Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women’s Welfare Activism, 1890–1945

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One of the pleasures of historical scholarship is that it may lead into unexpected paths, and what begins as a frustration—say, from an apparent shortage of sources—may end as a new opening. This essay began as an attempt to examine gender differences in visions of public welfare among reformers. Having compiled material about women welfare activists who were mainly white, I found I could not distinguish the influence of gender from that of race in their perspectives. (Indeed, to many white historians, the racial characteristics of the white people we studied were invisible until we began to learn from minority historians to ask the right questions.) So I set up a comparison between Black and white women welfare activists, with results that were illuminating about both groups. Three major areas of difference between Black and white women’s ideas emerged: first, about the nature of entitlement, between a Black orientation toward universal programs, and a white orientation toward supervised, means-tested ones; second, in attitude toward mothers’ employment; third, in strategies for protecting women from sexual exploitation. In what follows I want both to show how those differences were manifest and to suggest their roots in historical experience.¹

Several historians have recently studied Black women’s civic contributions, but Black women’s reform campaigns have not usually been seen as part of welfare history. How many discussions of settlement houses include Victoria Earle Matthews’s White Rose Mission of New York City, or Margaret Murray Washington’s Elizabeth Russell Settlement at Tuskegee, Alabama, or Janie Porter Barrett’s Locust Street Social Settlement in Hampton, Virginia, or Eugenia Burns Hope’s Neighborhood Union in Atlanta, Georgia, or many others? In examining this activism from a welfare history perspective I came to understand how the standard welfare histories had been by definition white-centered. It was possible to make the widespread welfare reform activity of minority women visible only by changing the definition of the topic and its periodization.²

The white experience has defined the very boundaries of what we mean by welfare. Whites were by 1890 campaigning for government programs of cash relief and of regulation such as the Pure Food and Drugs Act and anti-child-labor laws. These welfare programs had racial content, not only in the perspectives of the reformers (white) but also in the identification of their objects (largely the immigrant working class, which, although white, was perceived as racially different by turn-of-the-century reformers). The programs also had class content, visible, for example, in their rejection of traditional working-class cooperative

benevolent societies. Moreover, because of these orientations, welfare in the late nineteenth century was increasingly conceived as an urban reform activity.3

By contrast African Americans, still concentrated in the South and in rural communities, had been largely disfranchised by this time, and even in the North had much less power than whites, certainly less than elite whites, to influence government. Southern states had smaller administrative capacities and were more paltry in their provision of public services, even to whites. African Americans did campaign for governmental programs and had some success; at the federal level, they had won an Office of Negro Health Work in the United States Public Health Service, and they had gotten some resources from the extension programs of the United States Department of Agriculture. Nevertheless, Black welfare activity, especially before the New Deal, consisted to a great extent of building private institutions. Black women welfare reformers created schools, old people’s homes, medical services, community centers. Attempting to provide for their people what the white state would not, they even raised private money for public institutions. For example, an Atlanta University study of 1901 found that in at least three southern states (Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia) the private contribution to the Negro public schools was greater than that from tax moneys.4 For example, a teacher in Lowndes County, Alabama, appealed for funds in 1912.

Where I am now working there are 27,000 colored people. . . . In my school district there are nearly 400 children. I carry on this work eight months in the year and receive for it $290, out of which I pay three teachers and two extra teachers. The State provides for three months’ schooling. . . . I have been trying desperately to put up an adequate school building for the hundreds of children clamoring to get an education. To complete it . . . I need about $800.5

Thus a large proportion of their political energy went to raising money, and under the most difficult circumstances—trying to collect from the poor and the limited middle class to help the poor. White women raised money, of course, but they also lobbied aldermen and congressmen, attended White House conferences, and corresponded with Supreme Court justices; Black women had less access to such powerful men and spent proportionally more of their time organizing bake sales, rummage sales, and church dinners. One detailed example may illustrate this: the Gate City Kindergartens, established in Atlanta in 1905.

Another method of raising funds was through working circles throughout the city. . . . From Bazaars held at Thanksgiving time, lasting as long as a week, when every circle was responsible for a day, one day of which a turkey dinner was served. Money was made by sales in items of fancy work, aprons, etc., canned fruit, cakes and whatever could be begged. The association realized as much as $250.00 at a Bazaar. From track meets sponsored by colleges, and participated in by the children of the public school, $100.00 gate receipts were cleared. Food and cake sales brought at times $50.00. April sales brought $50.00, and one time the women realized as much as $100.00 from the sale of aprons. Sales of papers, magazines and tin foil brought as much as $50.00. A baby contest brought $50.00. Intercollegiate contest brought $100. Post-season baseball games realized as much as $25.00. Sales of soap wrappers, soap powder wrappers, saved and collected from housewives, and baking powder coupons brought $25.00. . . . [the list is twice this long]

It cost twelve hundred dollars in cash to maintain the kindergartens each year. In addition donations in kind were vital: all five kindergartens were housed in donated locations; clothes
were constantly solicited for the needy children; for several years Procter & Gamble gave five boxes of Ivory soap annually. Some Black welfare activists were adept at raising white money but had to accept sometimes galling strings, and even the most successful tried to shift their economic dependence to their own people. No doubt some of these money-raising activities were also pleasurable and community-building social occasions, but often they were just drudgery, and those doing the work hated it. Jane Hunter, a Cleveland Black activist, wrote that “this money getting business destroys so much of ones real self, that we cannot do our best.”

This essay uses a limited comparison—between Black and white women reformers—to alter somewhat our understanding of what welfare is and to bring into better visibility gender and race (and class) influences on welfare thinking. The essay uses two kinds of data: written and oral history records of the thoughts of these activists, and a rudimentary collective biography of 145 Black and white women who were national leaders in campaigns for public welfare between 1890 and 1945. This method emerges from the premise expressed by the feminist slogan, “The personal is political”: that political views and activities are related not only to macroeconomic and social conditions but also to personal circumstances—such as family experiences and occupational histories.

My approach uses a broad definition of welfare. I include reformers who sought regulatory laws, such as the Pure Food and Drugs Act, compulsory education, and anti-child-labor regulations. I do not include reformers who worked mainly on labor relations, civil rights, women’s rights, or a myriad of other reform issues not centrally related to welfare. In categorizing many different activists, I had to ignore many differences in order to make broad generalization possible. This method inevitably obscures context and some fascinating personalities. Many more monographs are necessary, but I notice that historical thinking develops through a constant interplay between monographs and syntheses; I hope that this essay, because of its very breadth, will stimulate more monographs.

I did not form this sample according to a random or other formal selection principle. Instead I identified members of my sample gradually during several years of research on welfare campaigns and then tracked down biographical information. The process is a historian’s form of snowball sampling, because often tracking down one activist produces references to another. Naturally, there are many bits of missing information because biographical facts are difficult to find for many women, especially minority women. I make no claim to having created a representative sample or an exhaustive list. But, on the methodological principle of saturation, I doubt that my generalizations would be much altered by the addition of more individuals.

To bound my sample, I included only those who were national leaders—officers of national organizations campaigning for welfare provision or builders of nationally important institutions, such as hospitals, schools, or asylums. (For more on the sample, see the Appendix.) These leaders were not typical welfare activists; more typical were those who worked exclusively locally, and their personal profiles might be quite different. But the national leaders had a great deal of influence on the thinking of other women. I included only activists prominent chiefly after 1890 because it was in the 1890s that such key national organizations as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) began and that white women welfare activists began a marked emphasis on public provision. I followed welfare activism until 1945 because I wanted to look at broad patterns of ideas across a long period of policy debate; I ended in 1945 because after that date, among white women, there was a marked decline in such agitation, and among Blacks, a shift in emphasis to civil rights.

My approach sacrifices, of course, change over time. Substantial generational as well
as individual differences among women had to be put aside. For example, the early Black activists were, on average, more focused on race uplift and the later more on integration; during this period the mass northward migration of Blacks shifted reformers’ concerns not only away from the South but also increasingly toward urban problems. The white women welfare activists of the 1890s tended to divide between Charity Organization Society devotees and settlement advocates; by the 1930s, they were more united in promoting professionalism in public assistance. Nevertheless, I am convinced that there are enough continuities to justify this periodization, continuities that will emerge in the discussion below.

