminals, they also understood that laws could serve as a moral compass. As a result, changing the existing legislation, which permitted sex with young girls, would “express the moral expectation that adult will accept responsibility to protect the young from sexual violence... even at the expense of their own sexual liberty.”³¹ They also hoped that, as a result of these reforms, parents would educate their children on the sexual threats “that beset their path on every side,” which suffragist Stanton argued would “keep our sons and daughters innocent.”³²

³¹ Larson, “Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,” 71.

³² Stanton, “Preface,” viii.

Despite the others' confidence, however, African-American suffragists were hesitant to support the age of consent goal because previous legal efforts similar to this one did not benefit black women directly. These sentiments mirrored those of black women associated with the WCTU and other Christian women's organizations. African American women still faced discrimination from law enforcement officers, from whom they risked the chance of sexual assault that was common during this era.³³ Certainly, these white officials would not exert any efforts to protect black women because of these reforms, especially if they accused other white males of rape. They also feared that stricter age of consent laws could lead to indiscriminate, unjust arrests of black men by white policemen.

Additionally, African American women believed that, in courts, higher ages of consent would not change the chastity requirement of victims for a ruling on rape. Particularly in southern trials, "jurors were likely to presume the chastity of white, but not black or Mexican, young women."³⁴ Unfortunately, age of consent reform could not be relied upon to save everyone from suffering and corruption, especially nonwhite women. Instead, African American women's organizations that supported suffrage, like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), focused their efforts on racial uplift, seeking moral reforms like sex education and healthcare that gave African Americans tools to gain financial stability and social respectability. The NACW occasionally touted the utility of age of consent reforms, but often worried that the perceived sexual vulnerability of young black women would detract from the benefits of these laws.³⁵

³³ Larson, "'Even a Worm Will Turn at Last,'" 71.

³⁴ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 142-143.

³⁵ Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 27.

Despite the lack of idealism on black suffragists' parts, some suffragists drew upon the idealistic nature of age of consent laws to show the tragedies that could ensue without reforms. Helen Hamilton Gardener, a suffragist writer, drew attention to age of consent and "white slavery" with her seduction narratives. One of these books was *Pray You, Sir, Whose Daughter?* It revealed the horrors of sexual violence and manipulation, and its widespread reading resulted in a public indignation similar to that following *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.³⁶ In Gardener's story, men in the legislature fail to pass increased ages of consent and actually decrease it instead to ten years old. One of Gardener's young female characters becomes outraged, claiming that "those who keep silence are as guilty as the rest" and the targets of such legislation are everyone's "little sisters."³⁷ The character, reminiscent of young suffragists at the time of Gardener's authorship, also slammed male politicians, "who, in spite of their fatherhood, in spite of the fact that they have little sisters, are such beasts as to pass a bill like that."³⁸ Gardener's story, even though fictitious, was so persuasive with its vivid language that the Women's Christian Temperance Union incorporated it into their own age of consent crusade, handing out copies to both political leaders and normal citizens.³⁹

While most age of consent reformers maintained the centrality of women's traditional role in the home, suffragists were more focused on the possibilities of women's activities in the public sphere. Accordingly, when the 1890s ushered in skyrocketing numbers of divorces filed by women and falling birth rates among middle

³⁶ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 35.

³⁷ Helen Hamilton Gardener, *Pray You, Sir, Whose Daughter?* (Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1892), 100.

³⁸ Ibid, 102.

³⁹ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 35.

class families, conservatives blamed suffragists and other female progressive groups first. Suffragists had fervently encouraged female public participation and a transition away from the “‘home-centered’ life,” and young women had done just that, joining the workforce so rapidly that by 1910 almost one-quarter of women worked outside the home; this percentage had only been less than ten percent in 1860.⁴⁰ As a result, suffrage activists were deemed responsible for the supposedly imminent “race suicide” and the denigration of home and family life.⁴¹ However, women entering the workforce actually resulted from many other factors, including industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Ultimately, conservative reformers believed the suffragists’ actions would undo their anti-vice victories, like raising the age of consent. Of all the evils resulting from a woman’s neglect of the home, the worst was a turn to prostitution, whether through a deceitful husband’s patronage, a daughter’s entrance into white slavery, or the resulting spread of venereal disease.⁴² These concerns effectively turned some groups against woman’s suffrage and motivated reformers to endorse further age of consent legislation.

In reality, however, nearly every Progressive reformer in the early twentieth century, including suffragists, held strong anti-prostitution stances, which frequently coincided with the push for a higher age of sexual consent. In general, “prostitution was invariably viewed as either the cause or the consequence of the changing morality of the young.”⁴³ If a young woman lost her virginity too early, suffragists claimed that she would have difficulties finding a good job and convincing a man to marry her; as a result,

⁴⁰ Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 43-45.

⁴¹ Ibid, 45.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 42.

she ran a greater risk of turning to prostitution for her livelihood.⁴⁴ These girls also possessed a high likelihood of contracting venereal disease at young ages, which could result in death. This was not just a problem for the United States; some hospitals in Great Britain tracked the ages of patients with venereal disease. Only twenty-eight out of one thousand patients in a Scottish hospital were over the age of thirty. In addition, “large numbers” of English fourteen-year-old girls who started out as domestic servants turned to prostitution and contracted sexual diseases before they reached twenty years of age.⁴⁵

Suffragists argued that almost “every country of the world” encountered roadblocks to raising the age of consent because both men and women involved in the industry of prostitution knew it would harm their business, which relied upon young, coerced sex workers.⁴⁶ For example, German officials took advantage of young foreign girls by declaring vaguely that they only needed to produce “official proof that they are addicted to prostitution” in order to stay in the country and continue their work, regardless of whether their parents objected in the neighboring country.⁴⁷ Young Italian prostitutes only needed to provide their birth certificates to register for a license, but suffragists gave Italy credit for recently increasing its national age of consent to sixteen. Prostitution was difficult to eradicate nearly everywhere because so many forces were working to keep the age of consent low and the sex trade unregulated.

Suffragists’ gender and age assumptions about girls in “white slavery” were quite evident in their actions and language. They insisted that young women rarely turned to

⁴⁴ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 137.

⁴⁵ Spencer, “The Age of Consent and its Significance,” 407.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 408.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 410.

prostitution out of their own accord and were almost always “coaxed.”⁴⁸ Whether this was true or not, conservative suffragists and other reformers wrote these women off as naïve and helpless, denying them any agency in their own lives. Therefore, the more conservative Progressive sexual regulation agenda aimed to protect young women and blocked all roads that could lead to prostitution, including underage sex (especially rape), drinking, dancing, and premarital promiscuity.⁴⁹ While the majority of American suffragists may not have agreed with all of these initiatives, they supported several of them, particularly the ones pertaining to prostitution.

In any case, most suffragists regularly encouraged women to maintain their morality and respectability so they could be deemed citizens worthy of political responsibilities like the vote.⁵⁰ If women actively presented themselves in this way, men would certainly respond with the earned recognition. This strategy had proven effective for women in other developed countries, like England, where the suffragettes had won their right to vote in 1918 by earning respect for their morality, patriotism, and labor contributions in World War I.⁵¹ However, suffragists admitted that the necessity for young women to portray themselves as virtuous was a socially constructed tenet of gender inequality, with the standards of morality being different for men and women. For a young woman, “chastity is the one absolute prerequisite to social consideration and even to decent life,” but men were excused by American society from this requirement

⁴⁸ Spencer, “The Age of Consent and its Significance,” 407-408.

⁴⁹ Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 42.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgressions in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013), 43-44.

because it was “impossible” for them to achieve.⁵² While suffragists recognized this, they also claimed they had other crimes to worry about instead.

