

CHAPTER ONE

"All over the Country There Is a Spirit of Cleaning Up": The Female Reform Tradition and the Origins of the Movement for Women Police

In the spring of 1910, Alice Stebbins Wells, a thirty-seven-year-old assistant pastor and social worker in Los Angeles, told her family, friends, and colleagues that she wanted to join the city police force. This news astonished everyone because police work had always been a "man's job." Moreover, even aside from her sex, Wells hardly fit the popular image of a police officer. The stereotypical officer was a working-class Catholic of Irish descent, nearly illiterate, with few scruples, plenty of muscle, and a fondness for strong drink. In contrast, Wells came from a middle-class Protestant family in the Midwest, held degrees from Oberlin College and Hartford Theological Seminary, stood two inches over five feet tall, and belonged to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). As Wells herself later wryly acknowledged, she personified the antithesis of every characteristic popularly ascribed to the police.¹

When asked why she wanted to enter police work, Wells replied that women could perform some police duties better than a man could, such as comforting, guiding, and questioning an erring or abused child. She also claimed that women would know better than a man how to prevent women and children from becoming involved in crime, either as victims or as offenders. Armed with these beliefs, Wells persuaded thirty-five local clergymen and clubwomen to sign a petition urging city officials to provide for the appointment of a policewoman. In later years, she liked to recall the stares she received when she first asked people for their support. After pointedly assessing her small frame, people invariably asked, "How could *you* make an arrest?" Her reply summarized the basic goal of pioneer policewomen's work: "I don't want to make arrests. I want to keep people from needing to be arrested, especially young people."²

Wells argued her case to the mayor, the chief of police, the city attorney, and the police commissioners. When she was satisfied that these men understood her concerns, she submitted the petition to the Los Angeles City Council.³ The idea of a woman officer preventing arrests rather than making them appealed to the council, then under the sway of the reform-minded Good Government League.

On August 2, 1910, the council unanimously passed an ordinance "providing for the employment of one police officer who shall be a woman."⁴ A few weeks later, on September 13, Wells officially joined the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Her job was to handle all female and juvenile cases and to investigate the social conditions that allegedly led some women and children to become involved in crime.⁵

News of her appointment spread quickly, and Wells soon became internationally known as the first policewoman in the United States. She received hundreds of letters and telegrams from people curious about her work. As she told an audience in New York City in 1912,

When I applied for my appointment in Los Angeles I thought chiefly of the immediate work to be done right there by a woman. But when I was appointed, then came this—this terrifying publicity—and I realized what it meant. I realized that I should have to stand behind a sort of "movement" for women in the police departments of other cities, just because I was the first in the field.⁶

Wells took the responsibilities of leadership seriously. In 1911, less than a year after her appointment to the LAPD, she visited thirty-one cities in thirty days, promoting the idea of women police in a lecture tour jointly organized by the Los Angeles District of the California Federation of Women's Clubs and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Northern California. The following year she took a six-month leave of absence to deliver her speech "The Need for Policewomen" in cities throughout the United States and eastern Canada. Her hard work paid off. By 1915, women's clubs and organizations in at least sixteen U.S. cities had successfully campaigned for the appointment of municipal policewomen. By 1917, the number of U.S. cities with women police had risen to 125.⁷

Wells liked to take full credit for beginning the movement for women police. In 1940, she wrote, "The Police Department especially considered itself to be a man's world, and the public so regarded it, until I stormed the fortress."⁸ Wells did indeed provide forceful leadership, but her efforts alone do not account for the success of the movement for women police. Instead, her ideas found fertile ground because of the convergence of several sets of circumstances in the early 1910s: the high level of female activism in social welfare reform, the juvenile court movement, and the ongoing revolution in sexual culture.

This chapter explores the roots of the movement for women police by first tracing the evolution of middle-class women's social action crusades over the course of the nineteenth century. Next, it illustrates middle-class women's gradually deepening involvement in criminal justice reform by describing the efforts of Chicago clubwomen during the 1880s and 1890s to change the ways local police and courts treated women and children. Chicago clubwomen's most famous

reform, the juvenile court, receives lengthy analysis because it not only sparked the involvement of thousands of middle-class women in criminal justice reform but also institutionalized a female-gendered, maternalist approach to the problem of juvenile delinquency. The chapter concludes with a look at the rising concerns of middle-class women in the early twentieth century over the moral and physical safety of urban women and children, especially teenage girls. Within a few years, their concerns became the basis of a demand for women police.

