

Jane Addams, "Woman's Conscience and Social Amelioration," *The Social Application of Religion, The Merrick Lectures for 1907-8*, (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1908): 41-60.

We have been accustomed for many generations to think of woman's place as being entirely within the walls of her own household, and it is indeed impossible to imagine the time when her duty there shall be ended or to forecast any social change which shall ever release her from that paramount obligation. There is no doubt, however, that many women to-day are failing properly to discharge their duties to their own families and households simply because they fail to see that as society grows more complicated it is necessary that woman shall extend her sense of responsibility to many things outside of her own home, if only in order to preserve the home in its entirety.

One could illustrate in many ways. A woman's simplest duty, one would say, is to keep her house clean and wholesome and to feed her children properly. Yet, if she lives in a tenement house, as so many of my neighbors do, she can not fulfill these simple obligations by her own efforts because she is utterly dependent upon the city administration for the conditions which render decent living possible. [end page 41] Her basement will not be dry, her stairways will not be fireproof, her house will not be provided with sufficient windows to give her light and air, nor will it be equipped with sanitary plumbing unless the Public Works Department shall send inspectors who constantly insist that these elementary decencies be provided. These same women who now live in tenements, when they lived in the country, swept their own dooryards and either fed the refuse of the table to a flock of chickens or allowed it innocently to decay in the open air and sunshine; now, however, if the street is not cleaned by the city authorities, no amount of private sweeping will keep the tenant free from grime; if the garbage is not properly collected and destroyed, she may see her children sicken and die of diseases from which she

alone is powerless to shield them, although her tenderness and devotion are unbounded; she can not even secure clean milk for her children, she can not provide them with fruit which is untainted, unless the milk has been properly taken care of by the City Health Department, and the decayed fruit, which is so often placed upon sale in the tenement districts, shall have been promptly destroyed in the interest of public health. In short, if woman would keep on with her old business of caring for her house and rearing her children, she will have to have some conscience in regard to public affairs lying quite outside of her immediate household. The individual conscience and devotion are no longer effective. In the tenement quarters [end page 42] of Chicago, I am sorry to say that last spring we had a spreading contagion of scarlet fever just at the time that the school nurses had been discontinued, because it was supposed that they were no longer necessary. If the women who sent their children to these schools had been sufficiently public-spirited they would have insisted that the schools be supplied with nurses in order that their own children might be protected from contagion. So I could go on with a dozen other illustrations. Women are pushed outside of the home in order that they may preserve the home. If they would effectively continue their old avocations, they must take part in the movements looking toward social amelioration.

On the other hand, this contention may be equally well illustrated by women who take no part in public affairs in order that they may give themselves exclusively to their own families, sometimes going so far as to despise their neighbors and their ways, and even to take a certain pride in being separate from them. Our own neighborhood was at one time suffering from a typhoid epidemic. Although the Nineteenth Ward had but one thirty-sixth of the population of Chicago, it had one-sixth of all the deaths in the city occurring from typhoid. A careful investigation was made by which we were able to establish a very close connection between the

typhoid and a mode of plumbing which made it most probable that the infection had been carried by flies. Among the people who had been exposed to the infection was a widow who had lived [end page 43] in the ward for a number of years, in a comfortable little house which she owned. Although the Italian immigrants were closing in all around her, she was not willing to sell her property and to move away until she had finished the education of her children, because she considered that her paramount duty. In the meantime she held herself quite aloof from her Italian neighbors and their affairs. Her two daughters were sent to an Eastern college; one had graduated, the other had still two years before she took her degree, when they came home to the spotless little house and to their self-sacrificing mother for the summer's holiday. They both fell ill,—not because their own home was not clean, not because their mother was not devoted, but because next door to them and also in the rear were wretched tenements and because the mother's utmost efforts could not keep the infection out of her own house. One daughter died, and one recovered, but was an invalid for two years following. This, is, perhaps, a fair illustration of the futility of the individual conscience when woman insists upon isolating her family from the rest of the community and its interests. The result is sure to be a pitiful failure.