Especially when it came to the chastity requirement and other strict standards, Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not wholeheartedly accept the existing gender norms. She radically pushed women to reassume agency in their own lives, politically, sexually, and economically. She argued that challenging gendered standards of femininity, like dependence, compliance, deference, and a lack of self-confidence, could dramatically reduce the likelihood of young women falling victim to men’s pressuring and seduction. She asserted that women did not have to conform to these standards as they had previously assumed.⁵³ Instead, women could seize control of their gendered perception in society, transform it, and use it to gain self-respect in addition to public approval. Coupled with the age of consent reforms and increased female education, young women’s newfound confidence had the potential to dramatically reduce the prevalence of rape and other sexual violence. As Stanton put it, these women will have “outgrown this superstition of divinely ordained sex domination.”⁵⁴ Stanton’s ideas may have seemed radical at the turn of the century, but these notions remain relevant today.⁵⁵

The Woman’s Suffrage movement also approached age of consent reform with gender equality in mind. For instance, if the age of consent was low for girls but the age at which a man may be convicted of rape was much higher, situations surely arose where a rapist went free because of the unequal age requirements. Suffragists in Ohio in 1891

⁵² Blackwell, “Age of Consent Legislation,” 2-3.

⁵³ Stanton, “Preface,” ix.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, ix-x.

⁵⁵ See Scott, “Gender;” which encourages historians to constantly question the established binary categories of gender rather than conforming to the fixed terms. At this time, suffragists like Stanton questioned their own gender norms and urged women to challenge them and reform them into what they wanted femininity to look like.

noticed this disparity and campaigned for legislators to raise the age of consent from fourteen to eighteen. While the age of rape conviction for a man remained comparatively high at twenty-one, the suffragists celebrated a small improvement when lawmakers appeased them with a new age of consent of sixteen.⁵⁶ In addition, most suffragists asserted that young boys needed protection as well as girls, which was not always a focus in the progressive agenda.⁵⁷

As the Woman's Suffrage movement gained momentum, female activists validated their campaign by reciting convincing facts and speaking in authoritative voices at their rallies. Suffragists were also increasingly confident in their evidence, going as far as to dare their opponents to write responses to their articles. Helen H. Gardener challenged "any legislator of any state who believes that he has a right to help to retain the age of consent below that at which a girl may legally dispose of property" to enter into a public debate with her in *Arena* magazine; she boldly concluded that if no one responded convincingly in favor of keeping the lower age of consent, "then surely we may demand their immediate repeal in every state."⁵⁸ Although Gardener was known for being an outspoken leader in the Woman's Suffrage movement, her audacious words expose the growing confidence and commitment of the suffragists to their causes.

As they had done with the WCTU's ideas, the suffragists also borrowed concepts from the social hygienists to improve their promotion of age of consent reform. One such idea was that the age of consent for young boys should be equal to that of young girls. They suggested eighteen as the universal age of consent. Just as the protections should

⁵⁶ Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 55.

⁵⁷ Blackwell, *The Woman Citizen*, 848.

⁵⁸ Helen H. Gardener, "What Shall the Age of Consent Be?" *Arena* (January 1895): 198.

be equal, they believed men and women should be “equally punishable for offense against the moral law.”⁵⁹ This notion extended to the crime of prostitution, for which suffragists and social purists asserted that men and women should also be proportionately disciplined, whether they served as the customer or the sex worker.

As reforms were passed, a number of suffragists worried about the possibly restrictive nature of raising the age of consent. The higher age could entrench government control deeply in women’s lives and only enforce societal gender norms upon them more strongly. Many suffragists already believed that their access to voting rights depended upon maintaining virtuous behavior. Furthermore, young women were not held responsible for their own sexual decisions under the age of consent. Therefore, the state governments effectively dominated their sexuality. Comparable instances of state controlled sexuality also occurred in other countries at this time. In the newly established Third Republic France, officials promoted marriage and sexual hygiene as qualities of good citizens, which helped them control men’s sexual desires and their morality. In other words, to be considered masculine and patriotic men in French society, male citizens felt compelled to follow the new societal standards and legislation.⁶⁰ Suffragists feared that government regulated sexual morality could lead to a similar situation in the United States.

As a result, some activists insisted that the increased age of consent should only be temporary until women gained the right to vote and improved general political power;

⁵⁹ Clara Savage Littledale, “To Everywoman, Citizen: the High Spots of the Cleveland Convention of the National League of Women Voters Brought to Your Home,” *Good Housekeeping* 73, no. 1 (July 1921): 132.

⁶⁰ For more details on Third Republic France and federal control of sexuality, see Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

after women were legally equal to men in America and possessed their own political voices, age of consent laws could be lowered or even removed. This way, they would no longer be used as tools to limit the sexual freedom of women by traditionalists. Until that time, many suffragists were willing to accept the drawbacks of age of consent reforms, like young women being painted as helpless, immature victims and young men facing the possibility of being convicted of statutory rape for underage consensual sex, for the overall cause of equal rights.⁶¹ Suffragists excused any apprehensions away about age of consent reforms, maintaining that “no law can be made so perfect as not to be capable of being sometimes so construed as to work injustice.”⁶² According to the reformers, in the long run, young girls suffered more as victims of sexual assault than their assailants did serving a brief sentence in prison.

A few radical suffragists, like Gardener, demanded even harsher punishments for convicted rapists. In select states, “laws treated the theft of purity more lightly than the theft of property.”⁶³ Woman suffrage activists believed that guilty men deserved to be imprisoned in addition to having their male-specific rights taken away, like their right to vote or run for political office. This punishment would lower rapists to the political position of women. Since society perceived women as too immoral or irresponsible to be worthy of political power, the radical suffragists reasoned that criminals certainly lacked the same necessary qualities. Also, suffragists bitterly stated that the only benefit of having low age of consent laws was that some young men may have been victimized by the unjust law. They called it “poetic justice” for the injustices done to women for

⁶¹ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 136.

⁶² Ibid, 137.

⁶³ Ibid.

centuries based on these laws, and if any men suffered, male legislators may be more compelled to improve the age of consent.⁶⁴ For Gardener and her associates, this proposition, which was seriously considered in certain states, was an opportunity to limit the seemingly limitless power of white men.⁶⁵

Henry Blackwell, another uncompromising suffragist, used the story of Maria Barberi, a fifteen year old immigrant who was seduced and raped by an older man. When she killed him in vengeance, Barberi was seen as obviously guilty, but Blackwell argued that her lack of rights and protection as a young, unenfranchised woman gave her no choice but to bring about justice on her own terms. If the same situation had occurred but Barberi had been married and her husband had murdered the rapist, society would have lauded the husband as a hero and he would have received “pity and acquittal.”⁶⁶ Blackwell concluded that “in the present state of society, if every man who seduces a child of fifteen leaving her no practical alternative but suicide or a life of prostitution, were promptly put out of existence, the morals of the community would be vastly improved.”⁶⁷ In this way, Blackwell emphasized the great trauma of statutory rape and horrible resulting predicament for the victim. Pointing back to his activist roots, Blackwell presented woman suffrage and a higher age of consent as a preventative solution to the problem illustrated by Maria Barberi’s story.

When states began to give women the right to vote, suffragists sought to prove that their accomplishment truly affected women in the ways they had hoped it would. They claimed that “suffrage has sent no girl astray but it has gathered many wanderers

⁶⁴ Blackwell, *The Woman Citizen*, 863.

⁶⁵ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 137.

⁶⁶ Henry B. Blackwell, “The Case of Maria Barberi,” *Woman’s Journal*, 10 (August 1895): 252.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 252.

and turned their feet into paths of safety and built for them a model State home.”⁶⁸

Because of the newly established voting bloc of women, numerous state legislators and those seeking election changed their priorities, considering the needs and opinions of women for once. As a result, age of consent laws had been revised and punishments were increased, so “many a seducer has ended his career in jail.”⁶⁹ Women were also elected to state boards that dealt with issues they cared about, like boards on helping the poor or reforming the prison system. Because of these cases of successful woman suffrage at the state level, suffragists possessed the evidence to convince politicians to take this initiative on the national scale.

After women were officially granted national suffrage in 1920, suffragists continued to fight for other women’s rights causes, with age of consent being one of them. However, new groups like the League of Women Voters doubted the necessity and utility of the Equal Rights bill, which was proposed by a group of their fellow suffragists called the National Woman’s Party (NWP).⁷⁰ If passed, this Equal Rights Amendment would make women equal to men in all legal aspects, including as workers, financial providers, political thinkers and voters, defenders of freedom, parents, sexual partners, and court subjects. It also could call into question the validity of any gender-specific or protective legislation, especially age of consent.