Women and Social Welfare Reform

The movement for women police began as one of several contemporaneous movements in which middle-class women used exalted definitions of womanhood and motherhood to claim new roles for themselves in the public sphere as policymakers, workers, and electors. In recent years, historians have examined the links between these movements, which they have labeled "maternalist," and the emergence of the welfare state in the early twentieth century. Kathryn Kish Sklar, Robyn Muncy, Linda Gordon, and other scholars have shown that female reformers were far more likely than their male counterparts to look to the state to correct social inequities and cure social ills. Recent studies also show that women reformers realized their greatest achievements in shaping welfare policies for women and children. Well-known examples of maternalist reforms during the early twentieth century include mothers' and widows' pensions and protective labor legislation.⁹

Like other women activists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the leaders of the movement for women police drew upon a female reform tradition that had deep roots in the middle-class ideology of domesticity. This ideology first began to take shape in the Northeast during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when profound changes in political culture, economic life, and family structure seemed to threaten women's traditional domestic roles. In response to the threat, white middle-class Americans gradually developed a highly refined gender ideology. According to its tenets, men and women occupied sexually differentiated social spaces and possessed different but complementary characters. Men presided over the morally dangerous public world of trade, politics, and industry, while women presided over the virtuous private world of the home. Because women were expected to devote their lives to their families, they were supposed to be pure, pious, submissive, and domestic. In theory, these virtues, together with women's exclusion from the amoral public world, elevated women to a position of moral influence, even superiority, over men. In practice, as historian Peggy Pascoe has noted, American society often did not accept middle-class women's claim to moral superiority.¹⁰

The conflation of femininity and domesticity in the gender ideology of the white middle class made the phrase "A woman's place is in the home" a popular

adage throughout the nineteenth century. Despite its popularity, the adage did not reflect the reality of most women's lives. Financial necessity—or, for enslaved women, the law and the whip—compelled millions of women to work outside their homes. Furthermore, the adage often contradicted the diverse cultural customs and gender ideologies of Latinos, Native Americans, and immigrants from all over the world.¹¹ Even many privileged white middle-class women did not limit their activities to their homes but instead plunged into organized benevolence and reform. Inspired by the teachings and values of evangelical Protestantism, these women joined church missionary and relief societies, established moral reform associations, and directed a variety of charitable organizations. Some of the women's voluntary organizations relied on the leadership of clergymen, but many had female leadership. As Kathryn Kish Sklar has noted, the United States before the Civil War had more mass-based, politically autonomous women's organizations than any other nation in the world.¹² Through their multifaceted commitment to social activism, humanitarianism, and moral reform, middle-class American women of the nineteenth century made it clear that women's "proper" place was not just in the home.¹³

The ideology of domesticity, together with women's common needs and experiences, fostered a strong sense of female solidarity among women of the same class and family networks.¹⁴ Among some women activists, this sense of solidarity was so strong that it crossed race, class, ethnic, and religious lines. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, some women's organizations identified and tried to help specific groups of women whom they labeled "unfortunate." During the 1820s, for example, a few Quaker women became interested in the plight of female prisoners in the Arch Street Prison of Philadelphia. Shut away in tiny, fetid, overcrowded cells, denied both physical exercise and mental stimulation, frequently abused and raped by male prison guards, female prisoners lived lives far removed from those of most middle-class women. At first, the Quaker women simply visited female inmates, but later they offered sewing and writing classes, as well as moral instruction. The Quaker women's efforts to "uplift their fallen sisters" eventually inspired similar efforts by women activists in other cities and culminated in the establishment of separate women's prisons in the 1870s.¹⁵

Although gender ideology and feelings of sisterhood bound women activists together, race, class, ethnic, religious, and ideological differences divided them into separate, but not always opposing, camps. Nancy A. Hewitt has found that white women activists from the most privileged socioeconomic backgrounds usually supported only the mildest reforms, while those from the lowest margins of the middle class often called for the complete overhaul of society.¹⁶ Additionally, some women activists supported the ideal of the patriarchal family, while others explicitly rejected it; some used conservative interpretations of prevailing gender beliefs to make personal attacks on other women activists; white women

activists barred women of color from their organizations; and in the two decades immediately following the Civil War, some women activists (notably those from elite backgrounds) rejected the idea of female moral superiority.¹⁷