In the process of socialization of their affairs, women might have received many suggestions from the changes in the organization of industry which have been going on for the last century. Ever since steam power has been applied to the processes of spinning and weaving, woman's old traditional work [end page 44] has been slowly but inevitably slipping out of the household into the factory. The clothing is not only spun and woven but largely sewed by machinery; the household linen, the preparation of grains, the butter and cheese have also passed into the factory, and, necessarily, a certain number of women have been obliged to follow their work there, although it is doubtful, in spite of the large number of factory girls, whether women

now are doing as large a proportion of the world's work as they used to do. If we contemplate the many thousands of them who enter industry and who are working in factories and shops, we at once recognize the great necessity there is that older women should feel interested in the conditions of industry. According to the census reports, there are in the United States more than five million self-supporting women. Most of them are between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, so that when we say working-women we really mean working-girls. It is the first time in history that such numbers of young girls have been permitted to walk unattended on city streets and to work under alien roofs. The very fact that these girls are not going to remain in industry permanently makes it more important that some one should see to it that they shall not be incapacitated for their future family life because they work for exhausting hours and under unsanitary conditions. One would imagine that as our grandmothers guarded the health and morals of the young women who spun and wove and sewed in their house- [end page 45] hold, so the women of to-day would feel equally responsible for the young girls who are doing the same work under changed conditions. This would be true if women's sense of obligation had modified and enlarged as the social conditions changed, so that she might naturally and almost imperceptibly have inaugurated the movements for social amelioration in the line of factory legislation and shop sanitation. That she has not done so is doubtless due to the fact that her conscience is slow to recognize any obligation outside of her own family circle and because she was so absorbed in her own affairs that she failed to see what the conditions outside actually were. As one industry after another has slipped from the household; as the education of her children has been more and more transferred to the school, so that now children of four years old begin to go to the kindergarten the woman has been left in a household of constantly narrowing interests.

Possibly the first step towards restoration is publicity as to industrial affairs, for we are all able to see only those things to which we bring the "informing mind." Perhaps you will permit me to illustrate from a group of home-keeping women who became interested in the problem of child labor. I was at one time a member of the Industrial Committee of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, which is, as you know, an association of women's clubs from all parts of the United States. We were very much interested in finding out how much child [end page 46] labor prevailed in the various States in which no legislation had been passed for the protection of children. We sent out questionnaires to all the women's clubs, and among others we received a very interesting reply from a woman's club in Florida. We had asked that the club members count all of the children under fourteen who were at work in the factories and mills in the club vicinities. The Florida women sent back the reply that they had found three thousand children in the sugar factories, and they added that they were very sorry that we had not asked them about child labor earlier, because their Legislature would not convene for two years and there would be no chance until then to secure protective legislation. They evidently thought that it was very remiss on the part of the committee that they had not earlier called their attention to child labor conditions. The whole incident is a good illustration of the point we would make. These women had lived in the same place for years. The children had doubtless gone to work back and forth right under their windows, but they had never looked, in order to count them and did not even know they were there. The Industrial Committee sent out a questionnaire which said, in effect, "Please look out of your windows and count the working-children." The club women suddenly waked up and bestirred themselves to protect the children they had thus discovered. Something of that sort goes on in every community. We see those things to which our at- [end page 47] tention has been drawn, we feel responsibility for those things which are brought to us as matters

of responsibility. In what direction, then, should women at the present moment look towards a more effective amelioration for the many social ills which are all about us?

If they follow only the lines of their traditional activities, there are certainly three primary duties which we would all admit belong to even the most conservative women and which no one woman or group of women can adequately discharge, unless they join the more general movements looking toward social amelioration.

The first of these is a responsibility for the members of her own household, that they may be properly fed and clothed and surrounded by hygienic conditions.

The second is responsibility for the education of children, that they may be provided with good schools, or kept free from vicious influences on the streets, and as a natural result of this concern, that when they first go to work that they shall be protected from dangerous machinery and from exhausting hours.

The third is responsibility for the social standards of the community, implying some comprehension of the difficulties and perplexities of the newly arrived immigrant, and adequate provision for the cultivation of music and other art sources which the community may contain.