The two groups thus formed were in many ways not parallel. For example, the white women were mainly from the Northeast or Midwest, and there were few southern white women—only sixteen percent of the group were either born or active in the South, whereas a majority of the Black women were born in the South. For another example, many of the Black women were educators by occupation, while white women who were educators were few. But these divergences are part of what I am trying to identify, part of the differences in Black and white women’s perspectives. Among whites, northerners contributed more to national welfare models than did southerners. And education had particular meanings for African Americans and was integrated into campaigns for the welfare of the race in a distinctive way. Generalizing among a variety of women of several generations, the comparison naturally eclipses some important distinctions, but it does so to illuminate others that are also important.11

I identified sixty-nine Black women as national leaders in welfare reform. Separating the white from the Black women was not my decision: the networks were almost completely segregated. First, the national women’s organizations were segregated; those that included Blacks, such as the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), had separate white and Black locals. Second, since Black women rarely held government positions, they rarely interacted with white women officially. Third, the national network of white women reformers usually excluded Black women even when they could have been included.12 The exclusion of Black women from the white women’s clubs and the ignoring or trivializing of life-and-death Black issues, such as lynching, have been amply documented.13 To cite but one example, one of the most important women in the New Deal—Mary McLeod Bethune—was not a part of the tight, if informal, caucus that the white New Deal women formed.14 There were important counterexamples, interracial efforts of significant impact, particularly local ones: in Chicago, for instance, white settlement and charity workers joined Black reformers in campaigning for public services for dependent children, establishing the Chicago Urban League, and responding to the 1919 race riot. In the South interracial efforts arose from evangelical religious activity. Some white members of this sample group worked with the Commission of Interracial Cooperation, forming its Women’s Council, which had 805 county-level groups by 1929.15 The national YWCA became a forum for communication between Black and white women. But these efforts were marked by serious and sometimes crippling white prejudice, and the core networks of women remained segregated.

While the Black group was created in part by white racism, it was also created from the inside, so to speak, by personal friendships. Often these relationships were born in schools and colleges and continued thereafter, strengthened by the development of Black sororities after 1908. The creation of national organizations and networks extended relationships and ideas among these Black women leaders across regional boundaries. For example, the Phillis Wheatley Home for the protection of single Black urban women, established by Jane Hunter in Cleveland in 1911, spurred the opening of similar homes in Denver, Atlanta,
Seattle, Boston, Detroit, Chicago, Greenville, Winston-Salem, Toledo, and Minneapolis by 1934. When Fannie Barrier Williams spoke in Memphis in 1896, she had never been in the South before, having grown up in upstate New York and settled in Chicago. More and more the women began to travel widely, despite the difficult and humiliating conditions of travel for Black women. Friendships could be intense, despite distance; Black women early in the twentieth century, like white women, sometimes spoke openly of their strong emotional bonds. Darlene Clark Hine quotes Jane Hunter writing Nannie Burroughs, "It was so nice to see you and to know your real sweet self. Surely we will ... cultivate a lasting friendship. I want to be your devoted sister in kindred thought and love." At other times Hunter wrote to Burroughs of her loneliness "for want of a friend." Mutual support was strong. When in the 1930s the president and trustees of Howard University, led by Abraham Flexner, tried to force Howard's dean of women, Lucy D. Slowe, to live on campus with her girls (something the dean of men was not, of course, required to do) and she refused to comply, a whole network of women interceded on her behalf. A group of five asked for a meeting with Flexner, which he refused. Another group of women interviewed trustees in New York and reported to Slowe their perceptions of the situation. Mary McLeod Bethune urged her to be "steadfast" and campaigned for her among sympathetic Howard faculty. The network was divided by cliques and encompassed conflicts and even feuds. Yet it had a "bottom line" of loyalty. Even those who criticized Bethune for insufficient militance understood her to be absolutely committed to the network of Black women.

The Black women's network was made more coherent by its members' common experience as educators and builders of educational institutions. Education was the single most important area of activism for Black women. The majority of women in this sample taught at one time or another, and thirty-eight percent were educators by profession. For many, reform activism centered around establishing schools, from kindergartens through colleges, such as Nannie Burroughs's National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C., or Lucy Laney's Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia, or Arena Mallory's Saints' Industrial and Literary Training School in Mississippi. In his 1907 report on economic cooperation among Negro Americans, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois counted 151 church-connected and 161 nonsectarian private Negro schools. Although he did not discuss the labor of founding and maintaining these institutions, we can guess that women contributed disproportionately.

Another Black welfare priority was the establishment of old people's homes, considered by Du Bois the "most characteristic Negro charity." These too, according to the early findings of Du Bois, were predominantly organized by women. But if we were to take the period 1890 to 1945 as a whole, the cause second to education was health. Black hospitals, while primarily initiated by Black and white men, depended on crucial support from Black women. Between 1890 and 1930, African Americans created approximately two hundred hospitals and nurse-training schools, and women often took charge of the community organizing and fund-raising labor. Over time Black women's health work changed its emphasis, from providing for the sick in the 1890s to preventive health projects after about 1910. Yet even in the first decade of the century, Du Bois found that most locations with considerable Black populations had beneficial and insurance societies that paid sickness as well as burial benefits; these can be traced back a century before Du Bois studied them. In several cities the societies also paid for medicines and actually created their own health maintenance organizations (HMOs). With the dues of their members they hired physicians, annually or on a quarterly basis, to provide health care for the entire group.

Many women's clubs made health work their priority. The Washington, D.C., Colored YWCA built a program around visiting the sick. The Indianapolis Woman's Improvement
Club focused on tuberculosis, attempting to make up for the denial of service to Blacks by the Indianapolis board of health, the city hospital, and the Marion County tuberculosis society. The preventive health emphasis was stimulated in part by educational work. For example, Atlanta's Neighborhood Union did a survey of conditions in the Black schools in 1912 to 1913 that revealed major health problems; in 1916 this led the Neighborhood Union to establish a clinic that offered both health education and free medical treatment. Possibly the most extraordinary individual in Black women's public health work was Modjeska Simkins, who used her position as director of Negro work for the antituberculosis association of South Carolina to inaugurate a program dealing with the entire range of Black health problems, including maternal and infant mortality, venereal disease (VD), and malnutrition as well as tuberculosis. Perhaps the most ingenious women's program was Alpha Kappa Alpha's Mississippi Health Project. These Black sorority women brought health care to sharecroppers in Holmes County, Mississippi, for several weeks every summer from 1935 to 1942. Unable to rent space for a clinic because of plantation owners' opposition, they turned cars into mobile health vans, immunizing over 15,000 children and providing services such as dentistry and treatment for malaria and VD for 2,500 to 4,000 people each summer.23

These reformers were united also through their churches, which were centers of networking and of activism, in the North as well as the South. Indeed, more locally active, less elite Black women reformers were probably even more connected to churches; the national leadership was moving toward more secular organization, while remaining more church-centered than white women welfare leaders. Black churches played a large role in raising money, serving in particular as a conduit for appeals for white money, through missionary projects.24

The YWCA also drew many of these women together. Victoria Matthews's White Rose Mission influenced the YWCA, through its leader Grace Dodge, to bring Black women onto its staff, which experience groomed many Black women leaders.25

And despite the fact that these were national leaders, they shared a regional experience. At least fifty-seven percent were born in the South. More important, perhaps, two-thirds of these migrated to the Northeast, Midwest, and mid-Atlantic regions, thus literally spreading their network as they fied Jim Crow and sought wider opportunity.26

Most members of this network were married—eighty-five percent. More than half of the married women had prominent men as spouses, and their marriages sometimes promoted their leadership positions.27 Lucenga Burns Hope was the wife of John Hope, first Black president of Atlanta University; Irene Gaines was the wife of an Illinois state legislator. Ida Wells-Barnett's husband published Chicago's leading Black newspaper. George Edmund Haynes, husband of Elizabeth, was a Columbia Ph.D., a professor at Fisk, an assistant to the secretary of labor from 1918 to 1921, and a founder of the Urban League. George Ruffin, husband of Josephine, was a Harvard Law graduate, a member of the Boston City Council, and Boston's first Black judge. Most of the women, however, had been activists before marriage, and many led lives quite independent of their husbands. (Of these married women, twenty percent were widowed, divorced, or separated.)

Their fertility pattern was probably related to their independence. Of the whole group, forty-three percent had no children; and of the married women, thirty-four percent had no children (there were no unmarried mothers).28 (In comparison, thirty-one percent of the white married women in this sample were childless.) It thus seems likely that these women welfare activists used birth control, although long physical separations from their husbands may have contributed to their low fertility.29 In their contraceptive practices these
women may have been as modern as contemporary white women of comparable class position.