Despite their differences, most women activists after the Civil War had one major strategy in common: they turned to the state for help. This strategy was not altogether new; a few women activists had begun to seek state funding for their organizations as early as the 1830s.¹⁸ But after the Civil War, the trend gained momentum. In several states during the 1870s, women activists seeking to improve conditions for female prisoners campaigned successfully for positions on newly formed public boards of charities and corrections. Once in power, they pushed for the establishment of separate prisons run by and for women.¹⁹ Like other women activists of their era, these prison reformers used direct political action to gain legal status from the government, as well as a sense of self-identity.²⁰

Between 1880 and 1930, many women activists devoted their entire careers in social work and social science to identifying the welfare needs of working-class women and children and pressing for the establishment of government programs and institutions to meet those needs. As Kathryn Kish Sklar has argued, women activists sought to ameliorate class inequities through gender-specific means; that is, they created a public discourse on the sufferings and problems of working-class women in order to champion measures that would bring about a more just distribution of the nation's resources.²¹ Moreover, most leading women activists expressed a firm belief in female moral authority and the unalloyed virtues of motherhood. In their eyes, motherhood and motherliness epitomized femininity at its best: nurturing, compassionate, protective, and morally vigilant. Despite their unity on these points, however, they did not share the same political commitments or views of women's role. They disagreed vehemently, for example, on woman suffrage and birth control. But underlying their political diversity was a strong commitment to the task of bringing the private, feminine virtues of motherhood to bear on the public, masculine sphere of politics, law, and government. This maternalist commitment, historically grounded in the Victorian middle-class ideology of domesticity, spurred and shaped female reform of the criminal justice system.

The Chicago Woman's Club, 1876–1907

The early history of the Chicago Woman's Club illustrates how middle-class women came to undertake maternalist reform of the criminal justice system. In fact, Chicago clubwomen's establishment of the juvenile court epitomizes the maternalist nature of much female criminal justice reform during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because it reflects middle-class women's belief that they had a moral responsibility to act in a motherly role toward the children of

the poor. The maternalist nature of the juvenile court deserves attention because it clarifies the scholarly debate over the establishment and early operations of the court. Much of this debate has centered on the role of class, particularly the class bias of the court's founders. Once the court is placed in the context of maternalist reform, however, a new picture of its historical development emerges, one that is shaded by gender difference and gender ideology as well as by class dynamics. The same can be said of the historical development of many criminal justice reforms undertaken by the Chicago Woman's Club and other women's organizations in the United States between 1880 and 1930.²²

The Chicago Woman's Club was one of many similar organizations formed by affluent women in cities across the nation after the Civil War. It began in 1876 as a literary and cultural study club.²³ Within four years, the members of the club's Philanthropy Committee resolved to abandon their nearly exclusive focus on self-improvement and undertake practical work on behalf of women. As they remarked, they wanted to do something that would "make them into a Committee of Philanthropy in fact as well as in name."²⁴ For their first project they arranged a public lecture series on women's health and hygiene matters. Within a short time, this series led to the establishment of the Woman's Physiological Institute of Chicago. Although committee members took a great deal of pride in the Institute, they soon realized that they had little to do with its routine operations once it got started. The Institute therefore did not offer them the kind of ongoing, hands-on work they yearned to accomplish. The opportunity to undertake that kind of work appeared two years later, in 1882, when the Chicago Woman's Club joined a nationwide movement, spearheaded by the WCTU, to install matrons, or female guards, in police stations and jails.²⁵

The Chicago Woman's Club first heard of the movement for police matrons on May 10, 1882. On that date, club members Mrs. Sabin Smith and Dr. Leila Bedell discussed the plight of female inmates in Chicago jails and then asked the club if it would support the WCTU campaign for matrons.²⁶ The WCTU had taken up the cause of women in jail during the late 1870s, arguing that only female guards could protect female prisoners from sexual assault and provide them with sisterly comfort and moral guidance. The WCTU borrowed these arguments from the movement for separate women's prisons, then going strong.²⁷

Smith and Bedell's discussion struck a responsive chord among club members. In what the club's annual report for 1882-83 calls "the only departure from the literary work of the Club," members passed a resolution in May 1882 "endorsing an effort being made by Miss Frances E. Willard to place women in police stations for the care of women prisoners."²⁸ The Philanthropy Committee was not content merely to endorse Willard's campaign, however. It also quickly instituted a successful search for a woman to become night matron at the jail, raised funds to pay her salary, and helped to persuade the Cook County sheriff to ap-