Chapter 2

“The Helping Hand”: The Origins and Ideas of Women’s Prison Reform, 1840–1900

Between 1840 and 1900 small groups of women, concentrated in New York, Massachusetts, and Indiana, took up the cause of women prisoners as their special mission. At first individuals merely visited penal institutions. Then, gradually, women formed associations to aid released female prisoners. In the decades after the Civil War, women prison reformers demanded greater authority over public institutions that housed women. And by the end of the century women had joined men as professionals in the growing field of charities and corrections.

In the course of their encounters with prisoners, middle-class women found that the fallen were not as depraved as they had expected. As early as the 1840s some reformers questioned the condemnation of the fallen woman. By the last quarter of the century women had elaborated a new interpretation of female crime that reversed the earlier view. One reformer’s comment reveals the change in public opinion that women sought. “Much is said about the depths to which women may fall,” Rhoda Coffin stated in 1885. “While we always have claimed that women are equal to men, we have never yet admitted the point that she was superior to him in ability to sin or to entangle others.”

The Origins of Benevolent Reform, 1820–60

Looking back over the women’s prison reform movement at the end of the century, Susan Barney offered a simplistic but useful explanation of its origins: “When Elizabeth Fry, in 1815, rapped at the prison doors in England, she not only summoned the turnkey, but sounded a call to women in other lands to enter upon a most Christlike mission.” Elizabeth Fry did provide both a personal example and a set of theories for American women. Although the movement outgrew her voluntary, benevolent methods by the 1860s, it also fulfilled her vision of women’s prison reform. Fry's
career provides a fitting introduction to the questions of why and how nineteenth-century women reached out “the helping hand” to their imprisoned sisters.

Like many of the American reformers who would follow in her path, Elizabeth Gurney Fry (1780–1845) came from a Quaker family with deep commitments to both religion and antislavery. In 1811, after marriage and a conversion experience, Fry became a minister, a position open to her because the Society of Friends believed in the spiritual equality of the sexes. Following a long tradition of prison visiting by Quaker women, Fry entered London’s Newgate Gaol in 1813. There she encountered starving, drunken, partially clothed women, often accompanied in prison by their young children. Although her original mission was religious conversion through prayer, she recognized that alleviating the physical misery of prisoners was necessary for their salvation. Thus she first offered clothing and comfort, and only later, prayer.³

In 1816, when Fry returned to Newgate after bearing and burying several of her children, she found conditions as appalling as before. This jail, one of her biographers has written, “offered an extreme example of how badly the dominant masculine upper class could design and administer a prison.”⁴ Determined to improve it, Fry and her companions obtained permission to experiment with prison reform for women. They established a Ladies Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners at Newgate which organized workshops, Bible classes, and a system of discipline monitored by inmates. They also hired a matron and attempted to aid female prisoners after their release.

Fry’s 1827 treatise, Observations in Visiting, Superintendence and Government of Female Prisoners, furnished the principles that would later dominate American women’s prison reform. She argued that female prisoners could be reformed, elaborated on the methods for doing so, and emphasized women’s responsibility to come to the aid of their fallen sisters. Combining the themes of sisterhood and female superiority, Fry wrote, “May the attention of women be more and more directed to these labors of love; and may the time quickly arrive, when there shall not exist, in this realm, a single public institution [where women] . . . shall not enjoy the efficacious superintendence of the pious and benevolent of THEIR OWN SEX!”⁵

Perhaps it was the strength with which Fry argued for women’s superintendence of female inmates that brought her into disfavor with English authorities, who rescinded her reforms in 1835 for
THEIR SISTERS’ KEEPERS

allegedly making prison life too soft. Perhaps it was simply her loss of status following her husband’s bankruptcy in the late 1820s. Biographer John Kent suggests that Fry lost influence because she had exceeded the limitations society placed on her sex.6

However short-lived her personal involvement, Fry’s followers in England and America benefited from her experience and writings. Americans learned of Fry’s work in the 1820s both from her book and from newspaper and travelers’ accounts.7 Like Fry, Quaker women in American cities, along with evangelical reformers from other denominations, were beginning to visit penal institutions to comfort or proselytize inmates.

The American women who followed in Fry’s path had many individual motives for reaching out to women prisoners. As a group, however, they did share certain historical experiences as well as many social characteristics. Of thirty women active in some type of women’s prison reform in America during the nineteenth century, a majority came from middle- and upper-middle-class Protestant families in the northeastern United States (see table 2). A disproportionate number belonged to liberal sects; almost a third were Quakers and many others were Unitarians. In all of these respects, the prison reformers resembled women abolitionists and feminists.8 Indeed, some women participated in all three movements as well as a variety of other reforms, including temperance, social purity, and pacifism. Abby Hopper Gibbons, Josephine Shaw Lowell, and Elizabeth Buffum Chace, for instance, were each raised in antislavery families and each led two or three reform movements during her life.