Like Gardener’s views on uneven punishments, the women voters believed that some inequality was required to protect “defenseless girls” as well as all women in

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage: 1900-1920* (New York: J. J. Little and Ives Company, 1922), 104.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 104.

⁷⁰ Francis Parkinson Kayes, “Letters from a Senator’s Wife,” *Good Housekeeping* 74, no. 6 (June 1922): 142.

need.⁷¹ For the women voters, protection meant that young women could not be sexually abused by evil men without court restitution. Furthermore, the women voters were concerned that women might lose important privileges, such as the traditional financial support from the husband, dower rights, exemption from the draft, and maternal government aid.⁷² These women voters even worried that the recently established higher age of consent may be entirely overridden in favor of full gender equality, which would limit women to only the same legal protections that men received from sexual abuses. NWP members, like Lady Willie Forbes in the late 1920s, argued that women would still be protected from rape with the ERA, but the law would also recognize that women can commit sexual crimes. Ultimately, the NWP's ideal rape laws would not be gender specific, using the word "person" instead.⁷³ The debate between the NWP and the League of Women Voters has persisted, with later generations of women continuing to seek an Equal Rights Amendment that has yet to come to fruition.

The pursuit of age of consent reforms exposed many other complexities that suffragists were forced to confront. One concern that the suffragists discovered and shared with fellow age of consent reformers, the social hygienists, involved the "feebleminded." An individual's mental capacity complicated any fixed universal age of consent. By 1920, psychologists and suffragists had worked together to find an explanation in which "responsibility should not be determined by the number of years an individual has been in existence, but by the mental level which he has attained."⁷⁴ They

⁷¹ Kayes, "Letters from a Senator's Wife," 142.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 223-224.

⁷⁴ Leta Stetter Hollingworth, Ph.D., *The Psychology of Subnormal Children* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 166.

argued that further studies of mental age were required to determine how to move forward with the prosecution of mentally disabled individuals who violate the age of consent.

In the twenties, suffragist groups like the League of Women Voters argued that age of consent legislation could be applied to many other areas of adolescents' lives besides sex, including education and child labor. In other words, if the age at which children became legally consenting adults was raised to eighteen, boys and girls would no longer be allowed to drop out of school or get a job without a parent's expressed permission. They cited states like Oregon that had extended the legal age of consent, which was increased to eighteen in the 1920s, to the regulation of child labor.⁷⁵ This demonstrates the political utility of sexually- and gender-motivated legislative reforms, which may begin as merely for the protection of young, innocent girls but can have a much greater overarching impact once implemented.

Throughout the campaign for woman suffrage, American suffragists worked toward all aspects of women's rights that needed improvement. While suffragists varied in political views from radical to conservative, they all wanted to improve the lives of women. Many of them also desired to challenge existing gender roles and inequalities, which they argued could be fixed or improved. Despite their previously sheltered and restricted roles in society, these women knew that their lives could be more meaningful. After seeking and achieving changes through legislative reforms, including the vote, higher ages of consent, and labor regulations, select suffragists began to doubt the true impact of their actions. Women's behavior, even behind closed doors, was being

⁷⁵ League of Women Voters of Iowa, "League of Women Voters Minutes, 1920-1925" (administrative record, University of Iowa Women's Archives), 13, 53.

monitored more closely than ever, and they were scrutinized in court for any moral transgressions. The “helpless girls” of the turn of the century were criticized as promiscuous and self-indulgent by the 1920s. Ultimately, suffragists were proud of their achievements, but they were also unsure that the implementation of their ideas had ended up as they had intended, especially regarding equal rights.

CHAPTER 3

Morality and Science Merged: Age Of Consent and the Social Hygiene Movement

“Slavery in its worst form in any age was never as terrible as the white slavery as today, Dr. Howard declared, and the wail of children in Herod’s day was a whisper compared to the cry of mistreated and outraged ones of the twentieth century. An exhaustive search of the records in Washington proved that numberless children were abused here each year, he charged, and he asserted that it was the duty of every one to do all in their power to right these wrongs.”¹

Progressive Era physicians like Dr. Howard A. Kelley, who worked at Johns Hopkins University, felt that it was their responsibility to use their knowledge of medicine and science to restore the morality of society. One of Kelley’s admirers insisted that “the public should place its confidence only in ‘Christian’ doctors,” because these doctors possessed “the Christian spirit of love of man.”² At the turn of the twentieth century, devout Christian physicians, though not of huge number, united together under the idea that they possessed the greatest knowledge to restore the purity of American society, especially concerning the legal age of consent. These activists became affiliated with groups already organized around social purity and hygiene. Social purity was a popular issue with other progressive groups as well; by the late 1800s, organizations like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union had created special units within their group to address social purity. This is why groups like the WCTU, suffrage organizations, and the American Purity Alliance interacted and supported each other in their pursuits of age of consent reform.³

¹ “Raps Society Women: Dr. Kelley Urges W.C.T.U. to Help White Slaves, Should Not be Spurned,” *The Washington Post* (December 1912): 4.

² Ibid.

³ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 139.

The APA, which was previously led by temperance and anti-slavery activists, transitioned to medical leadership at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ These leaders included both male and female doctors who aimed to improve the morality of their world. Physician activists in the APA and other new, exclusively medical purity groups claimed that they had a duty to educate the public about the dangers of sexual immorality, venereal disease, and prostitution. With the creation of a large collaborative organization, the American Social Hygiene Association, in 1913, the medical field officially took control of the social purity movement.⁵ At the same time, they gained an influential role in the final push for age of consent reform. While these physicians' opinions changed with evolving scientific knowledge and were often contested within their organization, their focus remained constant on the promotion of morality and public health. Ultimately, the social purity movement helped push age of consent reform further when it seemed to be stalled toward the end of the Progressive Era.

While studying progressivism, a number of historians have argued that physicians connected social morality with medical evidence to prove their worth as a science and profession.⁶ Physicians almost unanimously agreed at this time that individuals should refrain from sexual activity during single life, and only have one sexual partner in marriage.⁷ This suggestion joined together prevention of venereal diseases, protection of the innocence of childhood from sexual activity, deterrence of prostitution, and more. By combining these causes with medical evidence and data, the public found the age of consent reforms more valuable and credible.

⁴ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 139.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 138.

Social purists created the American Purity Alliance to organize and facilitate their political activities and interests based on the medical necessities they derived from their research. The members of this group came together to articulate their main concerns at the National Purity Congress in 1895. One such mission was to reform age of consent legislation in the United States. Purists believed that the age of consent was too low in many states and these laws “discriminate against girlhood and in favor of immoral men.”⁸ Working together with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and other Christian organizations, social purists used the American Purity Alliance to pursue age of consent reform.

Overall, the American Purity Alliance believed that age of consent laws and all immorality in American society could be corrected if men and women were held to identical moral standards. The group’s ideas, which often conflicted, were a mixture of the protectionist, Christian notions of the WCTU and the firm equality demands of the suffragists. They argued that men must follow the same “law of purity” as women to overcome vice, especially sinful sexual behavior with young girls.⁹ They recommended that men follow Jesus’s model of purity and raise their sons to do the same. Social hygienists truly believed that religion was also vital to maintaining young women’s innocence. This factor along with suitable housing and a “wholesome social life” improved a young woman’s chances of having good character into adulthood.¹⁰

⁸ Aaron M. Powell, *The National Purity Congress, its Papers, Addresses, Portraits: An Illustrated Record of the Papers and Addresses of the First National Purity Congress, Held Under the Auspices of the American Purity Alliance, (October 14-16, 1895)* (New York: The American Purity Alliance United Charities Building, 1896), 7.

⁹ Ibid, 8.

¹⁰ Arthur W. Towne, “A Community Program for Protective Work with Girls,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 6, no. 1 (January 1920): 59.