For most African American women a major reason for being in the public sphere after marriage was employment, due to economic necessity; but for this group of women, economic need was not a driving pressure. A remarkable number had prosperous parents. Crystal Pauset’s father, although born a slave, was principal of a Black academy in Maryland. Elizabeth Ross Haynes’s father went from slavery to ownership of a fifteen-hundred-acre plantation. Addie Hunton’s father was a substantial businessman and founder of the Negro Elks. Mary Church Terrell’s mother and father were successful in business. Most Black women in the sample had husbands who could support them; fifty-one percent of the married women had high-professional husbands—lawyers, physicians, ministers, educators. The women of this network were also often very class-conscious, and many of the clubs that built their collective identity were exclusive, such as the sororities, the Chautauqua Circle, and the Twelve in Atlanta. The fact that about forty percent were born outside the South provides further evidence of their high status, since the evidence suggests that the earlier northward migrants were the more upwardly mobile. In all these respects, this group probably differed from typical local activists, who were less privileged. Yet even among this elite group only a tiny minority—twelve percent—were not employed. To be sure, this economic privilege was only relative to the whole Black population; on average, the Black women’s network was less wealthy than the white women’s. Even those who were born to middle-class status were usually newly middle-class, perhaps a generation away from slavery and without much cushion against economic misfortune. Still, among many white women the first and most important emblem of middle-class status was a woman’s domesticity. One can safely conclude that one meaning of these women’s combining of public and family lives was the greater acceptance among African Americans, for many historical reasons, of the public life of married women.

The Black women’s national network was made more homogeneous by educational attainment, high social status, and a sense of superiority to the masses that brought with it obligations of service. Of the Black women, eighty-three percent had a higher education, comparable to the proportion of white women, and thirty-five percent had attended graduate school. These figures may surprise those unfamiliar with the high professional achievement patterns of Black women between 1890 and 1945. The full meaning of the statistics emerges when one compares them with the average educational opportunities for Blacks in the United States at this time. In the earliest year for which we have figures, 1940, only one percent of Afro-Americans, male and female, had four or more years of college. Moreover, only forty-one percent of the women in this sample attended Black colleges, whereas those colleges conferred eighty-six percent of all Black undergraduate degrees in the period from 1914 to 1936. Several women in this sample who were born into the middle class described learning for the first time in adulthood of the conditions of poverty in which most African Americans lived—an ignorance characteristic of prosperous whites but rarer among Blacks.

As Alfreda Duster, Ida Wells-Barnett’s daughter, recalled, “It was difficult for me to really empathize with people who had come from nothing, where they had lived in cottages, huts in the South, with no floor and no windows and had suffered the consequences of discrimination and the hardships of the South.” Many Black women joined Du Bois in emphasizing the importance of building an intellectual and professional elite, calling upon the “leading” or “intelligent” or “better class of” Negroes to take initiatives for their people. Class and status inequalities, measured by such markers as money, occupation, and skin color, created tensions in this network, as comparable inequalities did in the white
network. Some thought of their obligations in the eugenic terms that were so fashionable in the first three decades of this study. "I was going to multiply my ability and my husband's by six," Alfreda Duster said in describing her decision to have six children. Such thinking had somewhat different meanings for Blacks than for whites, however; reflecting their awareness that race prejudice made it difficult for educated, prosperous Blacks to escape the discrimination and pejorative stereotyping that held back all African Americans. As Ferdinand Barnett, later to become the husband of Ida B. Wells, put it in 1879, "One vicious, ignorant Negro is readily conceded to be a type of all the rest, but a Negro educated and refined is said to be an exception. We must labor to reverse this rule; education and moral excellence must become general and characteristic, with ignorance and depravity the exception."  

Indeed, the high social status and prosperity common in this group should not lead us to forget the discrimination and humiliation that they faced. Their high levels of skills and education were frustrated by lack of career opportunity. Sadie Alexander, from one of the most prominent Black families in the United States, was the first Black woman Ph.D., degree from the University of Pennsylvania. But she could not get an appropriate job because of her color, and was forced to work as an assistant actuary for a Black insurance company. Anna Arnold Hedgeman, one of the youngest women in this sample, from a small Minnesota town where she had attended integrated schools and churches, graduated from Hamline University in St. Paul and then discovered that she could not get a teaching job in any white institution. Instead she went to work in Holly Springs, Mississippi, until she found the Jim Crow intolerable. Despite the relatively large Black middle class in Washington, D.C., African American women there could not generally get clerical jobs in the federal government until the 1940s.

Moreover, this Black activism was born in an era of radically worsening conditions for most Afro-American women, in contrast to the improving conditions for white women. The older women in this network had felt segregation intensify in their adult lifetimes; there was widespread immiseration and denial of what political power they had accumulated after the emancipation. In the 1920s the second Ku Klux Klan attracted as many as six million members. These experiences, so rarely understood by whites, further reinforced the bonds uniting Black women and influenced their welfare visions.

The seventy-six white women, like the Blacks, constituted a coherent network. Most of them knew each other, and their compatibility was cemented by a homogeneous class, religious, and ethnic base. Most had prosperous, many even prominent parents; virtually all were of north European, Protestant backgrounds, from the Northeast or Midwest. The nine Jewish members were hardly representative of Jewish immigrants: five had wealthy German-Jewish parents (Elizabeth Brandeis Rauhenbush, Hannah Einstein, Josephine and Pauline Goldmark, and Lillian Wald). There were three Catholics (Josephine Brown, Jane Hoey, and Agnes Regan), but they were hardly typical of Catholics in the United States in the period: they were all native-born of prosperous parents. The shared Protestantism of the others was more a sign of similar ethnic background than of avid religious commitment, for few were churchgoers or intense believers, and churches did not organize their welfare activities.

The great majority (eighty-six percent) were college-educated, and sixty-six percent attended graduate school. By contrast, in 1920 fewer than one percent of all American women held college degrees. It is worth recalling, however, that eighty-three percent of the Black women were college-educated, and their disproportion to the Black population...
as a whole was even greater. The white women had attended more expensive, elite schools; thirty-seven percent had graduated from one of the New England women's colleges.

The white women had even more occupational commonality than the Blacks. The great majority were social workers. To understand this correctly we must appreciate the changing historical meanings of social work. Prior to the Progressive Era, the term did not refer to a profession but to a range of helping and reform activity; the word social originally emphasized the reform, rather than the charity, component. Here it is relevant that many had mothers active in social reform. The early twentieth-century professionalization of social work has often been conceptualized as creating a rather sharp break both with amateur friendly visiting and with political activism. The experience of the women I am studying suggests otherwise: well into the 1930s they considered casework, charity, and reform politics as "social work." By contrast to the Afro-American women, very few were educators, a pattern that suggests that creating new educational institutions was no longer a reform priority for white women and that other professional jobs, especially governmental, were open to them.

The whites had at least as much geographical togetherness as the Black women. Sixty-eight percent worked primarily in the New England and mid-Atlantic states—hardly surprising since the national headquarters of the organizations they worked for were usually located there. Moreover, fifty-seven percent had worked in New York City during the Progressive Era or the 1920s. New York City played a vanguard role in the development of public services and regulation in the public interest, and women in the network were influential in that city's welfare programs. New York City settlement houses specialized in demonstration projects, beginning programs on a small, private scale and then getting them publicly funded. The settlements initiated vocational guidance programs, later adopted by the public schools; they initiated use of public schools for after-hours recreation programs and public health nursing. Lillian Wald, head of the Henry Street Settlement, coordinated the city's response to the 1919 influenza epidemic. The settlements lobbied for municipal legislation regulating tenements and landlord-tenant relations, and milk purity and prices. In 1917 the Women's City Club of New York City opened a Maternity Center in Hell's Kitchen, where they provided prenatal nursing care and education and housekeeping services for new mothers. Expanded to ten locations in Manhattan, this effort served as a model for the bill that eventually became the Sheppard-Towner Act. The Women's City Club provided an important meeting place for many of these women, and it can serve as an indicator of their prosperity: members had to pay substantial dues and an initiation fee, and the club purchased a mansion on Thirty-fifth Street and Park Avenue for $160,000 in 1917.

Some of these white women had been active in party politics even before they had the vote. Some had been in the Socialist Party, and many were active in the 1912 Progressive Party campaign. Most, however, preferred nonpartisan public activism. During the late 1920s and 1930s they became more active in political parties, and transferred their allegiances to the Democratic Party. Here too New York was important, because the political figure who most attracted these women to the Democrats was Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his governorship and then his presidency. Several women who had been active in reform in the city, notably Belle Moskowitz, Rose Schneiderman, and Eleanor Roosevelt, took on statewide roles. The Al Smith campaign of 1928 promoted more division than unity, however, because most women social workers were critical of his "wet" positions and his association with machine politics. The reassuring presence of his aide Moskowitz and Franklin Roosevelt's "aide" Eleanor Roosevelt was critical in bringing their network into the Democratic Party.
The Black network also underwent a political realignment from Republican to Democratic, but with different meanings, largely associated with migration northward, because the southern Democratic party was essentially closed to Blacks. Ironically, this transition was also in part effectuated by Eleanor Roosevelt, who became the symbol of those few white political leaders willing to take stands on racial equality. Nevertheless Eleanor Roosevelt did not create an integrated network, nor was she able to swing the white network to support the leading Black demand during the Roosevelt administration: a federal antilynching law.