Growing up in such families influenced young daughters’ views of themselves as women. Since most of their families could afford to send them to school, many reformers had attended a Female or Friends’ Academy. At school, as at home, they were exposed to the ideology of “true womanhood” which was directed especially at young women of their class. Those who attended all-female institutions or who later joined women’s missionary, benevolent, or antislavery associations experienced the full implications of the separate sexual spheres. As historian Nancy Cott has shown for New England women, these educational and religious “sisterhoods” intensified both female identity and women’s sense of their own mission.9

The work histories of these reformers suggest how they acquired further skills necessary for the type of prison reform Elizabeth Fry recommended. Although trained for domestic tasks, their
socialization as moral guardians influenced many middle-class women to seek suitable work until marriage. The reformers had most frequently been occupied as teachers, and many had been engaged in church-related work as missionaries or Sunday school instructors. A few single women in this group had careers as writers, doctors, or nurses. During the Civil War many of the reformers served as nurses, aides, and administrators in field hospitals and on the home front.

Like most nineteenth-century women, the majority of the prison reformers married, gave birth to an average of four to five children, and experienced the death of one or more children. Several women, including Fry, Gibbons, and Chace, returned to reform shortly after mourning, while others became active when widowed. Traditional women in many ways, only a few actively supported the women's rights movement when it emerged at midcentury. Most, however, publicly expressed their respect for women's contributions to the society and their opposition to the degradation of women in any sphere, but particularly in prisons.

Stressing only common experiences, however, provides too static and homogeneous a profile of the reformers. Women entered prison reform during different decades, during different times in their life cycles, and at different stages in the movement they were creating. From the small steps taken by a few religious women in the 1820s to the opening of the third state reformatory prison for women in the 1890s, women's prison reform changed from private, voluntary benevolence to public, professional work for women. In the process, reformers revised their ideas about fallen women and attempted to transform penal policies toward them.

American women first discovered the plight of female prisoners during a period of religious revival and social reform. The Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s popularized a new, perfectionist theology that held out the possibility of individual and social salvation. As a result, movements for the redemption of sinners, including temperance, prison reform, and moral reform, proliferated in the Jacksonian period.

Although Quaker women had begun to engage in benevolent reforms in the late eighteenth century, large numbers of other Protestant women experienced religious conversion during the Awakening and joined the ranks of social reformers. Religious benevolence offered women an excellent opportunity to fulfill their tasks of moral guardianship. Many believed that through their efforts the
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Note: See appendix B for individual data and biographical sources.
most hardened sinners—drunkards, adulterers, slave owners, and even prostitutes—could be saved.13

Like the men who earlier became "their brothers' keepers" when they proselytized the unconverted through Bible, tract, and temperance societies, middle-class women formed associations to aid the indigent or dissolute. Both the ideology of the separate spheres and women's personal experiences in various sisterhoods encouraged these reformers to aid dependents of their own sex. In the 1820s and 1830s, for instance, female urban missionaries considered widows, orphans, and homeless women to be their special charges, while the female moral reformers dedicated themselves to the unpopular task of uplifting prostitutes.14

Philadelphia Quakers were the first Americans to attend to imprisoned women. Inspired by Elizabeth Fry, they began to visit women inmates at the Arch Street Prison in 1823. A women's prison visiting committee later expanded Fry's work by offering "individual and systematic instruction" to female prisoners to aid their spiritual redemption. The visitors also provided a library, and sewing and writing classes. For inmates who seemed truly penitent they sought "to procure suitable situations . . . in families or institutions."15

In the 1840s Protestant missionaries to New York City's charitable institutions encountered female prisoners during their rounds. Phoebe Palmer, a popular evangelical preacher, and Sarah Platt Doremus, a member of the Tract and Mission societies, found the women incarcerated in the New York City Tombs most in need of their services. Palmer helped organize the Methodist Five Points Mission while Doremus helped found a house of industry for poor women, a women's hospital, a women's missionary society, and a women's old age home. During the same period, members of the New York Female Moral Reform Society tried to convert and uplift young prostitutes both within prison and after their release.16

These scattered efforts at individual moral regeneration took on greater urgency when, in the 1840s, women's crime became the subject of concern to the men who had recently formed the Prison Association of New York (PANY). The male reformers visited the city's penal institutions and, confronted with the "contamination of evil communication" between male and female inmates, wondered whether any reformation could take place of women confined there. In 1845 they reported that "it is a matter of great doubt whether it would not be better for an innocent female to be consigned at once to a brothel . . . [where] she would at least enjoy
the advantage of being able to fly from the approach of corruption at her pleasure."  

Although the men were indignant about sexual license in city prisons, their willingness, even in jest, to commit the fallen woman to a brothel reflected the popular view that she was beyond redemption. In contrast, the women whom the Prison Association asked to form a ladies' auxiliary began to question not only prison conditions, but also the underlying attitudes toward female criminals that perpetuated them. Could reform ever take place, they wondered, given the greater condemnation of the fallen woman?

The New York women who raised this question joined the auxiliary to the Prison Association, called the Female Department, in the same spirit that initially motivated Elizabeth Fry—to encourage religious feelings among female prisoners. In the course of their benevolent activities, they encountered the increasing numbers of immigrant and working women sentenced to city jails. The meeting of these pure women with those the society deemed fallen affected a number of benevolent reformers who began to reconsider the prevailing view, as the early history of the Female Department illustrates.

The leader of the Female Department of the prison association, Abby Hopper Gibbons, came from a Quaker family of very modest means. Her mother was a Quaker minister and her father, Isaac Hopper, devoted himself to abolitionism and prison reform. Abby Hopper had operated a Friends' school in Philadelphia and had taught in New York before marrying James Gibbons in 1833. She belonged to a predominantly black female antislavery society and resigned from the Society of Friends in part because it had disowned her father and husband for their abolitionism.