By the 1920s, the social hygiene movement was viewed by its followers as a progressive campaign for gender egalitarianism. This was exemplified by their acceptance of women physicians as both members and leaders, who had already defied gender norms in American society by joining this line of work. Because it claimed that both men and women should be protected by the law, the movement “was revolutionary in its quest for a single moral standard.”¹¹ This had not always been the case, however. Before the turn of the century, many physicians had supported prostitution as long as it was regulated; they asserted that men medically needed a safe sexual outlet.¹² One prominent physician and president of the American Medical Association in the 1870s, James Marion Sims, advocated for the institution of a licensing system for prostitutes, whom he believed were necessary in society but must be regulated to stop the spread of venereal disease.¹³ Over time, this community of physicians-turned-social-hygienists gradually changed its opinion and eventually rejected any sort of prostitution, arguing that men must abstain from sex outside of marriage just like women.¹⁴ It is clear that these physicians manipulated medical science to fit the popular moral standards, and vice versa, when they saw fit.

After several legal reforms, like the Mann Act of 1910,¹⁵ had taken root in American society, social hygienists began to change their views of the women who they

¹¹ David J. Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene: Women, Prostitution, and the “American Plan,” 1900-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 85.

¹² Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 140.

¹³ Aaron M. Powell, *State Regulation of Vice: Regulation Efforts in America: The Geneva Congress* (New York: Wood and Holbrook, Publishers, 1878), 87-88.

¹⁴ Scott, *The Sexual Instinct*, 226; Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 140.

¹⁵ The Mann Act outlawed the transportation of any individual across state lines for the purposes of prostitution or illegal sexual activity, which applied to crossing state lines in search of a lower age of consent. This law was explicitly written to protect children, and social hygienists as well as other age of consent reformers undoubtedly played a part in pressuring this bill into a law. United States Department

had previously deemed in need of assistance, according to historian David J. Pivar. For example, with these laws in place, they assumed women would not fall so easily into “white slavery.” Nevertheless, they witnessed the continued prominence of prostitution, which caused reformers to lose sympathy for these women. While still seeing prostitutes as victims of immorality and requiring rehabilitation, hygienists asserted that “temporizing with evil would never eradicate it.”¹⁶ As a result, prostitutes were also seen as criminals who needed to be reformed rather than “lost souls” in need of saving, which was the typical WCTU opinion.¹⁷ Social hygienists altered their agenda whenever they felt it was necessary. Nevertheless, they were extremely influential in the successful passage of age of consent reforms as well as other social morality laws.

In their age of consent campaign, many social hygienists argued that women’s morality would be best served if the age of consent corresponded with the medical age of maturity. According to R. B. Leach, M.D., a physician who supported age of consent reform in 1913, God determined puberty as the age of consent for both sexes at the beginning of time. Leach argued that “man in the mighty conceit of egoism” disobeyed God’s laws by establishing an age of consent in the government that came before the predetermined time of maturity.¹⁸ If the age of consent matched God’s prescription, both young women and men would be ready to make decisions about their sex lives by the time they could legally consent. Therefore, Leach proposed a national law, or at the very least updates to state laws, that coincided with the law of God.

of Justice, “2027. Mann Act,” *Criminal Resource Manual*, accessed May 27, 2016, <https://www.justice.gov/usam/criminal-resource-manual-2027-mann-act>.

¹⁶ Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*, 86.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ R. B. Leach, M.D., “The Age of Consent: A Symposium: A Physician’s Standpoint,” *The Arena*, no. lxv (April 1895): 282.

Leach expanded on this argument by condemning women for their “perverseness and foolishness,” which were at least partially to blame for their immoral behavior.¹⁹ He argued women must instead focus their lives on being mothers, which Leach insisted would protect young girls from falling to moral or physical abuse before their age of consent. These mothers were expected to be pious examples for their daughters, and, as an added protection, the girls were to be thoroughly educated on sexuality.²⁰

Most social hygienists agreed with Leach that fostering mother-daughter relationships of trust and admiration would help preserve the innocence of girls. They suggested more motherly supervision of young girls, which would only be accomplished from women working less. While men were at fault for their sinful and overtly sexual nature, women were not blameless for fornication in the eyes of social hygienists; women’s “ignorance, inferiority, and defenselessness” allowed them to be easily swayed by their suitors.²¹ They also condemned women for their immoral behavior, suggesting that they “should dress and act only in such a way as to command respect from every man.”²² They suggested that “men should regard all women as they do their mothers, sisters, and daughters.”²³ Social hygienists visibly relied on, and encouraged, the gender roles of the 1900s in their campaign for age of consent reform.

Social hygienists joined forces with Protestant Christians to suppress immorality and promote purity, even encouraging other “civic, medical, and church men” to come

¹⁹ Leach, “The Age of Consent: A Symposium,” 282.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ American Social Hygiene Association, “Note and Comment,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 6, no. 4 (October 1920): 608.

²² American Social Hygiene Association, “Note and Comment,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 7, no. 1 (January 1921): 124.

²³ Ibid.

together “in raising the standard of the community.”²⁴ Together with churches and Christian organizations like the WCTU, the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) spoke out against sinful books, movies, and plays.²⁵ Members of ASHA were certain of their ambition “to get rid of many temptations which beset the path of our young people.”²⁶

Despite their insistence on protecting women and young girls, social purists also believed that all children, whether male or female, should have their innocence defended.²⁷ By raising the age of consent, reformers “reserved time in the life cycle of children and youth for development rather than exploitation.”²⁸ They also encouraged young adults and children to participate in sensible and harmless leisure activities rather than get into trouble with sex and alcohol.²⁹ A full and happy childhood was essential in the minds of social hygienists.

In addition to raising the legal age of consent, social purists insisted on several other measures to promote wellbeing and morality in American society. First, they argued that the punishment for statutory rape be no less than life in prison or the death penalty. Also, they pushed for the age of consent to match up with the age at which an individual can make a contract or own property, which is in agreement with the perspective of the WCTU.³⁰ Furthering its mission for morality, the American Purity Alliance supported the legal prohibition of alcohol. The overarching goal of this social purity activism was summed up as, “the heart and conscience of the people will be

²⁴ American Social Hygiene Association, “Note and Comment,” (January 1921): 124.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Powell, *The National Purity Congress*, 24.

²⁸ Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*, 3.

²⁹ Ibid, 47.

³⁰ Powell, *The National Purity Congress*, 423-424.

reached, and in the proper time, as the individual life becomes purified and exalted, will the national life take upon itself the same attributes and weave into the body politic the principles and truths for which this Congress stands.”³¹

During the same time period, other developed countries, like England, also struggled to raise their legal age of consent. Social purists in these countries also pushed for moral laws by clinging to the “law of God” just like their American counterparts. Christ’s example of marriage with the church was especially central to their age of consent mission since they believed that sexual experiences at young ages led to more immorality and less likelihood of godly marriages.³² While they were using American strategies, these foreign nations observed that the United States was behind in the legal protection of women and children. One English writer called the American age of consent “extraordinarily low.”³³ When American reformers heard or read about international opinions of the United States’ laws, they were even more strongly motivated to improve their country’s reality and reputation.

Because of these comparisons, social hygienists in the United States looked at foreign countries’ legislation to evaluate the state of American age of consent in the 1920s. While many nations had no formal age of consent, seven set their legal consenting age at twenty years or older. Norway, Greece, and Denmark all had an age of consent of eighteen, while countries like Siam (present-day Thailand) still held the national legal age at twelve.³⁴ This showed that the United States was not the only

³¹ Powell, *The National Purity Congress*, 362-363.

³² Ellice Hopkins, *The Power of Womanhood, or, Mothers and Sons: a Book for Parents and Those in Loco Parentis* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1899), 224.

³³ *Ibid*, 23.

³⁴ Mildred D. Mudgett, “Marriages of Unmarried Mothers,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 4, no. 4 (April 1923): 208.

country that was slow to adopt a higher age of consent, but it was also still not up to the standard of some of its European peers.