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We have already touched upon the first line of obligation and the difficulty of securing pure food without the help of pure food laws on the part of State and federal authorities and the impossibility of keeping the tenement family in sanitary surroundings without the constant

regulation on the part of city officials. If the public authorities are indifferent to wretched conditions, as they often are, the only effective way to secure their reform is by a concerted effort on the part of the women who are responsible for the households. Perhaps you will permit me to illustrate from the Hull House Woman's Club: One summer, fifteen years ago, we discovered the death rate in our ward for children under five years of age was far above the average, rating second highest of any ward in town. An investigation disclosed that, among other things, the refuse was not properly collected. The woman's club divided the ward into sections, and three times every week certain women went through each section in order to find out what could be done to make the territory clean. Of course it is not very pleasant to go up and down the alleys and get into trouble with people about garbage conditions; it takes a good deal of moral vigor and civic determination to do it effectively. Yet the members of the club did this day after day until they were able to gather sufficient material to dismiss three inspectors from office and finally to secure the appointment of a competent inspector. When the ward became cleaner, when the death rate [end page 49] fell month by month, and each health bulletin was read in the Woman's Club, all the members listened with breathless interest. I shall never forget the day, three years later, when the club broke into applause because the death rate of our ward had fallen to the average. They felt that they had been responsible in securing this result, that the neighborhood had been brought into a reasonable condition through their initiative and concerted effort. Of course, the household of each woman profited by the result, but it could not have been secured through the unaided effort of any one household. One might use, by way of illustration, the impossibility of knowing the sanitary conditions under which clothing is produced, unless women join together into an association like the Consumers' League, which supports officers whose business it is to inform the members of the league as to garments which are made in sweatshops and to indicate by a label those which are produced under sanitary conditions.

Country doctors testify as to the outbreak of scarlet fever in remote neighborhoods each autumn, after the children have begun to wear the winter cloaks and overcoats which have been sent from infected city sweatshops. That their mothers mend their stockings and guard them from "taking cold" is not a sufficient protection when the tailoring of the family is done in a distant city under conditions which the mother can not possibly control. Sweatshop legislation and the organization of consumers' leagues are the most [end page 50] obvious lines of amelioration of those glaring social evils which directly affect family life.

The duty of the mother towards schools which her children attend is so obvious that it is not necessary to dwell upon it, but even this simple obligation can not be effectively carried out without some form of social organization, as the mothers' school clubs and mothers' congresses testify. But women are also beginning to realize that children need attention outside of school hours; that much of the petty vice in cities is merely the love of pleasure one wrong, the over-restrained boy or girl seeking improper recreation and excitement. In Chicago a map has recently been made demonstrating that juvenile crime is decreasing in the territory surrounding the finely equipped playgrounds and athletic fields which the South Park Board three years ago placed in thirteen small parks. We know in Chicago, from ten years' experience in a juvenile court, that many boys are arrested from sheer excess of animal spirits, because they do not know what to do with themselves after school. The most daring thing the leader of a gang of boys can do is to break into an empty house, steal the plumbing fixtures and sell them for money with which to treat the gang. Of course that sort of thing gets a boy into very serious trouble, and is almost sure to land him in the reform school. It is obvious that a little collective study of the needs of the boys, a sympathetic understanding of the conditions under which [end page 51] they go astray, might save hundreds of them. Women traditionally have had an opportunity to observe the plays

of children and the needs of growing boys, and yet they have done singularly little in this vexed problem of juvenile delinquency until they helped to inaugurate the juvenile court movement a dozen years ago; since then they have done valiant service, and they are at last trying to minimize some of the dangers of city life which boys and girls encounter; they are beginning to see the relation between public recreation and social morality. The women of Chicago are studying the effect of these recreational centers provided by the South Park Committee upon the social life of the older people who use them. One thing they have done is enormously to decrease the patronage of the neighboring saloons. Before we had these park houses, the saloon hall was hired for weddings and christenings, or any sort of an event which in the foreign mind is associated with general feasting, because the only places for hire were the public halls attached to the saloons. As you know, the saloon hall is rented free, with the understanding that a certain amount of money be paid across the bar; that is, the rent must be made up in other ways. The park hall, of course, is under no such temptation and, therefore, drinking has almost ceased at the parties held in the parks. If a man must go two or three blocks to get an alcoholic drink, and can step down-stairs to secure other refreshments, it goes without saying that in most cases he [end page 52] does the latter. The park halls close promptly at eleven o'clock. The city is, therefore, approaching the temperance problem from the point of view of substitution, which appears to some of us more reasonable than the solely restrictive method. Many of the larger movements towards social amelioration in which women are active have taken their rise from the interest the women felt in the affairs of the juvenile court, and yet this does not mean that collective effort minimizes individual concern. On the other hand, we often see a woman stirred to individual effort only after she has been brought into contact with the general movement. I recall a woman in the Hull House neighborhood who, although she had a large family of her own, took charge every evening of a boy whose mother scrubbed offices down-town every day from five o'clock in