In 1846 Isaac Hopper encouraged his daughter to join the work of the Prison Association of New York which he had helped found. In its ladies' auxiliary Abby Hopper Gibbons met Sarah Doremus, local authors Catherine Sedgwick and Caroline Kirkland, and a number of women from prominent New York families. These women's lives conformed in many ways to the cultural ideal of true womanhood. Most were married, had large families, and were active in benevolent organizations like the Tract and Mission societies. Even the self-supporting among them maintained the ideal; for example authors Sedgwick, who was single, and Kirkland, a widow, wrote on domestic themes.  

The Female Department decided to open a home for discharged
women prisoners, a halfway house providing shelter, prayer, and training in order to prevent recidivism among drunken, vagrant, and immoral women. A fitting extension of the reformers’ domestic sphere, the home provided a means of expanding these women’s moral guardianship beyond their own families and to the fallen women whom they would receive and nurture.

The campaign for a home for discharged women prisoners had the support of one of the country’s outstanding feminists, Margaret Fuller, then an editor of the New York Tribune. Her insights into the problems of women inmates represented a more radical approach than the New York auxiliary had yet assumed. Fuller provided one of the earliest feminist perspectives on women’s crime when she introduced the theme of women’s victimization by social forces.

Fuller had visited the women’s department at Sing Sing prison in October 1844 when she spoke with the “so-called worst” (whom she compared favorably with the proper women in her Boston classes!). Returning to address the inmates on Christmas Day, she defended the fallen woman. According to William Channing’s memoir of her talk, Fuller explained that “the conduct of some now here was such that the world said:—’Women once lost are far worse than abandoned men, and cannot be restored.’ But no! It is not so! I know my sex better.” The inmates, she suggested, were victims who needed help to overcome the circumstances which had led them to crime: “Born of unfortunate marriages, inheriting dangerous inclinations, neglected in childhood, with bad habits and associates, as certainly must be the case with some of you, how terrible will be the struggle when you leave this shelter!”

Fuller’s views reached the public in a series of articles which appeared in the Tribune in the spring of 1845, coinciding with the campaign for a home for discharged women prisoners. The author reported that the city almshouses and penitentiaries contained shocking sights of mothers with newborn infants, “exposed to the careless scrutiny of male visitors” and to dreary, daily routines without even the pretense of training. At the “gloomiest” institution, the penitentiary, she decried “the want of proper matrons, or any matrons, to take the care so necessary for the bodily or mental improvement or even decent conditions of the seven hundred women assembled here.” Most importantly, she questioned the predominant view that these women were hopelessly fallen. The Transcendentalist and feminist was struck by “how many there are in whom the feelings of innocent childhood are not dead, who need
only good influences and steady aid to raise them from the pit of
infamy into which they have fallen.” Following closely the advice
of Elizabeth Fry’s Observations, she suggested that the first prin-
ciples of the institution should be inmate classification and in-
struction, and a good sanitary system. “We trust,” she wrote, “that
interest on this subject will not slumber.”

A few months later, when the Female Department of the prison
association opened its home for discharged women prisoners,
Fuller published an appeal to New York citizens to support the
endeavor with money and furnishings. Once again, she rejected
the condemnation of fallen women. She addressed her article to
“men, to atone for the wrongs inflicted by men on that ‘weaker
sex,’ who should, they say, be soft, confiding, dependent on them
for protection. [And] to women, to feel for those who have not been
guarded either by social influence or inward strength from that
first mistake which the opinion of the world makes irrevocable for
women alone.” Then, in a twist on the concept of women’s greater
fall, she added: “Since their danger is so great, their fall so terrible,
let mercies be multiplied when there is a chance of that partial
restoration which society at present permits.” Fuller admonished
“people of leisure” to see at first hand the sick and ruined women
at Blackwell’s Island penitentiary and hospital, and to recognize
social responsibility for them. Her article concluded with Thomas
Hood’s poem, “The Bridge of Sighs,” a moral tale narrating the
plight of a fallen woman who, when rejected by family and society,
plunged into a river. The sins of those who had refused to help her,
it preached, were as great as those of the victim.

Gibbons, Sedgewick, and their colleagues who operated the
home for discharged prisoners had, in general, more traditional
views than the feminist advocate Margaret Fuller. They also were
far more actively involved in providing practical services to pris-
oners. Through the home they hoped to prevent the immediate
rearrest of released prisoners who had no family or friends.

The Isaac Hopper Home, named after Gibbons’s father, provided
a refuge for inmates who would forsake smoking, drinking, and
cursing in favor of the domestic pursuits of sewing, laundry, and
religious study. After a month or more of residence, about half of
the inmates were placed in domestic positions, ideally in homes
like Catherine Sedgewick’s, which offered the “favorable circum-
stances and kindness [which] were the means best adapted to save
them from an evil life.”