The age of consent in other countries also concerned ASHA in relation to “white slavery.” While there were existing international agreements about women who were forced into service or underage girls being trafficked, women who allegedly agreed to prostitution were excluded from this protection. Social hygienists insisted that sex trafficking of any woman was unjust, but many international authorities claimed that prostitution was a national concern only, meaning each country must deal with this issue on its own terms. One study exposed an Amsterdam brothel, supposedly monitored by the police, where, “during a year and a half, there had been no less than seventy-seven French minors” who entered into prostitution.³⁵ With this type of abomination inciting outrage, ASHA asserted that the age of consent had to be enforced and taken seriously in all countries, especially in relation to white slavery.

ASHA even conducted studies in countries like India, which still struggles with age of consent and child marriages today. American activist groups like ASHA followed the progression of age of consent legislation in India. In 1929, India had its own Age of Consent Committee, which recommended a similar course of action to the American reform plans. In addition to raising the general age of consent to eighteen and enforcing birth registration requirements, Indian committee members advocated for an “age of consent within marital relations” because of the culture’s tradition of child marriages.³⁶ This law punished men for having sex with their wives if they were younger than fifteen

³⁵ Mudgett, “Marriages of Unmarried Mothers,” 210.

³⁶ American Social Hygiene Association, “News and Abstracts,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 15, no. 8 (November 1929): 498.

years old. Wives under this age could not legally consent to sex and this act was considered rape. Most likely, this law was difficult to enforce because these young girls would have been implicating their older, dominant husbands. Also, expecting a married couple to abstain from consummating their marriage seemed unrealistic.

Furthermore, India did not use gendered logic to validate the higher age of consent, making sure to clarify that their new legislation pertained to both male and female individuals. Still, ASHA criticized India's low age of consent within marital relations, stating that it was "a compromise with orthodoxy," but they recognized the importance of maintaining public support.³⁷ In both India and the United States, no reform movement would succeed without approval from the masses, so they could not become too radical for the public to promote.³⁸ ASHA's assertion hints that some members wanted to go further in their reformist actions, but tempered their publicized measures. It is clear that ASHA and its international counterparts were extremely concerned about their public reputations.

Like both the WCTU members and suffragists before them, social hygienists also extended their concerns and activism to the general topic of rape, both before and after an individual reached the age of consent. The medical definition of rape or sexual assault evolved over the years of the social hygiene movement with the broadening public view of women's sexual rights. The newer definition extended to lack of consent, physical force, coerced sex, and fraud. The refinement of this definition was likely associated with the ideological and scientific connections between the medical community and the social hygiene movement. Social hygienists, and particularly medical professionals,

³⁷ American Social Hygiene Association, "News and Abstracts," 498.

³⁸ Ibid, 499.

rooted their commitment to the issue of sexual assault in biblical scripture, especially chapter twenty-two of Deuteronomy:

“But if a man find a betrothed damsel in the field, and the man force her and lie with her; then the man only that lay with her shall die. But unto the damsel thou shalt do nothing; there is in the damsel no sin worthy of death. For as when a man riseth against his neighbor and slayeth him, even so in this matter; for he found her in the field and the betrothed damsel cried, and there was none to save her.”³⁹

Rape was not always so well understood or compassionately recognized however. As late as 1906, physicians and other medical experts believed that a woman could not be raped if she physically resisted, no matter how strong the attacker may be.⁴⁰ Therefore, a woman who was successfully raped could not have resisted, according to medical knowledge. Only if a woman was too young and small or drugged would her lack of resistance be dismissed and sexual assault still be assumed. Even in a situation where a woman feared excessive violence with continued resistance, sexual intercourse was not always considered rape.⁴¹

The legal definition of rape at this earlier time undeniably favored the male attacker since proof of rape was quite difficult. Physicians claimed that only one of every thirteen alleged sexual assault cases was based on true events; this meant that women were presumed to be lying most of the time when they brought rape charges. Social hygienists, who were often from the medical community, claimed that women most often falsified reports of physicians, surgeons, and dentists raping them while they were under

³⁹ Charles C. Mapes, “Sexual Assault,” *Urological and Cutaneous Review* 21 (1917): 430.

⁴⁰ Charles C. Mapes, “A Practical Consideration of Sexual Assault,” *Medical Age* 24 (1906): 928.

⁴¹ Ibid, 929.

treatment or in surgery.⁴² In these early rape cases, women were portrayed as unreliable and dramatic, far from victims of assault.

Also, problems with sexual consent extended into the realm of marriage. In the early twentieth century, rape within a marital relationship was not legally possible because a husband had a legal right to the body of his wife.⁴³ At the National Purity Congress in the late 1890s, however, social purists were already attacking this subject of marital rape. While they were uncertain about the legal definition of sexual consent within marriage, the social purists argued that married women unquestionably had a right to revoke consent. If a man forced himself upon his wife, especially if he caused her injury, social purists asserted the need for legal penance.⁴⁴ While their opinion of marital rape was underdeveloped, it seemed to be headed toward a full recognition of this crime.

Social hygienists were also concerned with preventing child marriage, since any sexual relations within these early marital bonds would be considered immoral and possibly illegal. In states with a low legal age of sexual consent, a low marital consent age usually remained as well. Social hygienists cautioned against raising the age of marriage too quickly, which could stimulate resistance in the population. With gradual increases, they believed both the age of marriage and the age of sexual consent could be raised to reasonable and popular standards.⁴⁵ By connecting these two causes, social hygienists concentrated their efforts on improving children's lives and protecting their sexual innocence.

⁴² Mapes, "A Practical Consideration," 937.

⁴³ Ibid, 929.

⁴⁴ Powell, *The National Purity Congress*, 438.

⁴⁵ Arthur W. Towne, "Young Girl Marriages in Criminal and Juvenile Courts," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 3, no. 3 (July 1922): 305.

ASHA also aimed to protect girls from being tricked into consenting to sexual relations. As one social hygienist proclaimed, “girls under the ‘age of consent’ are protected even against themselves because of their immaturity and ignorance.”⁴⁶ Many young women were persuaded with false promises of marriage from their suitors. Some were even lied to by doctors, who coerced girls into consenting to sex as a cure for their illnesses. According to social hygienists, all of these men deserved to be sentenced as rapists.⁴⁷ Age of consent laws, according to social hygienists, were formed so that “neither body nor spirit may be coerced or defrauded.”⁴⁸

ASHA further insisted that even if the man perceived the girl as above the legal age of consent, he should still suffer the consequences of his careless actions. If he was not punished, other men would use this excuse fraudulently to escape conviction in future cases. In other unique cases of consent, like the consent of feeble-minded girls or the seduction of girls under pretense of marriage, the National Purity Congress favored the rights of the victims.⁴⁹ More specifically, they believed feeble-minded women were unable to give sexual consent, while seduced women’s consent was invalid as a result of false claims by the seducer.⁵⁰ They also distinguished that, even if a young woman previously had consensual sex with a man, the woman still possessed a right to refuse consent the next time. Even a person as sinful as a prostitute could be raped under the law according to ASHA.⁵¹ As organizations, both ASHA and the APA publicly supported the privileged the victim’s rights rather than the rights of the accused.

⁴⁶ Albert Levitt, “Love and the Law,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 11, no. 8 (November 1925): 456.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 456-457.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 455.

⁴⁹ Powell, *The National Purity Congress*, 441.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 443.

⁵¹ Levitt, “Love and the Law,” 455.

Despite their public support of victim's rights, some social hygienists asserted their doubts about women's truthfulness in rape accusations, again revealing gendered assumptions. In the 1910s, the age of consent in most states had been raised to fourteen, but the legal and medical terms of sexual assault were underdeveloped.⁵² Medical professionals suggested evidence could prove a victim's unchastity as well as her desire to commit sexual acts with the defendant.⁵³ They even warned against women's efforts to manipulate their genitals in efforts to simulate virginity.

Gendered assumptions played into this legal and medical standard, especially the notion that women should maintain their chastity or they would be considered immoral beings.⁵⁴ If a woman was known to be a prostitute or "of shady reputation," some social hygienists and portions of society regarded their accusations as false.⁵⁵ These conflicting and diverse opinions amongst members of the social hygiene movement demonstrated the contradictions between gender norms and the idealistic egalitarian ideas of the movement.