Women in both networks taught, mentored, even self-consciously trained each other. Among Blacks this occurred in colleges, in white-run organizations such as the YWCAs, and in Black organizations such as sororities, the National Association of Colored Women, and many local groups. A higher proportion of the white than of the Black women worked in settlement houses—probably partly because so many of the white women were single. That experience strongly encouraged intergenerational connections and intimacy, because the younger or newer volunteers actually lived with their elders, seeing them in action. In the civic organizations, leaders groomed, protected, and promoted their protégées: Jane Addams did this with Alice Hamilton, Lillian Wald, and Florence Kelley; Sophonisba Breckinridge launched her student Grace Abbott’s career by placing her at the head of the newly formed Immigrants’ Protective League; the whole network campaigned for Abbott and then for Frances Perkins to become secretary of labor. Such involvements continued when network members became federal or state officials, with other members as their employees. The chiefs of the Children’s and Women’s bureaus—the two key federal agencies run by women—exercised extraordinary involvement in the personal lives of their employees. Mary Anderson, for example, head of the Women’s Bureau, corresponded frequently with her employees in other parts of the country about their family lives, advising them, for example, about the care of aging parents.

It is quite possible that Black women’s personal and professional support networks were just as strong; there is less evidence because, as several historians of African American women have suggested, Black women left fewer private papers than did white. Given this caveat, the white women’s network does appear to differ in one measure of mutual dependence. The great majority of the white women were single—only thirty-four percent had ever been married, and only eighteen percent remained married during their peak political activity (forty-two percent of those who ever married were divorced, separated, or widowed). Only twenty-eight percent had children. In this respect they are probably quite different from many local welfare activists, a group that included less elite and more married women. Moreover, twenty-eight percent were in relationships with other women that might have been called “Boston marriages” a few decades before. (My figure is a conservative one since I counted only those women for whom I could identify a specific partner. It does not include such women as Edith Rockwood who lived until her death in 1953 with Marjorie Heseltine of the Children’s Bureau and Louise Griffith of the Social Security Agency and who built and owned a summer house jointly with Marion Crane of the Children’s Bureau.) At the time these relationships were mainly not named at all, although Mary (“Molly”) Dewson referred to her mate as “partner.” Contemporaries usually perceived them as celibate. Today some of these women might be called lesbian, but there is much controversy among historians as to whether it is ahistorical to apply the word to that generation, a controversy I wish to avoid here since it is not relevant to my argument. What is relevant is not their sexual activity but their dependence on other women economically, for jobs; for care in grief, illness, and old age; for vacation companionship; for every conceivable kind of help. Despite their singleness, their efforts were very much directed to family and
child welfare. It is remarkable to contemplate that so many women who became symbols of matronly respectability and asexual "social motherhood" led such unconventional private lives.

Moreover, they turned this mutual dependency into a political caucus. When lesbian history was first being written, these relationships between women were seen, first, in exclusively private and individual terms, and, second, as a life-style that isolated them from the heterosexual social and cultural mainstream. Recently, Estelle Freedman and Blanche Wiesen Cook have helped change that paradigm. The women's female bonding did not disadvantage them but brought them political power, and they got it without making the sacrifices of personal intimacy that men so often did. Privileged women that they were, several of them had country homes, and groups would often weekend together; we can be sure that their conversation erased distinctions between the personal and the political, between gossip and tactics.

In truth we do not know how different these white women's relationships were from Black women's. Many Black married women, such as Bethune and Charlotte Hawkins Brown, lived apart from their husbands (but so did several white women counted here as married, such as Perkins); and a few Black women, such as Dean Lucy Slow of Howard, lived in Boston marriages. Many Blacks in this sample spoke critically not only of men but of marriage, and feared its potential to demobilize women. Dorothy Height lamented that the "over-emphasis on marriage has destroyed so many people."

Both white and Black women, if single, experienced a sense of betrayal when a friend married; and both, if about to marry, feared telling their single comrades. In time, particularly from the 1930s on, the white women's sense that marriage and activity in the public sphere were incompatible choices diminished, and more married activists appeared.

This change, however, only makes it the more evident that throughout the period, Black women had greater willingness, necessity, or ability to combine marriage and public activism, through coping strategies that may have included informal marital separations.

The white women's friendship network was particularly visible among the most prominent women because they took it with them to their prominent and well-documented jobs. Their friendships transcended boundaries between the public and private sectors, between government and civic organization. In this way they created what several historians have begun calling a "women's political culture"—but again we must remember that this concept has referred primarily to white women. The powerful settlement houses, Hull House and the Henry Street Settlement, for example, became virtually a part of municipal government and were able to command the use of tax money when necessary. When women gained governmental positions, there was as much extra-agency as intra-agency consultation and direction. In its first project, collecting data on infant mortality, the Children's Bureau used hundreds of volunteers from this organizational network to help. In 1920, Florence Kelley of the National Consumers' League (NCL) listed investigations the Women's Bureau should undertake, and these were done. Mary Anderson of the Women's Bureau arranged for the NCL to draft a bill for protection of female employees for the state of Indiana, and Anderson herself wrote comments on the draft. In 1922 Anderson wrote Mary Dewson of the NCL, asking her to tone down her critical language about the National Woman's Party, and Dewson complied; in 1923 Dewson asked Anderson to help her draft a response to the National Woman's Party that was to appear in the Nation under Dewson's name.

Such cooperation continued throughout the New Deal. A good example was the Women's Charter, an attempt made in 1936, in response to the increased intensity of the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), to negotiate a settlement between the two sides of the women's movement. An initial meeting was attended by representatives of the usual
white women's network civic organizations—YWCA, League of Women Voters, Women's Trade Union League, American Association of University Women (AAUW), Federation of Business and Professional Women—as well as several state and federal government women. The first draft of the charter was written by Anderson, still head of the Women's Bureau; Frieda Miller, then head of the women's section of the New York State Department of Labor; Rose Schneiderman, formerly of the National Recovery Administration (until the Supreme Court overruled it) and soon to become head of the New York State Department of Labor; and Mary Van Kleeck. The drafting of the charter exemplifies two of the findings regarding this network: the importance of New York and the predominance of single women.\(^\text{57}\)

Singleness did not keep these women from useful connections with men, however. These connections came with kinship and class, if not with marriage. Clara Beyer got her "in" to the network because Felix Frankfurter recommended her to administer the 1918 District of Columbia minimum wage law. She then brought in Elizabeth Brandeis, the daughter of Louis Brandeis, to share the job with her. Brandeis's two sisters-in-law, Josephine and Pauline Goldmark, were also active in this network. Sophonisba Breckinridge, Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, and Katherine Lenroot were daughters of senators or congressmen. Loula Dunn's father and two grandfathers had been in the Alabama legislature. Susan Ware computed, about a different but overlapping group of New Deal women, that almost fifty percent (thirteen of twenty-eight) were from political families.\(^\text{58}\) These women often learned politics in their households, and knew where to get introductions and referrals to politically influential people when they needed them. When Beyer said, "It was my contacts that made [me] so valuable, that I could go to these people," she was speaking about both her women's network and her male connections.\(^\text{59}\)

With these group characteristics in mind, I want to examine the welfare ideas of these two networks.

One major difference in the orientation of the two groups was that the whites, well into the Great Depression, more strongly saw themselves as helping others—people who were "other" not only socially but often also ethnically and religiously. The perspective of the white network had been affected particularly by large-scale immigration, the reconstitution of the urban working class by people of non-WASP origin, and residential segregation, which grouped the immigrants in ghettos not often seen by the white middle class. Much has been written about the arrogance and condescension these privileged social workers showed their immigrant clients. Little has been done to discover the impact of the immigrant population on the reformers' own ideas. The Black/white comparison suggests that ethnic difference between the white poor and white reformers not only discouraged identification but also slowed the reformers' development of a structural understanding of the origins of poverty, as opposed to one that blamed individual character defects, however environmentally caused. Thus into the 1940s, the great majority of the white women in this sample supported welfare programs that were not only means-tested but also "morals-tested," continuing a distinction between the worthy and the unworthy poor. They believed that aid should always be accompanied by expert supervision and rehabilitation so as to inculcate into the poor work habits and morals that they so often (or so the reformers believed) lacked. (And, one might add, they did not mind the fact that this set up a sexual double standard in which women aid recipients would be treated differently and more severely than men recipients.)\(^\text{60}\)

In comparison, Black women were more focused on their own kind. Despite the relative
vilege of most of them, and there was criticism from Blacks of the snobbery of some of these network members, there was less distance between helper and helped than among white reformers. There was less chronological distance, for all their privileges were so recent and so tenuous. There was less geographical distance, for residential segregation did not allow the Black middle class much insulation from the Black poor. Concentrating their efforts more on education and health, and proportionally less on charity or relief, meant that they dealt more often with universal needs than with those of the particularly fortunate, and sought to provide universal, not means-tested, services.