From 1845 to 1864, the home sheltered 2,961 women, found
placements for 1,083 of them, and deemed only 480 "unworthy or without hope of being reclaimed." The case of one inmate, as told by Caroline Kirkland, expresses the attitudes that reformers often repeated about the influence of the home:

S.C. was considered a hopeless case; but after she had been several months at the Home—too bad to be recommended to a place, yet showing occasionally such encouraging signs that we did not dare reject her—she began to improve so evidently that the records of the House speak of it as an "astonishing change." From having been very violent in her temper, she became, under the influence of kind words and good offices, docile and pleasant. The religious exercises of the Home exerted an influence over her; and the Chaplain at Blackwell's Island expressed his surprise that he had not seen her there for more than a year—a remarkable thing in his experience.23

Kind words, prayers, and a full schedule of domestic tasks transformed thousands of New York City's female prisoners into docile and pleasant women who, no longer resisting the standards of feminine behavior, would be spared the harsh penalties of prison life.

In the course of effecting these transformations, members of the Female Department adopted new attitudes toward women prisoners. In contrast to most prison officials and male reformers, who condemned the fallen woman as a social outcast, these women insisted on removing the stigma that separated them from their fallen sisters. As one of their reports explained, "we would approach the fallen woman, and when all the world turns away with loathing from her misery, we would take her by the hand, lift her from her degradation, whisper hope to her amid her despair, teach her lessons of self-control, instill into her ideas of purity and industry, and send her forth to work her own way upward to her final destiny."24

Once reformers had proclaimed that the fallen could be redirected toward purity, they took issue with the analysis of women's crime that had condemned female prisoners. The women they aided, their reports noted, had not been designing temptresses very often. Rather, many were innocent victims of male seduction. Women drifted astray, they argued, not simply from lust or greed, but through the deception of others. Although "they seem to be what they are . . . by their own perverse choice," reformers asked, "has there in truth been any such deliberate choice—any such insane election!"
Our experience has shown us conclusively that in nine cases out of ten, no choice was ever made, for none was ever offered. Hereditary tendencies have their share, evil associations theirs, temptations, . . . lack of any kindly aid after the first offense, . . . the hard trials of poverty—. . . the passion for drinking.

Given the lives these women had led, the reformers concluded, "How, then, can we be pitiless toward the transgressions of the untaught, the unwarned, the neglected!" As long as the fallen woman retained "a hope of redeeming the past," reformers would treat her "as a woman and as a sister."25

The use of sisterhood to describe the relationship of women prisoners and reformers suggests the influence of the ideology of women's separate sphere. Reformers attempted to dismiss class difference and emphasized the common bond of an innate womanly spirit. Moreover, case histories in their annual reports stressed the leveling influence of the home. In 1849, for example, an upper-class woman and an Irish servant, both seduced and abandoned by upper-class men, were given shelter. The former was "placed on an equal footing" with other inmates, all of whom achieved redemption through penitence and docility.26

Underlying the rhetoric of sisterhood was also the criticism of male behavior and attitudes which would contribute to the formation of the Women's Prison Association (WPA). Annual reports of the Female Department included attacks on the double standard, asking why "so unequal a measure of retribution should be meted out to the man and the woman?" In private correspondence members such as Abby Hopper Gibbons and Catherine Sedgwick occasionally expressed anger toward men's treatment of women.27 Their own experiences working in a male organization may have further influenced the reformers' emphasis on sisterhood. Like women in the temperance and antislavery movements, some members of the Female Department of the PANY chafed against the limitations men placed on their work.

An explicit conflict with men's authority in the 1850s eventually brought New York reformers to assert their independence. Catherine Sedgwick recorded that when the women were discussing the management of their home, a "committee from the men's society appeared" at the meeting "to remind the women that they were but a department." Some of the women "were disposed to stand upon their reserved rights," Sedgwick wrote, and "some modestly hinted that they had privileges as well as responsibili-
ties.” In response to these tensions several women left the PANY and in 1854 formed the autonomous Women’s Prison Association and Home. They raised private funds to support the home and, beginning in 1861, they received a financial contribution from the city, acknowledging the home as a quasi-public institution. Prison visiting continued, both at city jails and state penitentiaries.

Although their reports made no mention of the political movement for women’s rights which had begun at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, the new organization did draw upon its rhetoric. Caroline Kirkland’s fund-raising tract, The Helping Hand, asked privileged women to overcome the gulf between themselves and the fallen of their sex in the following terms:

Among the most precious of Women’s Rights is the right to do good to her own sex; ... Sad it is that [the] fallen woman hopes less from her sisters than from her brothers; ... women should consider themselves as a community, having special common needs and common obligations, which it is a shame to turn aside from under the plea of inability or distaste. Every woman in misfortune is the proper object of care to the happier and safer part of her sex. Not to stretch forth to her the helping hand—not to defend her against wrong and shield her from temptation—is to consent to her degradation and to become, in some sense, party to her ruin.

An important distinction must be drawn between the prison reformers’ appeal to sisterhood and the demand of the women’s rights movement for political equality. Most antebellum prison reformers did not support women’s rights. Like more vehement opponents, such as Catharine Beecher or the vocal antisuffragists of the late nineteenth century, benevolent reformers assumed that women’s power emanated from the moral influence of their separate sphere. In contrast to radical feminists, they did not seek equality in the public sphere; many even prided themselves on remaining outside of politics. These reformers did insist, however, that their feminine values should have equal weight in the society. Neither radical feminists nor antifeminists, their prison reform activities had led them to several prefeminist insights, including a critique of the double standard, a call for solidarity between women, and a commitment to establishing autonomous women’s institutions.