Through age of consent reform, ASHA aimed to eliminate "white slavery" and lessen statutory rape with one strike. Taking New York as an example, ASHA claims that the state legislative increase to 18 years old as the legal age of consent led to harsher punishments for "professional procurers" of young girls to be prostitutes.⁵⁶ Social hygienists believed in the strong likelihood of young women turning to prostitution if they were coerced, in desperate financial need, or mentally unfit. Dr. Anne T. Bingham

⁵² Mapes, "A Practical Consideration," 931.

⁵³ Ibid, 930.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 936.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 937.

⁵⁶ Maude E. Miner, "Report of Committee on Social Hygiene," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 1, no 1 (December 1914): 85.

conducted a study of five hundred cases and found that many of these prostitutes were feebleminded. She asserts that they were easily tricked into leaving home prematurely.⁵⁷ Also, girls who had abnormally early sexual experiences, especially in cases of assault and incest, were more likely to become “sex delinquents.”⁵⁸ Overall, prostitution coupled with rape became the social hygiene movement’s double punch to push through age of consent reforms.

Another way social hygienists sought to promote age of consent increases and sexual morality was through education, a view they also shared with suffragists and WCTU members. As doctors and educated individuals, social hygienists believed that information was power, and that sexual education needed to be implemented in schools. They insisted that these lessons would improve the effectiveness and popularity of age of consent laws. Many mothers believed it was inappropriate and immoral for them to teach their children about sex, so reformers called on schools to take up the task. They also recommended that professionals, like physicians, be called into schools to teach these lessons and avoid misinformation.⁵⁹ Furthermore, social hygienists insisted that a mother’s role was to be a shining example of morality and modesty for her daughters because it would lead to a better transition during puberty.⁶⁰

Later on, social hygienists began to emphasize the benefits of sexual education imparted by parents. ASHA particularly insisted that girls must receive sex instruction from their parents as well as the school. To make these efforts successful, parents must

⁵⁷ Anne T. Bingham, “Determinants of Sex Delinquency in Adolescent Girls Based on Intensive Studies of 500 Cases,” *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 13, no. 4 (February 1923): 522.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 528.

⁵⁹ Winfield S. Hall, Ph.D., M.D., “Conservation of the Child as Related to Social Ethics,” *The Child: A Monthly Journal of Child Welfare* 2, no. 5 (July 1913): 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 12.

have previously had “tactful instruction” themselves about “the dangers of confronting unguarded girlhood.”⁶¹ Even though it did not completely align with the group’s promotion of religious principles and gender equality, ASHA fervently supported sex education to help age of consent laws be more effective.⁶²

The United States’ Children’s Bureau, though not explicitly involved in the social hygiene movement, also supported the improvement of sex education as well as the reform of age of consent legislation. They encouraged sex education for all young men and women, which could be fulfilled at school, by the parents, or, most effectively, both. The Children’s Bureau suggested that every girl should learn how to guard “her sex apparatus as sacred to her womanhood.”⁶³ Young women were supposed to learn to protect their chastity at all times. Boys, on the other hand, were prescribed to join the YMCA or Boy Scouts to learn leadership and self-control.⁶⁴ In accordance with gender roles, young women were expected to be more steadfast about preserving their innocence, while young men were encouraged to participate in society and develop their manhood while practicing moderate restraint.

The social hygiene movement from the late 1800s into the twentieth century had an inconsistent relationship with eugenics, especially during their campaign for age of consent reforms. As stated previously, social hygienists believed that feeble-minded women could be more easily tempted into prostitution, but, for many physicians, this idea applied to other criminal behavior and alcoholism too.⁶⁵ Eugenicist medical

⁶¹ Towne, “A Community Program for Protective Work with Girls,” 60.

⁶² Ibid, 59.

⁶³ Hall, “Conservation of the Child as Related to Social Ethics,” 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*, 148.

professionals warned that some young boys, and even girls, could possess heightened sexual instincts if they carried “a hereditary neurotic taint.”⁶⁶ This assertion led some social hygienists to believe that individuals classified as feebleminded were naturally more sexual and uncontrollable. Some states, like Washington, actually instituted laws in the early 1900s stating that people who were convicted of lewd sex crimes, like statutory rape, and/or were diagnosed as feebleminded could be sterilized for their punishment. This law was upheld in court in 1912 when Peter Feilen, who was convicted of raping a girl younger than ten years old (the age of consent in Washington at the time) and sentenced to life in prison as well as sterilization, appealed on the basis of cruel and unusual punishment, and he lost.⁶⁷ An even more popular idea, also believed by many WCTU members, was that the truly feebleminded were so mentally incapacitated that they could not legally consent to sex at any point in their lives. Therefore, some reformers argued that there should be no age of consent for the feebleminded, and the courts should automatically assume that their consent is invalid and treat these cases as rape.

With the widespread reproduction of these “unfit” people, social hygienists with eugenic inclinations feared that American society would continue to be drawn into sinful activities. Limiting unfit reproduction, as eugenicists aimed to do, would ultimately promote the goals of the social hygiene movement.⁶⁸ While many social hygienists were not comfortable endorsing control mechanisms for the feebleminded like sterilization, several others enthusiastically joined in. Frequently, leaders of the movement advocated

⁶⁶ Mapes, “A Practical Consideration,” 936.

⁶⁷ Dr. Bethenia A. Owens-Adair, *Human Sterilization: Its Social and Legislative Aspects* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1922), 45.

⁶⁸ Mapes, “A Practical Consideration,” 936.

incorporating eugenic theories into their objectives, especially if they were physicians who trusted the science behind eugenics; however, the social hygiene movement as a whole never fully embraced this idea.

Social hygienists advocated for feeble-minded children to be institutionalized, connecting their presence in society with the corruption of other children. Claiming that eighty-five percent of dangerous feeble-minded children remained “out among the people in private homes,” Dr. W. H. Slingerland asserts that the population of feeble-minded individuals was rising and causing “race deterioration.”⁶⁹ He also argues that feeble-minded girls naturally tended towards becoming prostitutes because they lacked self-control and mental capacity. These deficient children held back their able peers in school and their social lives, dragging them into immoral activities.⁷⁰ Like Slingerland, many social hygienists saw feeble-minded individuals as threats to the moral society that they desired.

The Children’s Bureau was also highly concerned about feeble-minded children. It argued that this population of people was on the rise, which would lead to “race deterioration.”⁷¹ Referring to these individuals as inferior, this government agency accused them of having too many babies, holding back fellow students mentally, and contributing to rising rates of prostitution and other crimes. They argued that feeble-minded girls posed a much larger problem than boys, citing that sixty thousand American women qualified as feeble-minded.⁷² A feeble-minded woman was as

⁶⁹ W. H. Slingerland, Ph.D., “The Defective Child of the Twentieth Century,” *The Child: A Monthly Journal of Child Welfare* 2, no. 5 (July 1913): 42.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, 43.

vulnerable “as her normal sister of half her years and she is entitled to similar protection.”⁷³ The Children’s Bureau suggested the creation of an extensive federal program to isolate this group and care for it. With these actions, they aimed to limit the reproduction of feebleminded women so their population would not continue to rise.

Most social hygienists distanced themselves from eugenics because they were uncomfortable endorsing sterilization. One reason why certain social hygienists opposed sterilizing feebleminded individuals was not necessarily because it was wrong, but because it might encourage them to have sex even more. “By removing the fear of pregnancy,” feebleminded men and women may see no benefit from abstaining from sexual activity.⁷⁴ As a result, they could poison the minds of “normal” individual and encourage them to be sexually active as well. A central motivation of the social hygiene movement’s proposed isolation of the feebleminded was to prevent the corruption of the normal population, who have stronger wills and more education, thus being less easily drawn to vice. Still, their uncertainty about the moral repercussions of sterilization led most social hygienists to refrain from supporting it.

Overall, the social hygienists who embraced eugenics aimed to control the feebleminded and prevent them from expanding their population. While never explicitly stated, organizations like ASHA and APA most likely connected the idea that feebleminded individuals could not legally consent to sex to the forced limitation of their reproduction. In other words, if a feebleminded woman could not consent to sex at any age, she should be legally prevented from ever reproducing. The incorporation of this

⁷³ Slingerland, “The Defective Child,” 43.