the afternoon until eleven at night. This kindly woman gave the boy his supper with her own children, saw that he got into no difficulty during the evening, and allowed him to sleep on the lounge in her sitting-room until his mother came by in the evening and took him home. After she had been doing this for about six months, I spoke to her about it one day and congratulated her on her success with the boy, who had formerly been a ward of the juvenile court. She replied that she had undertaken to help the boy because the juvenile court officer had spoken to her about him and had said that he thought she might be willing to help because he had observed [end page 53] her interest in juvenile court matters. Although the boy's mother was a neighbor of hers, she had not apparently seen her obligation to the lad until it had been brought home to her in this somewhat remote way. It is another illustration of our inability to see the duty "next to hand" until we have become alert through our knowledge of conditions in connection with the larger duties. We would all agree that social amelioration must come about through the efforts of many people who are moved thereto by the compunction and stirring of the individual conscience, but we are only beginning to understand that the individual conscience will respond to the special challenge and will heed the call largely in proportion as the individual is able to see the social conditions and intelligently to understand the larger need. Therefore, careful investigation and mutual discussion is perhaps the first step in securing the legal enactment and civic amelioration of obvious social ills.

The third line of effort which every community needs to have carried on if it would obtain a social life in any real sense, I may perhaps illustrate from experiments at Hull House, not because they have been especially successful, but because an attempt has there been made to develop the social resources of an immigrant community.

If an historian, one hundred years from now, should write the social history of America, he would probably say that one of the marked characteristics [end page 54] of our time was the arrival of immigrants at the rate of a million a year and the fact that the American people had little social connection with them. If the historian a hundred years hence used the same phrases which the psychologists now use—perhaps they will get over them by that time—he would say that our minds seem to be "inhibited" by certain mental concepts which apparently prevented us from forming social relations with immigrants. What are these mental concepts, this state of mind which keeps us apart from the immigrant populations? The difference in language, in religion, in history and tradition always makes social intercourse difficult, and yet every year people go to Europe, for the very purpose of overcoming that difference and of seeing the life of other nations. They discover that people may differ in language and education and still possess similar interests. We would say that a person who went to Europe and returned without that point of view had made rather a failure of his trip. In the midst of American cities there are various colonies of immigrants who represent European life and conditions, and that we who stay at home know so little about them is only because we do not make the adequate effort. We have in the neighborhood of Hull House a colony of about five thousand Greeks, who once produced in the Hull House theater the classic play of "Ajax," written by Sophocles. The Greeks were very much surprised when the professors came from the various [end page 55] universities in order to follow the play in the Greek text from books which they brought with them. The Greeks were surprised, because they did not know there were so many people in Chicago who cared for ancient Greece. The professors in turn were astonished to know that the modern Greeks were able to give such a charming interpretation of Sophocles. It was a mutual revelation on both sides. On one side the Greeks felt more nearly a part of America, and on the other side the professors felt that perhaps the traditions had not been so wholly broken in the case of Greece as

they had been led to believe. It would have been difficult for the Greeks to have made for themselves all the preliminary arrangements for this play; they needed some people to act as ambassador, as it were, and yet they themselves possessed this tradition, the historic background, this beauty of classic form, which our American cities so sadly need and which they were able to supply.