The antebellum women reformers had set the precedent that the
fallen woman need not be an outcast, that she could be uplifted, and that women had the right to direct this work. But, as they were the first to admit, the cause was not yet a popular one. “To solicit public assistance for the prisoner, and especially for the female prisoner,” the WPA lamented in 1855, “is to row against wind and tide.”32 Their own activities, moreover, remained limited to voluntary measures aimed at individual moral regeneration through prison visiting and a halfway house for released prisoners. Only after the Civil War, with the expansion of women’s prison reform, would their sympathies for fallen women lead to alternatives to the neglect of women in prison.

Professional Reformers, 1860–1900

In the decades after 1860 the scattered voluntary efforts to uplift women prisoners expanded into a movement to achieve public authority and professional status for women prison reformers. Building upon the precedents of the antebellum period, particularly the home for discharged women prisoners, postwar activists adopted new methods and added new responsibilities to their reform agenda, including authority on state correctional boards and institutions. By the end of the century they had attained legitimacy for women as professionals in public agencies which cared for female clients.

The Civil War influenced older prison reformers and helped bring more women into the movement. Abby Hopper Gibbons, who had served as a battlefield nurse, continued to work with the WPA but also became receptive to women’s rights and a leader of the social purity movement. In the 1870s she joined forces with Josephine Shaw Lowell to campaign for the establishment of separate women’s prisons in New York, to be run by women.33

Lowell had grown up in one of Boston’s oldest families, surrounded by Transcendentalist and abolitionist luminaries. The widow of war hero Charles Russell Lowell, she helped direct the Women’s Central Association of Relief for the Army and Navy and became an advocate of “scientific philanthropy.” In addition to leading the postwar-charity organization movement in New York, Lowell investigated the conditions of women in jails, served on the state charities board, and argued for women’s control over public institutions. She also supported woman suffrage, the Women’s Municipal League, and the New York Consumers’ League.34
In Massachusetts a group of women had similar experiences during and after the war. Ellen Cheney Johnson, a temperance advocate who had taught domestic skills to women in the slums, founded the New England Women’s Auxiliary Association and raised funds for the U.S. Sanitary Commission. In the process of searching for veterans’ dependents and survivors, she discovered many women virtually unattended in local jails and workhouses. In trying to assist them she met Hannah Chickering, who had become a prison visitor in order to be useful during the war. Chickering founded the Dedham Asylum for Discharged Female Prisoners, a home supported by prominent Boston women, including former WPA member Mary Pierce Poor. In the 1870s both Chickering and Poor served on the Massachusetts Prison Commission and, along with Ellen Cheney Johnson, led a statewide campaign for a separate women’s prison. Johnson later became the superintendent of the institution they succeeded in establishing.

Both wartime social service and religious benevolence motivated a group of midwestern Quakers to enter prison reform during the 1860s. The most active reformer in the Friends community was Rhoda Coffin of Richmond, Indiana. From yet another anti-slavery family, Coffin had originally learned about prison visiting during a trip East in 1858, when she and her husband, Charles, were impressed by the reforms their Quaker acquaintances had undertaken in New York and Philadelphia jails. During the war, influenced in part by a religious revival among Indiana Friends, the Coffins began visiting soldiers’ families and prisoners. Quaker minister Sarah Smith and Chicago prison visitor Elizabeth Comstock, both of whom attended to soldiers and prisoners during the war, inspired the Coffins to launch a prison reform committee in the Indiana Yearly Meeting. Sarah Smith and Rhoda Coffin, like reformers in New York and Massachusetts, first aided women prisoners by establishing the Home for the Friendless in Richmond, Indiana. They also visited state penal institutions and, appalled at the treatment of women, campaigned for the creation of a separate state women’s prison. Like other reformers, after 1870 the Indiana women served as state officials.

These personal experiences of wartime social service and post-war prison reform suggest some of the ways the Civil War influenced American women. During the 1860s thousands of women worked for the state in some capacity—as nurses, charity workers, and clerks, on the battlefield, or in offices. They learned that women could serve competently in the absence of, or alongside,
men. After the war many nurses, administrators, and volunteers were committed to a life of social service, but they did not want to accept subordinate rank or menial tasks.\textsuperscript{37} Like the prison reformers, they sought public and professional roles in which to utilize their skills.

While wartime social service drew some women into prison reform, others entered the public charities movement that resulted from the centralization of social services during the war. Organizations like the U.S. Sanitary Commission facilitated the move away from benevolent, private reform and toward secular, "scientific philanthropy" modeled on the British charity organization movement.\textsuperscript{38} The creation of state boards of charities and corrections provided new opportunities for women reformers to assume public, professional roles.