These were differences of degree and should not be overstated. Most of the white men in this sample favored environmental analyses of the sources of poverty. Many black women's groups engaged in classic charity activity. In the 1890s Washington, D.C., black women volunteered to work with the Associated Charities in its "stamp work," a program designed to inculcate thrift and saving among the poor. In the depression of 1893 these relatively prosperous Black "friendly visitors" donated supplies of coal and food staples. The Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, Marilyn Brady found, clung to all the nets of the "cult of true womanhood" except, perhaps, for fragility. As Ena Farley wrote the Boston League of Women for Community Service, "Their patronage roles toward others less fortunate than themselves not only dramatized their relative superiority within the minority structure, but also gave them the claim to leadership and power positions." But these programs must be understood in a context in which the needy were far more numerous, and the prosperous far fewer, than among whites.51

This does not mean that there was no condescension among Black women. Black leaders shared with white ones the conviction that the poor needed training, to develop not only skills but also moral and spiritual capacities. Mary Church Terrell could sound remarkably like a white clubwoman.

To our poor, benighted sisters in the Black Belt of Alabama we have gone and we have been both a comfort and a help to these women, through the darkness of whose ignorance of everything that makes life sweet or worth the living, no ray of light would have penetrated but for us. We have taught them the ABC of living by showing them how to make their huts more habitable and decent with the small means at their command and how to care for themselves and their families.62

Like the Progressive Era white female reformers, the Blacks emphasized the need to improve the sexual morals of their people.53 Fannie Barrier Williams declared that the colored people's greatest need was a better and purer home life—that slavery had destroyed home ties, the sanctity of marriage, and the instincts of motherhood.54

Concern for sexual respectability by no means represented one class or stratum imposing its values on another; for Black as for white women it grew also from a feminist, or womanist, desire to protect women from exploitation, a desire shared across class lines. But this priority had profoundly different meanings for Black women reformers. Not only were Black women more severely sexually victimized, but combating sexual exploitation was for Blacks inseparable from race uplift in general, as white sexual assaults against Black women had long been a fundamental part of slavery and racial oppression. Indeed, Black activists were far in advance of white feminists in their campaigns against rape and their identification of that crime as part of a system of power relations, and they did not assume that only white men were sexual aggressors. The historian Darlene Clark Hine suggests that efforts to build recreational programs for boys also reflected women's strategies for protecting girls from assault. Nevertheless, given the difficulties of affecting change in the aggressors,
many Black welfare reformers focused on protecting potential victims. Many of the earliest Black urban institutions were homes designed to protect working women. Black women’s considerable contribution to the founding and development of the Urban League had such motives. Just as the efforts by white welfare reformers to protect girls and women contained condescending and victim-blaming aspects, particularly inasmuch as they were directed at different social groups (immigrants, the poor), so victim-blaming was present among Black reformers too. The problem of sex exploitation could not be removed from intrarace class differences that left some Black women much more vulnerable than others, not only to assault but also to having their reputations smeared; Black, like white, women defined their middle-class status in part by their sexual respectability. But their sexual protection efforts were so connected to uplift for the whole race, without which the reformers could not enjoy any class privileges, that the victim-blaming was a smaller part of their message than among whites.65

Moreover, despite the sense of superiority among some, the Black women reformers could not easily separate their welfare from their civil rights agitation.66 As Deborah White puts it, “The race problem . . . inherently included the problems of poverty.”67 Race uplift work was usually welfare work by definition, and it was always conceived as a path to racial equality. And Black poverty could not be ameliorated without challenges to white domination. A nice example: in 1894 Gertrude Mossell, in a tribute to Black women’s uplift activity, referred to Ida Wells’s antilynching campaign as “philanthropy.” Several of these women, notably Terrell and Anna J. Cooper, were among the first rebels against Booker T. Washington’s domination because of their attraction both to academic educational goals for their people and to challenges to segregation.68 Those who considered themselves women’s rights activists, such as Burroughs, Terrell, and Cooper, particularly protested the hypocrisy in the white feminists’ coupling of the language of sisterhood with the practice of Black exclusion—as in Terrell’s principled struggle, as an elderly woman, to gain admission to the District of Columbia chapter of the American Association of University Women.

To be sure, there was a shift in emphasis from race uplift and thus institution-building in the first part of this long period of study to the struggle against segregation in the second. But the shift was only visible in overview, because many women activists had been challenging racism from early in their careers. Williams, for example, as early as 1896, insisted that white women needed to learn from Blacks.69 YWCA women such as Eva Bowles, Lugenia Burns Hope, and Addie Hunton struggled against discrimination in the YWCA soon after the first colored branch opened in 1911. Charlotte Hawkins Brown, who was noted and sometimes criticized for her snobbery and insistence on “respectability,” nevertheless “made it a practice, whenever insulted in a train or forced to leave a Pullman coach and enter the Jim Crow car, to bring suit.” At least one lawyer, in 1921, tried to get her to accept a small settlement, but she made it clear that her purpose was not financial compensation but justice.70 Cooper, whose flowery and sentimental prose style might lead one to mistake her for a “soft,” accommodating, spirit, rarely let a slur against Negroes go unprotested. She wrote to the Oberlin Committee against Al Smith in 1928 that she could not “warm up very enthusiastically with religious fervor for Bible ‘fundamentalists’ who have nothing to say about lynching Negroes or reducing whole sections of them to a state of peonage.71

The many women who had always challenged racism made a relatively smooth transition to a civil rights emphasis in their welfare work. There were conflicts about separatist versus integrationist strategies from the beginning of this period, not only in women’s participation in leading Black discourse but also in women’s own projects. For example, Jane Hunter's
establishment of a Black YWCA in Cleveland evoked much Black criticism, especially from those who thought her success in raising white money sprang from her decision not to challenge the white YWCA. Yet most Black women in this network used separate institution-building and antisegregation tactics at the same time. Nannie Burroughs, noted for her work as an educator promoting Black Christian and vocational education, urged a boycott of the segregated public transportation system of Washington, D.C., in 1915.22 (And Burroughs was Hunter's model.) In the 1930s Burroughs denounced the Baptist leadership and resisted its control so strongly that that church almost cut off financial support for the National Training School for Girls that she had worked so hard and long to build. "Don't wait for deliverers," she admonished her listeners. . . . "There are no deliverers. They're all dead. . . . The Negro must serve notice . . . that he is ready to die for justice." The Baptists relented, but Burroughs was still provoking white churchmen a decade later. In 1941 she canceled an engagement to speak for the National Christian Mission because the hierarchy insisted on precensoring her speech.23 "The Negro is oppressed not because he is a Negro—but because he'll take it."24 Bethune, who began her career as founder of a Black college, and was criticized by some for her apologies for segregated New Deal programs, was walking a picket line in front of Peoples Drugs in the District of Columbia, demanding jobs for colored youth, in 1939 even while still at the National Youth Administration.25

Moreover, the greater emphasis on civil rights never eclipsed uplift strategies. From the New Deal on, Black government leaders were simultaneously trying to get more Black women hired, protesting the passing over of qualified Black applicants, and working to improve the qualifications and performance of Black individuals. In 1943 Corinne Robinson of the Federal Public Housing Authority organized a skit, entitled Lazy Daisy, which called upon Black government workers to shed slothful habits.26 Nannie Burroughs in 1950 complained that the average Negro "gets up on the installment plan—never gets dressed fully until night, and by then he is completely disorganized." But that is because, she explained, "He really has nothing to get up to." To repeat: there was for these women no inherent contradiction between race uplift and antidiscrimination thinking.27

These Black welfare activists were also militant in their critique of male supremacy, that militance, too, arising from their work for the welfare of the race. Deborah White has argued that the Black women's clubs, more than the white, claimed leadership of the race for women. Charlotte Hawkins Brown declared her own work and thoughts were just as important as Booker T. Washington's.28 Moreover, their ambitions were just as great as those of the white women: Afro-Americans spoke of uplifting their race; white women described themselves as promoting the general welfare, but only because their focus on their own race was silent and understood. Whether or not these women should be called feminists (and they certainly did not call themselves that), they shared characteristics of the white group that has been called "social feminists"; their activism arose from efforts to advance the welfare of the whole public, not just women, in a context where, they believed, men did not or could not adequately meet the needs.29

Black and white women welfare reformers also differed in their thinking about women's economic role. The white women, with few exceptions, tended to view married women's economic dependence on men as desirable, and their employment as a misfortune; they accepted the family wage system and rarely expressed doubts about its effectiveness, let alone its justice. There was substantial variation within this network and change over time in its members' view of the family wage. There was also substantial contradiction. Beginning in the 1890s, women social investigators repeatedly demonstrated that the family wage did not work, because most men did not earn enough, because some men became disabled,
and because others were irresponsible toward their families. Sybil Lipschultz has shown that between two key Supreme Court briefs written by women in the white network—for Muller v. Oregon in 1908, and for Adkins v. Children’s Hospital in 1923—the grounds for protective legislation changed considerably. The brief for Muller privileged sacred motherhood and treated women’s wage labor as an anomaly that should be prevented; the brief for Adkins argued from women’s weaker position in the labor market and the need for government to intervene because it was not an anomaly. Yet when the women’s welfare network moved away from protective labor legislation toward public assistance or family policy, its recommendations presupposed that the desirable position for women was as domestic wives and mothers dependent on male earnings. The many unmarried women in the network viewed their own singleness as a class privilege and a natural condition for women active in the public sphere, and felt that remaining childless was an acceptable price for it. They were convinced that single motherhood and employment among mothers meant danger. They feared relief to single mothers offered without counseling or employment offered to mothers other than temporarily, because they resisted establishing single-mother families as durable institutions.