⁷⁴ Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*, 158.

principle into the social hygienists' age of consent reform plans was relatively seamless and popular, just as eugenics itself was around this time.

Once the social hygiene movement achieved some age of consent reforms, they continued to supervise the effectiveness of their achievements. Members of ASHA argued "the enforcement of age-of-consent laws would have an important effect in lessening immorality."⁷⁵ To observe this enforcement, ASHA monitored the legislative progression in the states on matters of sexual morality. The organization published their findings in a table in their monthly bulletin. Some specific categories of legislation they tracked were regulations on white slavery, houses of prostitution, and age of consent. Concerning white slavery, or prostitution, ASHA rated many of the southern state laws at a poor level in 1914; moreover, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Georgia had no laws protecting women from being forced into prostitution.⁷⁶ The states without laws prohibiting "disorderly houses," or brothels, were also located in the southern half of the country. While many states had recently raised their legal ages of consent, a few states still held their ages as low as ten years old, including Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ American Social Hygiene Association, "Note and Comment," (October 1920): 607.

⁷⁶ American Social Hygiene Association, "State and Federal Laws Concerning White Slave Traffic, Keeping Disorderly Houses and Age of Consent, January, 1916," *The American Social Hygiene Association Bulletin* 2, no. 10 (January 1916): 5.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

**STATE AND FEDERAL LAWS CONCERNING WHITE SLAVE TRAFFIC, KEEPING
DISORDERLY HOUSES AND AGE OF CONSENT, JANUARY, 1916**

<i>Keeping Disorderly Houses.</i>				
<i>State.</i>	<i>White Slave Law.</i>	<i>Criminal Law.</i>	<i>Civil Law.</i>	<i>Age of Consent.</i>
Alabama	Poor, 1897	Keeper Vagrant		14
Alaska	Good, 1915	Prohibited		16
Arizona	Good, 1912	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1915	18
Arkansas	Fair, 1913	City may suppress		16
California	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1914	18
Colorado	Fair, 1911	Keeper punished	Injunction and Abatement, 1915	18
Connecticut	Good, 1911	Prohibited		16
Delaware	Good, 1911	Prohibited		16
District of Columbia	Fair, 1910	No Law	Injunction and Abatement, 1914	16
Florida	Poor, 1911	Prohibited		18
Georgia	No Law	Prohibited		10
Hawaii	Fair, 1909	Prohibited		15
Idaho	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1915	18
Illinois	Good, 1909	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1915	16
Indiana	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1915	14
Iowa	Fair, 1909	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1909	15
Kansas	Fair, 1913	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	18
Kentucky	Poor, 1912	No Law		16
Louisiana	Good, 1910	Prohibited		18
Maine	Good, 1913	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1891	16
Maryland	Fair, 1910	Prohibited		16
Massachusetts	Good, 1910	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1914	16
Michigan	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1915	16
Minnesota	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	18
Mississippi	No Law	No Law		18
Missouri	Good, 1913	Prohibited		18
Montana	Good, 1911	Prohibited		18
Nebraska	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1911	15 unchaste 18 chaste
Nevada	Fair, 1912	Prohibited		16
New Hampshire	Good, 1911	City may suppress		16
New Jersey	Fair, 1910	City may suppress		16
New Mexico	Good, 1913	No Law		16
New York	Good, 1910	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1914	18
North Carolina	Good, 1911	No Law		10 unchaste 14 chaste
North Dakota	Fair, 1909	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1911	18
Ohio	Fair, 1910	Prohibited	(Nuisance abated on conviction)	16
Oklahoma	Good, 1910	Prohibited		16 unchaste 18 chaste
Oregon	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	16
Pennsylvania	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	16 chaste
Rhode Island	Good, 1910	Prohibited		16
South Carolina	No Law	No Law		10-14
South Dakota	Poor, 1909	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	16
Tennessee	Poor, 1901	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	12 unchaste 21 chaste
Texas	Good, 1911	Owner punished	Injunction and Abatement, 1907	15
Utah	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	18
Vermont	Good, 1911	Prohibited		16
Virginia	Fair, 1910	Prohibited		14
Washington	Good, 1909	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	15 unchaste 18 chaste
West Virginia	Good, 1911	Prohibited		14
Wisconsin	Good, 1911	Prohibited	Injunction and Abatement, 1913	18 unchaste 21 chaste
Wyoming	Fair, 1910			18

These statistics revealed that the South, although known for its deep Christian roots, refused to yield to the progressive push for age of consent reform from social hygienists and the like. As demonstrated by the interactions with the WCTU and Southern legislators, this resistance may have been to protect the interests of patriarchal power, which would certainly be tested if girls

were able to charge reputable men with statutory rape or white slavery. It is also possible that southern politicians rejected claims that white slavery, brothels, or rape were serious issues in their society like they were in the North.

Some states took proactive measures in response to the pressures of social hygienists and other age of consent reformers. For example, the Missouri governor created the Missouri Children's Code Commission to improve child welfare in the state. University of Missouri scholars of political science, sociology, and law contributed to the code along with private organizations and governmental authorities. This code proposed many adjustments to aid mothers and children, such as “abolishing the legal stigma of illegitimacy,” and “raising the age of consent in the case of a girl previously unchaste to sixteen years.”⁷⁸ Missouri also established a division of child hygiene within their State Board of Health, an initiative surely admired by all physicians. Additionally, this code coincided with social hygienists’ views on the feeble-minded, proposing a law that required all feeble-minded individuals to be confined to special institutions and banned them from getting married.⁷⁹ Since these regulations lined up with many of the social

⁷⁸ American Social Hygiene Association, “Note and Comment,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 3, no. 2 (April 1917): 292.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

hygienists' beliefs and goals, ASHA thought highly of Missouri's Children's Code and praised it as exemplary legislation in their journal.

In 1920, Massachusetts had also passed what social hygienists considered exemplary age of consent laws. Referred to as "Laws against Chastity," these laws stipulated that only the man would be punished in cases of sexual relations with a girl under the age of consent, which was set at eighteen. Furthermore, sexual relations with a feeble-minded individual, seduction of a woman through deceit, or forcing a woman into prostitution all were ruled illegal. For the social hygienists, this state's laws seemed to encompass all of their major concerns, such as prostitution, age of consent (which matched God's natural age of maturity), and feeble-mindedness. Enforcement of these laws, however, fell short in the eyes of the social hygiene activists. For instance, they pushed Massachusetts, and other states, to test suspects of these crimes for venereal diseases. Social hygienists believed that this precaution would limit the spread of such diseases.⁸⁰

Social hygiene activists also suggested more ways enforcement could be improved. They pushed for reformed court procedures, including faster criminal trials, a separate juvenile court system, and allowing young girls to decline to be witnesses in rape trials. Social hygienists believed these actions would further protect the innocence of the American childhood. To make these laws even more effective, they declared that they desired "to bring about a more intelligent public opinion," changing the minds of parents and legislators alike.⁸¹ Spreading the word about age of consent legislation

⁸⁰ George E. Worthington and Ruth Topping, "The Second Sessions of the Municipal Court of the City of Boston," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 3, no. 2 (April 1922): 197-200.

⁸¹ Towne, "Young Girl Marriages in Criminal and Juvenile Courts," 305.

would force people to acknowledge the changes in the laws and be conscious of the moral efforts of the state,

Some social hygienists hesitated to suggest more age of consent laws, arguing that instead “we need to systematize and unify those that we have.”⁸² These reformers insisted that state laws were too inconsistent, leaving citizens and police confused about what was illegal and the severity of the crime. In 1916, state legal consenting ages varied from a young ten to the much more reasonable eighteen.⁸³ This was certainly confusing to anyone who crossed state lines regularly. Furthermore, the prosecution across states was uneven, meaning that someone convicted of statutory rape in one state might be sentenced to death and another may only receive a short time in jail.