The entry of Elizabeth Buffum Chace into women's prison reform provides a notable example of how women began to demand official status in the new state agencies that directed correctional institutions. Like other prison reformers, she came from a Quaker, abolitionist family. The Buffum home in Providence, Rhode Island, had been a way station on the Underground Railroad and a meeting place for antislavery proponents. In 1835, several years after her marriage to cotton manufacturer Samuel Chace, Elizabeth Buffum Chace formed the Female Anti-Slavery Society and from 1868 to 1870 was vice-president of the American Anti-Slavery Society.\textsuperscript{39}

The deaths of several of her children left Chace longing for activity, and the women's rights movement influenced her decision to enter public life. Chace had attended the 1850 women's rights convention in Massachusetts and, at the close of the Civil War, her feminist friend Lucy Stone urged her to accept the social responsibilities incumbent on her as an economically secure wife and mother. In response to Chace's doubts about entering public life, Stone advised that she "let the housekeeping take care of itself while you take care of the Republic."\textsuperscript{40} Chace heeded the challenge. In addition to supporting Negro rights, woman suffrage, and higher education for women, she began to visit penal institutions in Rhode Island and to call attention to the problems of female inmates.

At the time, no woman sat on the official state board of control nor on the boards of management which directed most state institutions. Through the Rhode Island Woman Suffrage Association, of which she was president, Chace sent a memorial to the governor
requesting that state charity boards include both sexes.\textsuperscript{41} As a result of her effort, an 1870 Rhode Island act provided for a Board of Lady Visitors to inspect institutions which housed women; the board was not given power to enforce its recommendations. Chace was "rather scornful of the Legislative sop," but served on the new board for several years. In 1876, however, she resigned to protest women's lack of power on the board. "When the State of Rhode Island shall call its best women to an equal participation with men in the direction of its penal and reformatory institutions," she explained, "I have no doubt they will gladly assume the duties and responsibilities of such positions."\textsuperscript{42}

By the time of her resignation, several states had established positions for women in directing charities and corrections. In Connecticut the newly created State Board of Charities (1876) formed a department with female members to supervise state institutions. In New York Josephine Shaw Lowell, who became a member of the State Board of Charities in 1876, began to inspect jails, penitentiaries, and almshouses, with particular attention to methods of caring for young women delinquents. The Massachusetts Prison Commission, established in 1870, legally required female members and was well advanced toward giving women complete control of their own reformatory. By 1888 the Department of Franchise of the Women's Christian Temperance Union recommended that women become directors and visitors for state institutions as one means of taking advantage of any local political power they could achieve on route to suffrage.\textsuperscript{43}

Women's participation in two new national organizations provides another measure of the change from private to public, and from voluntary to professional, prison reform. Through the National Prison Congress (later called the American Prison Association) and the National Conference on Charities and Corrections (NCCC), new middle-class professionals in penal and charitable agencies sought to standardize their methods and to increase both their prestige and their influence on social policy. In each organization women eventually shared in these tasks.

The American Prison Association (APA) was formed in 1870 as a meeting place for reformers, public officials, and prison administrators. Originally called the National Prison Congress, it recommended penal reforms, including the indeterminate sentence, industrial and academic training for inmates, and the creation of specialized institutions for misdemeanants, first offenders, and women.\textsuperscript{44} At its founding meeting, the APA adopted as the last of
thirty-seven principles for a better correctional system that “both in official administration of such a system and in the voluntary cooperation of citizens therein, the agency of women may be employed with excellent effect.” In 1875 Rhoda Coffin delivered the first paper by a female member and in 1896 Ellen Cheney Johnson became the first woman on a standing committee.\textsuperscript{45}

A similar process occurred within the National Conference on Charities and Corrections, the social workers’ professional organization. Between its founding in 1874 and the turn of the century women increased their participation at conferences, offering papers in those branches of the profession that seemed most open to their participation. Among these areas was penology, and women in the NCCC insisted that they were particularly suited for the tasks of preventing female crime and aiding women prisoners. By 1890 the organization officially recognized women’s achievements, citing female membership on almost half of the existing state boards of charities and the increased use of female professional staff in state institutions that cared for women.\textsuperscript{46}

The expansion of women’s prison reform into public and professional life had been fostered by several events of the 1860s. Public officials, faced with the increase in the number of women arrested, convicted, and imprisoned during that decade may have been more willing to entertain women’s ideas about female inmates. Women’s wartime public service contributed to their interest in postwar charities and corrections. Furthermore, although the war had a dampening effect on most reform movements, for women the political aftermath of the war inspired feminist organization. The failure to include woman suffrage in the Fifteenth Amendment resulted in the establishment of two national suffrage associations that publicly questioned restrictions on women’s rights over the next decades. After the war, female prison reformers became more sympathetic to the women’s suffrage movement.

While the political feminists may have had a limited audience between 1870 and 1910, other women, since termed “social feminists,” enjoyed growing support for their efforts to expand female moral guardianship from the home to the society.\textsuperscript{47} Like temperance advocates, social purity leaders, and settlement house founders, the postwar prison reformers believed in women’s separate sphere and superior morality. Even as they entered the public sphere and gained valuable skills by building separate women’s organizations, social feminists continued to argue that women had unique, feminine virtues that should be embodied in social policy.
These principles strongly influenced prison reformers’ attitudes toward fallen women and their growing interest in creating separate women’s prisons.

The Fallen Woman Reconsidered

Ever since Elizabeth Fry first entered Newgate Gaol, women prison reformers had expressed sympathy for the fallen woman and a belief in her capacity for redemption. As nineteenth-century American women argued for a greater degree of public responsibility for women prisoners, they articulated these views more frequently and more publicly. Those who held official positions had a wider forum for their ideas, while others continued to volunteer their criticism of prevailing attitudes toward fallen women.