This is where the social work legacy is felt. The white reformers were accustomed to, and felt comfortable with, supervising. Long after Jane Addams with her environmentalist, democratic orientation became their hero, they continued to identify with the Charity Organization Society fear of “pauperizing” aid recipients by making it too easy for them and destroying their work incentive—and they feared that too much help to deserted women, for example, would do just this, let men off the hook. They did not share the belief of many contemporary European socialists that aid to single mothers should be a matter of right, of entitlement. Even Florence Kelley, herself a product of a European socialist education, defended the family wage as the appropriate goal of reform legislation. A divorced mother herself, she nevertheless lauded “the American tradition that men support their families, the wives throughout life,” and lamented the “retrograde movement” that made the man no longer the breadwinner. The U.S. supporters of mothers’ pensions envisioned aid as a gift to the deserving, and felt an unshakable responsibility to supervise single mothers and restore marriages and wives’ dependency on husbands when possible. This “white” view was clearly a class perspective as well. A troubling question is unavoidable: Did these elite white women believe that independence was a privilege of wealth to which poor women ought not aspire?

The Black women reformers also held up breadwinner husbands and nonemployed wives as an ideal; Black and white women spoke very similarly about the appropriate “spheres” of the two sexes, equally emphasizing motherhood. The difference I am describing here is not diametric. Lucy D. Slowe, dean of women at Howard, believed that working mothers caused urban juvenile delinquency, and she called for campaigns to “build up public sentiment for paying heads of families wages sufficient to reduce the number of Negro women who must be employed away from home to the detriment of their children and of the community in general.” Personally, many of the married Black activists had trouble prevailing upon their husbands to accept their activities, and some were persuaded to stay home. Ardie Halyard, recollecting the year 1920, described the process:

Interviewer: How did your husband feel about your working?
Halyard: At first, he thought it was very necessary. But afterwards, when he became able to support us, it was day in and day out, “When are you going to quit?”

Dorothy Ferebee’s husband could not tolerate her higher professional status. Isabel Lindsay promised her husband not to work for a year and then slid into a lifelong career by taking a job that she promised was only temporary.
Mixed as it was, acceptance of married women's employment as a long-term and widespread necessity was much greater among Blacks than among whites. Fanny Jackson Coppin had argued in the 1860s for women's economic independence from men, and women were active in creating employment bureaus. We see the greater Black acknowledgment of single mothers in the high priority Black women reformers gave to organizing kindergartens, then usually called day nurseries. In Chicago, Cleveland, Atlanta, Washington, and many other locations, daytime child-care facilities were among the earliest projects of women's groups. Terrell called establishing them her first goal, and her first publication was the printed version of a speech she had delivered at a National American Woman Suffrage Association convention, which she sold for twenty-five cents a copy to help fund a kindergarten. In poor urban white neighborhoods the need for child care may have been nearly as great, and some white activists created kindergartens, but proportionally far fewer. Virtually no northern white welfare reformers endorsed such programs as long-term or permanent services until the 1930s and 1940s; until then even the most progressive, such as Kelley, opposed them even as temporary solutions, fearing they would encourage the exploitation of women through low-wage labor.

Black women decried the effects of the "double day" on poor women as much as did white reformers. They were outspoken in their criticism of men who failed to support families. Burroughs wrote, "Black men sing too much 'I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby.'" But their solutions were different. From the beginning of her career, Burroughs understood that the great majority of Black women would work all their lives, and she had to struggle against continuing resistance to accepting that fact to get her National Training School funded. And most Black women activists projected a favorable view of working women and women's professional aspirations. Elizabeth Ross Haynes wrote with praise in 1922 of "the hope of an economic independence that will some day enable them [Negro women] to take their places in the ranks with other working women." Sadie Alexander directly attacked the view that a married woman's ideal should be domesticity. She saw that in an industrial society the work of the housewife would be increasingly seen as "valueless consumption" and that women should "place themselves again among the producers of the world."

This high regard for women's economic independence is also reflected in the important and prestigious role played by businesswomen in Black welfare activity. One of the best-known and most revered women of this network was Maggie Lena Walker, the first woman bank president in the United States. Beginning work at the age of fourteen in the Independent Order of St. Luke, a mutual benefit society in Richmond, Virginia, that provided illness and burial insurance as well as social activity for Blacks, in 1903 she established the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank. Walker became a very wealthy woman. She devoted a great deal of her money and her energy to welfare activity, working in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Association of Wage Earners, and local Richmond groups. In the context of Afro-American experience, Walker's business was itself a civil rights and community welfare activity; many reformers, including prominently Bethune and Du Bois, believed that economic power was a key to Black progress. The St. Luke enterprise stimulated Black ownership and employment. They opened a Black-owned department store in Richmond, thus threatening white economic power, and met intense opposition from white businessmen; indeed, a white Retail Dealers' Association was formed to crush the store. Several noteworthy businesswomen-activists got rich manufacturing cosmetics for Blacks: the mother-daughter team, C. J. Walker and A'Lelia Walker (not related to Maggie Walker) of Pittsburgh and Indianapolis, and Annie Turnbo Malone of St. Louis. Reformer Jane Hunter was respected not only because of her welfare contributions but also because, once penniless, she left an estate
of over four hundred thousand dollars at her death; as was Sallie Wyatt Stewart, who left over one hundred thousand dollars in real estate.  

These factors suggest considerable differences in orientations (among the numerous similarities) between white and Black women activists, although the preliminary stage of research on this topic requires us to consider the differences more as hypotheses than as conclusions. First, Black women claimed leadership in looking after the welfare of their whole people more than did comparable whites. Because of this assumption of race responsibility, and because Blacks welfare was so indistinguishable from equal rights, Black women emphasized programs for the unusually needy less, and universal provision more, than did white women. Perhaps in part because education was so important a part of the Black women's program, and because education developed for whites in the United States as a universal public service, Blacks' vision of welfare provision followed that model. Among whites, a relatively large middle class encouraged reformers to focus their helping efforts on others, and kept alive and relatively uncriticized the use of means and morals testing as a way of distributing help, continuing the division of the "deserving" from the "undeserving" poor. Among the Black reformers, despite their relatively elite position, welfare appeared more closely connected with legal entitlements, not so different from the right to vote or to ride the public transportation system. Had their ideas been integrated into the white women's thinking, one might ask, would means testing and humiliating invasions of privacy have been so uniformly accepted in programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), over which the white women's network had substantial influence?  

Another difference is the Black women's different attitude toward married women's employment. Most of the white women welfare reformers retained, until World War II, a distinctly head--in-the-sand and even somewhat contradictory attitude toward it: it was a misfortune, not good for women, children, or men; helping working mothers too much would tend to encourage it. Thus they were more concerned to help—sometimes to force—single mothers to stay home than to provide services that would help working mothers, such as child care or maternity leave. Black women were much more positive about women's employment. Despite their agreement that a male family wage was the most desirable arrangement, they doubted that married women's employment would soon disappear, or that it could be discouraged by making women and children suffer for it. In relation to this race difference, it is hard to ignore the different marital status of the majority of the women in the two groups: Most of the Black women had themselves had the experience of combining public-sphere activism with marriage, if less often with children. Perhaps the fact that most of the white women had dispensed with marriage and family, probably largely by choice, made them see the choice between family and work as an acceptable one, oblivious to the different conditions of such "choice" among poorer women.  

Third, Black and white welfare reformers differed considerably about how to protect women from sexual exploitation. Black welfare reformers were more concerned to combine the development of protective institutions for women with an antirape discourse. Among whites, rape was not an important topic of discussion during this period, and in protective work for women and girls, male sexuality was treated as natural and irrepressible. It is not clear how the Black activists would have translated antirape consciousness into welfare policy, had they the power to do so, but it seems likely that they would have tried.  