We may illustrate from Italy, if you please, the very word which charms us so completely when we hear it on the other side of the Atlantic, and yet it means so little to us in our own country. These colonies of Italians might yield to our American life something very valuable if their resources were intelligently studied and developed. They have all sorts of artistic susceptibility, and even trained craftsmanship, which is never recovered for use here. I tell the story sometimes of an Italian who was threatened with arrest by his landlord because he had orna- [end page 56] mented the doorpost of his tenement with a piece of beautiful wood carving. The Italian was very much astonished at this result of his attempt to make his home more beautiful. He could not understand why his landlord did not like it; he said that he had carved a reredos in a church in Naples, which Americans came to look at and which they thought was very beautiful; the man was naturally bewildered by the contrast between the appreciation of his work in Naples and Chicago. And yet we need nothing more in America than that same tendency to make beautiful the surroundings of our common life. The man's skill was a very precious thing, and ought to have been conserved and utilized in our American life. The Italians in our neighborhood occasionally agitate for the erection of a public wash-house. They do not like to wash in their own tenements; they have never seen a washing tub until they came to America, and find it very difficult to use it in the restricted space of their little kitchens and to hang the clothes within the house to dry. They say that in Italy washing clothes is a pleasant task. In the

villages the women all go to the stream together; in the towns, to the public wash-house, and washing, instead of being lonely and disagreeable, is made pleasant by cheerful conversation. It is asking a great deal of these women to change suddenly all their habits of living, and their contention that the tenement house kitchen is too small for laundry work is well taken. If women in Chicago knew the needs of [end page 57] the Italian colony and were conversant with their living in Italy, they, too, would agitate for the erection of public wash-houses for the use of Italian women. Anything that would bring cleanliness and fresh clothing into the Italian households would be a very sensible and hygienic measure. It is, perhaps, asking a great deal that the members of the city council should understand this, but surely a comprehension of the needs of these women and efforts towards ameliorating their lot might be regarded as a matter of conscientious duty on the part of American women.

One constantly sees also, in the Italian colony, that sad break between the customs of the older people and their children, who, because they have learned English and certain American ways, come to be half ashamed of their parents. It does not make for good Americans that the children should thus cut themselves away from the European past. If the reverse could be brought about; if the children, by some understanding of the past, could assist their parents in making the transition to American habits and customs, it would be most valuable from both points of view. An Italian girl who has gone to the public school and has had lessons in cooking and the household arts, will help her mother much more and connect the entire family with American foods and household habits more easily, if she understands her mother's Italian experiences. That the mother has never baked bread in Italy—only mixed it in her own house, and then taken it out to the village oven— [end page 58] makes it all the more necessary that her daughter should understand the complication of a cooking stove and introduce her to its

mysteries. At the same time, the daughter and her American teacher could get something of the historic sense and background in the long line of woman's household work by knowing this primitive woman and learning from her some of the old recipes and methods which have been preserved among the simplest people because of their worth. Take the girl who learns to sew in the public school, whose Italian mother is able to spin with the old stick spindle, reaching back to the period of Homer and David; who knows how to weave and to make her own loom; such a girl's mother could bring a most valuable background into a schoolroom over-filled with machine-made products, often shoddy and meaningless. As the old crafts may be recovered from a foreign colony and used for the edification of our newer cities, so it is possible to recover something of the arts. We have in Hull House a music school in which some of the foreign-born children have been pupils for twelve years. These children often discover in the neighboring foreign colonies old folk songs which have never been reduced to writing. The music school reproduces these songs and invites the older people to hear them; their pleasure at such a concert is quite touching as they hear the familiar melodies connecting them with their earliest experiences; reminiscent perhaps of their parents and grandparents. [end page 59]

After all, what is the function of art but to preserve in permanent and beautiful form those emotions and solaces which cheer life, make it kindlier and more comprehensible, lift the mind of the worker from the harshness of his task, and, by connecting him with what has gone before, free him from a sense of isolation and hardship? Many American women of education are beginning to feel a sense of obligation for work of this sort. If women have been responsible in any sense for that gentler side of life which softens and blurs some of the conditions of life, then certainly they have a duty to perform in the large foreign colonies which make up so large a part of the American cities. I am sure illustrations occur to all of you as to what might be done in this

third line of responsibility, for, whatever we think as to a woman's fitness to secure betterment through legal enactment, we must agree that responsibility for social standards has always been hers.

In closing, may I recapitulate that if woman would fulfill her traditional responsibility to her own children; if she would educate and protect from danger the children in the community, who now work in factories although they formerly worked in households; if she would in any sense meet the difficulties which modern immigration has brought us; then she must be concerned to push her conscience into the general movements for social amelioration. [ends on page 60]