In speeches and writings, late nineteenth-century prison reformers elaborated on earlier observations that the fallen woman should not be held solely responsible for her crimes. Increasingly, women stressed that societal forces created the problem of woman’s fall. This tendency toward a social, rather than individual, analysis of crime derived in part from the women’s new vantage point as public reformers. In addition, two streams of late nineteenth-century social thought—determinist theories of crime and social feminist views of the relations of the sexes—influenced women’s ideas and gave them credence among both professional colleagues and feminist allies.

A more sympathetic portrait of female criminals first reached the wider public through novels written between 1860 and 1890, when “fictional sympathy for the fallen and interest in their rehabilitation... generally shifted attention from the harlot as temptress of men and befouler of society to the harlot as victim of economic distress and the vice rackets.” Stories by Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Bayard Taylor, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, for instance, suggested that women were driven to crime by urban and industrial life, or by men. Moreover, the fictional fallen women were often rescued by other women, who helped them find Christian redemption and an honest means of support. By 1890 novelists had adopted the theme that fallen women could achieve almost total rehabilitation.48

Women who had participated in antebellum prison reform and those who entered charity and correctional work in the postwar decades shared these new attitudes about fallen women. What is especially interesting about these women’s explanations of
prostitution and other crimes is the way they singled out their own sex as a subculture of the dangerous class. Reversing the older view of women’s greater fall, they argued that women were more victimized and even more capable of reformation than were male criminals.

A number of women prison reformers viewed the fallen woman through the dual perspectives of hereditary thought and feminist sympathies. Josephine Shaw Lowell argued that since criminal tendencies could be inherited, women offenders were not entirely at fault for their sins; furthermore, environmental conditions, if properly manipulated, might subdue them. Thus Lowell told the 1879 meeting of the NCCC that “the community itself is responsible for the existence of such miserable, wrecked specimens of humanity” as the women and children who filled state almshouses. “Circumstances make the criminal,” Ellen Cheney Johnson repeatedly contended, while Indiana reformers told their legislators that young women traveled the “path of ruin . . . not so much because of any predisposing fault of their own, as because parents, church and State have failed to give them sympathy, and to inspire them to seek a better and higher life.”

Dozens of other statements by women prison reformers over the next years reiterated the point that unique circumstances led to women’s crimes. Although they realized that unhappy homes and immoral literature could create male as well as female criminals, the reformers singled out women as the victims of two particular social forces: economic and sexual exploitation. The economic explanation predominated in women’s rights movement literature; it constituted a minor theme for prison reformers, who launched their major attack on the sexual victimization of women by men.

Radical feminist Susan B. Anthony provided the strongest expression of the economic origins of women’s fall in her 1875 address on “Social Purity.” Anthony distinguished between the causes of crime in men and women, claiming that the former acted from “love of vice,” while the latter acted “from absolute want of the necessaries of life.” Historical forces had created this want, she explained. Women who once engaged in profitable household manufacturing had been displaced by men and machines. When “thrust into the world’s outer market,” they found exhausting labor and little recompense. The working woman, Anthony wrote, “weary and worn from her day’s toil . . . sees on every side and at every turn the gilded hand of vice and crime outstretched, . . . Can we wonder that so many poor girls fall, . . . Should we not wonder,
rather, that so many escape the sad fate?"50 Her solution was eco-
nomic self-sufficiency: "Clearly, then, the first step toward solving
this problem is to lift this vast army of poverty-stricken women
who now crowd our cities, above the temptation, the necessity, to
sell themselves in marriage or out, for bread and shelter."51

Although some antebellum writers, both male and female, had
made similar points, limited economic opportunities for working
women became a central focus of feminist analysis after 1870. Like
Anthony, writers in the suffragist Woman's Journal anticipated the
feminist economics of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. They too argued
that financial need, not innate sexual depravity, sent women to the
streets, largely because respectable work for women offered in-
adequate wages. "Society says to all women, 'Go sew' . . . and
schools . . . train them chiefly to sew," but in an overcrowded mar-
et, the Journal lamented, they starved from low wages and were
tempted to prostitution. The harlot would disappear only if
women became "educated to self support" in various industries.
Or, as one former prostitute from Indiana stated, "It was not know-
ing how to work that made me bad; now I can get my own living,
marrined or single."52 The Women's Prison Association began to
agree with the economic argument in the postwar years. As long
as working women received only "their pittance, just so long will
they eke it out by the wages of sin," the WPA explained.53

Reformers’ concerns about working women reflected changes in
women's work experiences. Despite the persistent ideology of do-
mmesticity, many unmarried, working-class and immigrant women
were entering the paid labor force in the decades after 1870. They
earned meager salaries for tedious work as domestic servants,
laundresses, and unskilled factory workers. A generation later
women's low wages and poor working conditions would become a
major concern of the Progressive movement. In the late nineteenth
century, reformers often suspected the relationship between class
and crime, but they did not extend their insight into a full-fledged
analysis.

Most women prison reformers pointed to another social force
which was unique to the etiology of female crime: sexual explo-
tation and the double standard of morality. Men, they held, de-
manded fallen women, but women alone paid the moral and legal
price for prostitution. Like the female moral reformers of antebel-
lum New England and New York, the women prison reformers in-
creasingly claimed that men were the root of the social evil.