There were also substantial areas of shared emphases between white and Black women. Both groups oriented much of their welfare thinking to children, rarely questioning the unique responsibility of women for children's welfare. Neither group questioned sexual
"purity" as an appropriate goal for unmarried women. Both groups used women's organizations as their main political and social channels. Both emphasized the promotion of other women into positions of leadership and jobs, confident that increasing the numbers of women at the "top" would benefit the public welfare. Both believed that improving the status of women was essential to advancing the community as a whole. At the same time, both groups, in the 1920s, were moving away from explicitly feminist discourse and muting their public criticisms of what we would today call sexism. Moreover they shared many personal characteristics: low fertility, relatively high economic and social status, very high educational attainment.

These impressions raise more questions than they answer. I wonder, for example, what the relation was between the national leaders and local rank-and-file activists: Were the leaders "representative" of "constituencies"? One might hypothesize that local activists were more often married and less elite, since singleness and prosperity were probably among the factors that allowed women to travel and to function nationally. To what extent were the Black/white differences functions of chronology? White reformers were, for instance, active in building educational institutions in the nineteenth century; by the early twentieth century the institutions they needed were in place. Further research might also make it possible to identify historical circumstances that contributed to these race differences, circumstances such as migration, changing demand for labor, immigration, and its closure.

I approached this evidence as part of a general inquiry into welfare thinking in the United States in this century. In this project I found, as have several other historians, that the white women's reform network—but not the Black—had some influence on welfare policy, particularly in public assistance programs. I have tried to show here that this influence was as much colored by race as by gender. The white women's influence supported the legacies in our welfare programs of means testing, distinguishing the deserving from the undeserving, moral supervision of female welfare recipients, failing to criticize men's sexual behavior, and discouraging women's employment. Black women's influence on federal welfare programs was negligible in this period; indeed, the leading federal programs—old-age insurance, unemployment compensation, workmen's compensation, and the various forms of public assistance such as AFDC—were expressly constructed to exclude Blacks. It is not too late now, however, to benefit from a review of Black women's welfare thought as we reconsider the kind of welfare state we want.95

Appendix

The women in these samples were selected because they were the leaders of national organizations that lobbied for welfare programs (such as the National Consumers' League, the National Child Labor Committee, the National Association of Colored Women, or the National Council of Negro Women), or government officials responsible for welfare programs who were also important advocates of such programs, or builders of private welfare institutions. Women who were simply employees of welfare programs or institutions were not included; for example, educators were only included when they were builders of educational institutions. For the Blacks, this sample of welfare activists overlaps extensively with a sample one might construct of clubwomen and political activists, but not exactly; for example, Ida Wells-Barnett is not here because she must be categorized as primarily a civil rights, not a welfare, campaigner. Among the whites this sample overlaps, somewhat with "social feminists," but those who were primarily labor organizers, for example, are not included.
Some of what appear to be race differences are differences of historical time and circumstance. Thus a study of women between, say, 1840 and 1890 would have included more white women educators (because white women were then working to build educational institutions, as Black women were later) and more white married women (because the dip in the marriage rate among college-educated white women occurred later). Regional differences are also produced by this definition of the samples: a focus on local or state, as opposed to national activity would have led to the inclusion of more western and southern women, for example; women in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic were more likely to be important in national politics because New York and Washington, D.C., were so often the headquarters of national activities.

In order to simplify this list, only a single, general, major area of welfare activism is given for each woman. Because many women were active in several areas, the identifications given here do not necessarily conform to some figures in the text, for example, how many women were social workers or educators. The categories for the white and Black women are not the same. Among the whites I gave more specific identifications to indicate the importance of several key arenas, such as the National Consumers’ League and the United States Children’s Bureau. To use such specific identifications among the Black women would have been uninformative, since virtually all were, for example, active in the NACW. Furthermore, a few Black women participated in such a variety of welfarist activity organized through the NACW, sororities, or other women’s organizations that I could define their major sphere as simply club work.
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Notes

For critical readings of this article in draft I am indebted to Lisa D. Brush, Nancy Cott, Elizabeth Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Jacqueline D. Hall, Stanlie James, Judith Walzer Leavitt, Gerda Lerner, Adolph Reed, Jr., Anne Firor Scott, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Susan Smith, David Thelen, Susan Traverso, Bill Van Deburg, Deborah Gray White, and anonymous readers for this journal. I could not meet all the high standards of these scholars, many of whom took a great deal of time and care with this sprawling essay, but several of them not only offered valuable insights but also saved me from some errors resulting from my venture into a new field, and I am extremely grateful.

1. For a critique of gender bias in existing welfare scholarship and an explanation of the need for further research about the influence of gender, see the introduction to Linda Gordon, ed., Women, the State, and Welfare (Madison, 1990), pp. 9-35.


9. For help in gathering and analyzing biographical data, I am indebted to Lisa Brush, Bob Buchanan, Nancy Isenberg, Nancy MacLean, and Susan Traverso.

10. For a discussion of the definition of welfare, see Gordon, ed., Women, the State, and Welfare, pp. 19-35; and Linda Gordon, "What Does Welfare Regulate?" Social Research, 55 (Winter 1988), pp. 693-30. Child labor is both a welfare and labor reform issue. I have included it here because, for so many women active in this cause, it seemed a logical, even inevitable, continuation of other child welfare activity; opposition to child labor was a much-used argument for mothers' pensions and Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

11. Although my focus is on welfare, a similar predominance of northern whites and southern Blacks occurred.
among the national women’s organizations. For example, Margaret (Mrs. Booker T.) Washington was the first southerner to be head of any national secular women’s group—in her case, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). See Darlene Rebecca Roth, “Matronage: Patterns in Women’s Organizations, Atlanta, Georgia, 1890–1940” (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1978), p. 81. On the integration of education into campaigns for welfare by African Americans, see, for example, Elizabeth Higginbotham, “Too Much to Ask: The Costs of Black Female Success,” ch. 3, “Socialized for Survival” (in Elizabeth Higginbotham’s possession).

12. Of the 69 black women, 5 held governmental positions: Mary McLeod Bethune was director of the Division of Negro Affairs at the National Youth Administration under Franklin D. Roosevelt; Alice Cary was a traveling advisor to the Department of Labor during World War I; Crystal Faust was a state legislator from Philadelphia and race relations advisor to the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal; Hattie Remsperg was assistant to the Treasurer of the New York City commissioners of welfare in 1934. By contrast, 53 percent of the white women held federal government positions, and 58 percent held state positions.


14. These white reformers were not more racist than the men engaged in similar activity and often less. Eight white women from this sample were among the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP): Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, Sophonisba Breckinridge, Mary McDowell, Lillian Wald, and Edith and Grace Abbott.


19. For remarks made about Bethune at the 1938 National Conference of Negro Women White House Conference, praising her for not being satisfied to be the token Black but struggling to increase Black representation in the New Deal, see folder 4, box 1, series 4, pp. 27-28, National Council of Negro Women Papers (Mary McLeod Bethune Museum and Archives, Washington, D.C.).

20. Tullia Brown Hamilton also found this focus on education predominant among the Black women reformers she studied. Tullia Brown Hamilton, “The National Association of Colored Women, 1896–1920” (Ph.D. diss. Emory University, 1978), pp. 43-46. Similarly Roth found that even among Atlanta’s most elite organization of Black women, the Chautauqua Circle, all had been employed as teachers; Roth, “Matronage,” p. 181. Melinda Chatteaurverd found that women graduates of Washington, D.C.’s elite Black Dunbar High School (who outnumbered males two to one around 1910) were overwhelmingly likely to go on to the district’s free Miner Teacher’s College to become teachers; Melinda Chatteaurverd, “The Third Step: Anna Julia Cooper and Black Education in the District of Columbia,” *Sage*, 5 (Student Supplement, 1988), pp.


25. The Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) was segregated, and these activists fought that segregation. Nevertheless, as Dorothy Height points out forcefully in her interview, "It was unmatched by any other major group drawn from the major white population" in the opportunities it offered to Black women; Dorothy Height interview by Polly Cowan, February 11, 1974-November 6, 1976, p. 173, Black Women Oral History Project (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.). See also descriptions of YWCA opportunities in Frankie V. Adams interview by Gay Francine Banks, April 26, 28, 1977, transcript, p. 9, *ibid*.; Salem, *To Better Our World*, p. 46.

26. I could not identify birthplaces for all the women, and those with missing information include some likely to have been southern-born.


29. Black women's overall fertility was declining rapidly in this period, falling by one-third between 1880 and 1910, and southern Black women had fewer children than southern white women. Some of this low fertility was attributable to poor health and nutrition. Moreover, the women in this network were virtually all urban, and the fertility of urban Black woman was only half that of rural Black women. See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985), pp. 122-23. Supporting my view of Black women's use of birth control, see Jessie M. Rodrique, "The Black Community and the Birth-Control Movement," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 138-54. This article offers a convincing criticism of my own earlier work, which overstated Black hostility to birth control campaigns because of its genocidal implications. I also learned from Elizabeth Lasch's unpublished paper that Margaret Murray Washington's settlement at Tuskegee offered a course of study on sex hygiene that included birth control; this suggests
the need for further research on Black women's advocacy of birth control. Lasch, "Female Vanguard in Race Relations," p. 4.