Along with the inadequacy of police enforcement of age of consent laws for young women, social hygienists were also concerned with the equal protection of underage boys. They argued that laws needed to include an age of consent for boys, which must also be firmly enforced. While these suggestions were well-intended, the supporting evidence provided demonstrate the more controversial side of social purity. They supported age of consent laws for young men by saying boys “are frequently enticed and seriously injured by the importunities of servants of more mature years and vicious tendencies.”⁸⁴ Like mental health and gender biases, social hygienists also demonstrated these kinds of class prejudices. Some social hygienists clearly assumed all working class servants were prone to immorality, especially more so than wealthy and

⁸² Raymond B. Fosdick, “Prostitution and the Police,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 2, no. 1 (January 1916): 18.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ A. J. R., “Book Review of *Christianity and Sex Problems*,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 5, no. 3 (July 1919): 378.

successful men. They also identified working class individuals as feeble-minded and criminal more often than members of their own class. Despite these biases, the push for the protection of young men was a commendable attempt at gender equality.

The promotion of birth registration was one innovative way that social hygienists hoped to improve the enforcement of age of consent laws. They reasoned that if people had records of their birthdate, “doubt as to the age of consent on the part of females can no longer furnish escapes for the penalties of statutory crime.”⁸⁵ This was not their only motivation for supporting birth registration, however. As strong believers in social data and scientific analysis, social hygienists also stood to gain ample general knowledge about birth rates, infant mortality, unwed mothers, and the makeup of the population as a whole from these state birth records. They also believed birth registration could uncover secrets about the feeble-minded, especially concerning inherited traits and genetic predispositions.

To encourage better enforcement of age of consent legislation, social hygienists even resorted to attacking the state legislatures in their printed publications, alleging that states with low age of consent standards were “protecting vicious men from deserved punishment” instead of “shielding helpless girls from assault.”⁸⁶ These gendered portrayals were quite typical of most age of consent reformers, who exaggerated the innocence of girls and brutality of men in order to compel legislators. While this was certainly popular logic amongst a large number of Americans and was probably effective, using gendered portrayals only when it was convenient may have confused the public

⁸⁵ American Social Hygiene Association, “Note and Comment,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 2, no. 2 (April 1916): 304.

⁸⁶ Towne, “A Community Program for Protective Work with Girls,” 60.

about the social hygiene movement's platform. Social hygienists waffled between promoting gender equality and describing women according to gendered ideals, leaving them without a verifiable unified stance on how women and men should be treated.

By 1931, some social hygienists began to question the justice of these age of consent laws that they had pushed through over the years. They saw men, especially young men, being prosecuted for rape of underage women and were concerned about the fairness of the laws. In one disturbing case, a young man committed suicide after he was charged with rape. They argued that "social, racial and psychological factors" should be taken into account, which the law does not allow.⁸⁷ Undoubtedly, social, racial, and psychological prejudices were prominent at this time, meaning that some social hygienists, no matter their intentions, could not fully overcome these biases. In a case of a rich white young man raping a poor black servant girl, some prejudicial social hygienists might have had more sympathy for the rapist than the victim. To prevent the age of consent laws from going too far in their eyes, social hygienists called on social workers to be more careful when distinguishing true cases.⁸⁸ This backtracking by the social hygiene movement resulted from the gender, class, and race components of their reforms, and the activists' own inabilities to come to terms with these factors.

Social hygienists and purists merged science and religion to push for the regulation of morality in early twentieth century America. As they exposed the holes in the legislation, social hygienists widened their agenda to include issues such as age of consent, rape, marriage, prostitution, and more. While their stances on these issues may

⁸⁷ Peter Kasius, "Social Hygiene Training for Social Workers," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 17, no. 8 (November 1931): 464.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

have changed over time and even conflicted within the group, these activists maintained loyal to promoting the virtue and health of American people. Furthermore, the social hygiene movement greatly advanced age of consent reforms in conjunction with a few other activist groups.

CONCLUSION: THE MODERN SEXUAL CONSENT DEBATE

In 2008, the national age of consent in Canada was raised for the first time in over a century, increasing the age to sixteen years old when it had been previously set at fourteen. This legislative reform was surrounded by heated debate, with female activists on both sides of the discussion. Roz Prober, the leader of an organization against child pornography and sex trafficking (the modern term for “white slavery”), argued in favor of the bill because “a 14-year-old has ‘exploit me’ written all over her forehead... and must be protected from making mistakes.”¹ She also emphasized the new threat of the internet, which provides sexual predators with a fresh method of exploiting teenage girls. Prober and other supporters of the Canadian law emphasized protection of “children” over all else in their campaign.

At the same time, Maria-Belen Ordonez opposed the age of consent bill because she feared it would lead to a loss in sexual agency for teenagers. As a member on the Sex Laws Committee in Toronto and an anthropology professor, Ordonez worried that the law would enforce restrictive gender roles because it was “based on attitudes that stereotype men as aggressors and girls as helpless, ‘feeble-minded’ prey.”² Furthermore, she and other opponents of the bill suggested that it would deter adolescents from pursuing and receiving adequate sexual education and birth control; instead, she believed the higher age of consent would encourage teens to hide their sexual activity, feel ashamed, and neglect sexual health.³ Although opponents of the bill were fighting for

¹ Kaj Hasselriis, “Should the Age of Consent be Raised? A Conservative bill proposing that the age of sexual consent be raised has feminists divided,” *Horizons* (Spring 2007): 6.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 7.

gender equality and sexual freedom, the supporters successfully convinced legislators to pass the law. Since 2008, the same supporters have pushed further, advocating for another increase in the national age of consent to eighteen years old.

Even though higher age of consent laws have become commonplace in the United States and around the world in the twentieth century, their utility and severity is still widely disputed everywhere. Furthermore, the arguments and phrases used by these activists sound exceedingly familiar to those employed by the progressives. It is easy to picture Prober petitioning door-to-door with the members of the WCTU, demanding protection for helpless girls. Ordonez, on the other hand, echoed many of the same concerns that 1920s ERA supporters held about the age of consent, such as restrictions on young women's sexual agency and uneven gender standards. Also, while the gender expectations, social interactions, and sexual norms have changed over the last century, the population sharing Ordonez's apprehensions has grown, resulting in a push to lower the age of consent in some developed countries, especially the United Kingdom and Canada.⁴ Female moral reformers of the Progressive Era expressed interest in another issue that has recently resurfaced: marital rape. This concept did not legally exist in the reformers' time and took until the 1990s to gain formal legal recognition in the United States.⁵ Today, this issue as well as the wider campaign to raise awareness about all types of rape remain central to political conversations involving feminist reformers.

⁴ For more information on the debate over lowering the age of consent, see Sarah Beresford, "The Age of Consent and the Ending of Queer Theory," *Laws* 3, no. 4 (October 2014): 759-779, doi: 10.3390/laws3040759.

⁵ "Intercourse with Wife Under Age of Consent," *Harvard Law Review* 34, no. 1 (November 1920): 92; Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 282-284.

Reformers in the Progressive Era, including numerous women, often worked together to pursue their goals, especially when it came to pursuing age of consent reform. These women demonstrated to the country and themselves that they possessed significant political power, even without the vote or elected office. Taken together, the WCTU, woman's suffrage organizations, and the Social Purity Movement were a remarkable example of this cooperation. Nevertheless, these progressive reformers possessed polarizing opinions on some matters like the ERA or eugenics. Such disagreements proved that these groups were not uniform in their convictions. While the WCTU stressed Christian, motherly responsibility and protection, suffragists argued in favor of whatever would promote equal rights (though they disagreed upon approaches to this issue even amongst themselves). Social hygienists, however, attempted to support both equal rights and protection, basing their arguments upon science and Christian values. At times, these divergences in opinion caused conflicts between the groups and made it difficult for them to stay united on the issue of age of consent.

Despite their disagreements, these three groups consistently agreed on the objective of making the world a better place for women to grow up, work, voice their ideas, and raise children. During the Progressive Era, the suffragists, temperance workers, and social hygienists believed that increasing the age of consent was one step they could take toward their common goal. Often, these three groups also recognized that, even with their differences, working together would improve the likelihood of achieving their objective. In the end, most reformers questioned whether the higher age of consent was as effective as they had hoped, but they never abandoned what they perceived as their moral purpose.

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