Elizabeth Buffum Chace came to this conclusion early in her
career when she wrote that only uplift work among men could check the demand for fallen women. Similarly, the WPA reported that “If disreputable men were not to be found upon our streets, disreputable women would not go there to seek them.” In the Woman’s Journal, Ellen Batelle Dietrick placed this cause above all others. Criticizing a group of clergymen she explained that “They are only dealing with half of the problem so long as they utterly ignore the fact that the chief cause for ‘fallen women’ is fallen men.”

Even more annoying was the double standard which, Dietrick held, served to deny the ideal of female superiority. When woman alone bore the blame for sexual infidelity she suffered a loss of status from which men were immune. “Every such [fallen] woman,” she wrote, “was once an innocent girl born into a civilization which considers men her superior, supporter and protector. Every boy in our civilization knows that society will excuse in him, the superior, what it will relentlessly condemn in her, his inferior.”

That men established the demand for prostitutes, and that they usually escaped without punishment, constituted only part of the indictment. Case histories, written by reformers, blamed men for actively initiating women’s fall. Women’s crimes, ranging from drunkenness to lewdness to larceny, were attributed to the experiences of being “dragged down by a worthless husband”; accused by “a brutal husband”; “seduced by a coachman”; prostituted by a “bad, intemperate man”; “ruined by the wickedness” of men; or of having fallen “victim to masculine wills.” Cruel stepfathers, dishonest lovers, or ruthless employers seemed to plague women at every turn. Other case histories pitied those who had “married a base man”; or been ruined by a promise of marriage that led to a house of prostitution; or been “led off by a married man.” One inmate’s friends wrote to a women’s prison that it was “better to leave her in jail where she has home and food” than to let her return to her drunken husband. So too did prison commissioners often note the woman of “more than usual capacity” who had “been dragged down by a worthless husband.” As one case read, “if she had married a better man [she] might have turned out differently.”

The reconsideration of the fallen woman was encouraged in part by the deterministic thought which had begun to influence American criminology in general. Both experts in the newly founded social sciences and popular writers who attempted to explain the
The origins of crime and poverty rejected individual moral responsibility in favor of theories of hereditary and environmental causes. Despite the influence of Darwinian ideas in popularizing biological interpretations of crime, Americans displayed a deeply ingrained environmentalism that continued to hold out hope for the regeneration of the criminal, the insane, and the poor. The rise of a medical profession with a vested interest in "curing" not only disease but also deviancy tempered biological determinism, as did the emergence of a social service profession committed to eliminating poverty and vice.58

In addition to the influence of environmental determinism, the specifically intimate content of women's writings suggests other sources for new interpretations. The reformers approached the problem of the fallen woman as one rooted in the social relations of the sexes, rather than as simply the result of heredity or environment. Although they joined contemporaries in speculating on inherited vice and even pointed to the relationship between wages, working conditions, and crime, they repeatedly returned to the theme of woman's sexual vulnerability. Reformers' adoption of a sexual interpretation of crime is not surprising, given that the world of nineteenth-century women was so clearly defined as one in which their sex was supposed to inhabit its own separate sphere—one which had a morality superior to men's. The ideology of women's purity that had earlier condemned the fallen woman now could be used to condemn instead the impure men who, reformers claimed, were at the root of women's crimes.

This sexual interpretation illustrated an important strain of social feminist thought at the end of the century. Many feminists argued that men's intemperate drinking habits and their sexual indulgence led to the exploitation of women, whether as abused wives or as prostitutes. Therefore, the WCTU and the social purity movement attempted to control men's drinking and sexual behavior through personal moral force or through legislation outlawing liquor and vice districts. Some historians view these efforts as part of a symbolic struggle waged to increase women's power in the family and the society.59 The attacks on men's behavior may have been more defensive, however. Women attempted to protect their personal interests by minimizing their physical vulnerability. Sexual activity carried heavy risks for Victorian women, including the dangers of venereal infection, the strain of repeated childbirth, and a life of constant child rearing.60 Within this personal framework some women perceived chastity as a liberating experience
and saw all institutions that fostered sexual activity as contributing to women's oppression. Thus, social feminists often condemned men's sexual freedom and women prison reformers attacked men's sexual victimization of women as a cause of female crime.

Women's prison visiting had begun as a suitable female auxiliary to men's antebellum reforms. Led by Quakers, charity workers, and social feminists, women's prison reform grew into an independent movement by the late nineteenth century. From their experiences visiting women in jails, operating homes for discharged women prisoners, and participating in the postwar charities and social feminist movements, women reformers developed a unique perspective on the fallen woman. They challenged the view of her total depravity and substituted an indictment of society and particularly of men for causing her fall.

Underlying both women's entry into prison reform and their reinterpretation of the fallen woman was a firm belief that women constituted a separate sexual class. Despite their social analysis of women's crimes, reformers accepted biological categories that separated them from men but bound them to their sisters in prison. Although they acknowledged economic sources of crime, they discounted class differences between themselves and the objects of their concern. In the WPA, and later in state charity and corrections boards, women claimed that, if given a chance to bring their feminine influence to bear, the fallen could be redeemed and made into true women. This commitment to female moral superiority ultimately led to demands for separate women's prisons.