30. I was able to identify 25 percent (17) with prosperous parents.

31. Marilyn Dell Brady found the same marital patterns for Black women reformers in her study of Kansas. Brady, "Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1900-1930," pp. 19-30. The major figures she studied were married and supported by their husbands.


36. In my comments on the class attitudes of Black women welfare reformers, I am mainly indebted to the interpretations of Deborah Gray White, especially in Deborah Gray White, "Fetters of Sisterhood: Class and Classism in Early Twentieth Century Black Women's History," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association, Toronto, November 1989 (in Gordon's possession). See also Williams, "Social Bonds in the 'Black Belt' of Chicago." On Black discrimination against relatively dark-skinned women, see, for example, Nannie Burroughs, "Not Color But Character," Voice of the Negro, 1 (July 1904), pp. 277-79; Duster interview, p. 52; Giddings, In Search of Sisterhood, p. 105; Perkins, Black Feminism and "Race Uplift," p. 4; and Nancy Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR (Princeton, 1983), p. 139. Berkeley argues against the importance of class differences in the NACW, but I found them substantial. See Berkeley, "Colored Ladies Also Contributed." On class development among Blacks, see August Meier and David Lewis, "History of the Negro Upper Class in Atlanta, Georgia, 1890-1958," Journal of Negro Education, 28 (Spring 1959), pp. 128-39.

37. Duster interview, p. 37.


41. Of the white women reformers, 78 percent had been social workers at some time; 68 percent had social work as their major reform area. I checked to see if the social work background could have been a characteristic of the less prominent women, but this was not the case. The most prominent two-thirds of the group were even more frequently social workers (84 percent).


43. Of the white women, 18 percent had held academic jobs at one time; 9 percent were mainly employed as educators. For only 1 percent was education their major reform area.


46. I thank Anne Fieror Scott for pointing out this similarity to me.

47. On settlement house relationships, see Virginia Kemp Fish, "The Hull House Circle: Women's Friendships and Achievements," in Gender, Ideology, and Action: Historical Perspectives on Women's Public Lives, ed. Janet

48. See, for example, Ethel Erickson to Mary Anderson, July 14, 1938, box 1263, Women’s Bureau Papers, RG 86 (National Archives); Anderson to Erickson, August 4, 1938, ibid.; Erickson to Anderson, July 29, 1942, ibid.; Anderson to Erickson, August 1, 1942, ibid.


50. The singleness of the white women reformers was characteristic of other women of their race, class, and education in this period. In 1890, for example, over half of all women doctors were single. Of women earning Ph.D.s between 1877 and 1924, three-fourths remained single. As late as 1920, only 12 percent of all professional women were married. See, for example, Carl N. Degler, At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present (New York, 1980), p. 385. Roth corroborates the significance of marital breaks in the lives of activists, finding that civicly active white women in Atlanta in this period were more likely to be widows. Roth, “Matronage,” p. 182. On Boston marriages, see Micaela di Leonardo, “Warrior Virgins and Boston Marriages: Spinstersdom in History and Culture,” Feminist Issues, 5 (Fall 1985), pp. 47–68.

51. Mrs. Tilden Frank Phillips, memoir, February 22, February 26, 1953, folder 22, Edith Rockwood Papers (Schlesinger Library); will of Edith Rockwood, folder 20, ibid.


54. Slowelved with Mary Burrill, who is treated as a partner in letters to and from Slowel and in letters of condolence to Burrill after Slowel’s death in 1937. See letters in box 90–1, Slowel Papers. Height interview, p. 52.


56. Mary Dewson to Clara Beyer, October 12, 1931, folder 40, box 2, Clara Beyer Papers (Schlesinger Library); Ware interview, pp. 40–42; Janice Andrews, “Role of Female Social Workers in the Second Generation: Leaders or Followers,” 1989 (in Gordon’s possession). The possibility of combining marriage and career had been debated intensely starting in the 1920s, but it was in the 1930s that the change began to be evident. See Lois Scharf. To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression (Westport, 1980).

57. Florence Kelley to Anderson, June 28, 1920, box 843, Women’s Bureau Papers; Anderson to Dewson, August 23, 1920, ibid.; Anderson to Dewson, October 23, 1922, ibid.; Dewson to Anderson, June 1, 1923, ibid. Anderson to Mary Van Kleck, January 8, 1937, folder 22, box 1, Mary Anderson Papers (Schlesinger Library); Judith Sealandere, “Feminist against Feminist: The First Phase of the Equal Rights Amendment Debate, 1923–1963,” South Atlantic Quarterly, 81 (Spring 1982), pp. 154–56. Mary R. Beard participated in the early meeting to draft the charter but did not, ultimately, sign it. I thank Nancy Cott for clarification on this point.


62. Mary Church Terrell, “Club Work among Women,” New York Age, January 4, 1900, p. 1. Although this speech was given in 1900, another given in 1928 uses virtually the same rhetoric. See Mary Church Terrell, “Progress and Problems of Colored Women,” Boston Evening Transcript, December 15, 1928, folder 132, box 102-4, Mary Church Terrell Papers (Moorland-Spingarn Research Collection).

63. For just a few examples, see Elise Johnson McDougald, “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” in The New Negro: An Interpretation, ed. Alain Locke (New York, 1925), pp. 369–84; Mary Church Terrell, “Up-To-Date,” Norfolk Journal and Guide, November 3, 1927, folder W, box 102-2, Terrell Papers; Williams, “Opportunities and Responsibilities of Colored Women”; and many speeches by Slowe, box 90-6, Slowe Papers. See also Perkins, Black Feminism and “Race Uplift.”

64. Williams, “Opportunities and Responsibilities of Colored Women,” p. 150.


71. Anna J. Cooper to A. G. Comings, October 1, 1928, folder 5, box 32-1, Anna J. Cooper Papers (Moorland-Spingarn Research Collection). Cooper was another one of those figures who tirelessly challenged racism even in its apparently small or accidental varieties. For example, she wrote to the Atlantic Monthly complaining about an article mentioning a poor Negro with lice. Atlantic Monthly editors to Cooper, January 31, 1935, folder 5, box 23-1, ibid.


73. Burroughs, speech at Bethel AME Church in Baltimore, reported in “Baptists May Oust Nannie H. Burroughs,” Chicago Defender, (September 9, 1939); “Nannie Burroughs Refuses to Speak on National Christian Mission,” Pittsburgh Courier (February 1, 1941), Burroughs Vertical File (Moorland-Spingarn Research Collection).

74. Burroughs’s 1943 remark is quoted in Lerner, Black Women, p. 552.

76. Corinne Robinson to Jeanetta Welch Brown, with script of Lazy Daisy enclosed, September 22, 1943, folder 274, box 17, series 5, National Council of Negro Women Papers.


79. I am in sympathy with Cott's critique of the use of the concept "social feminism," but it remains descriptive of a widely understood phenomenon, and we have as yet no terms to substitute. Nancy F. Cott, "What's in a Name? The Limits of 'Social Feminism'; or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women's History," Journal of American History, 76 (December 1989), pp. 809-29.


84. Lucy D. Slowe, "Some Problems of Colored Women and Girls in the Urban Process" [probably 1930s], folder 143, box 90-6, Slowe Papers.


86. Dorothy Boulding Ferebee interview by Merze Tate, December 28-31, 1979, transcript, p. 9, ibid.; Lindsay interview, pp. 4-5.


88. The white reformers in the first decades of the twentieth century were campaigning hard for mothers' pensions and feared that daytime child care would be used as an alternative, forcing mothers into poor jobs. But they continued to see mothers' employment as a misfortune. For example, Florence Kelley in 1909 argued that day nurseries should be acceptable only for temporary emergencies and that the social cost of mothers' employment was always too high. "A friend of mine has conceived the monstrous idea of having a night nursery to which women so employed might send their children. And this idea was seriously described in so modern a publication as Charities and the Commons ... without a word of editorial denunciation." Florence Kelley, "The Family and the Woman's Wage," Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction ... 1909, pp. 118-21.

89. Giddings, When and Where I Enter, p. 205.


91. Giddings, When and Where I Enter, p. 196.


93. This orientation toward entitlement was evident despite the southern state governments' relatively smaller size, and it casts doubt on state capacity explanations for reformers' strategies.

94. Although many of the Afro-American women leaders were legally married, it does not necessarily follow that they lived their daily lives in close partnerships with their husbands or carried much domestic labor responsibility.

95. Gordon, "What Does Welfare Regulate?"