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# African American Reformers' Mission: Caring for Our Girls and Women

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Iris Carlton-LaNey and Vanessa Hodges

*This article focuses on the mechanisms that African American women used during the Progressive Era to meet the needs of young African American women and girls. It identifies some of the early reform women and describes the girls and women who were the recipients of their beneficence. Attention is also given to specific strategies that were implemented by service organizations and groups, such as women's clubs, sororities, schools, and settlement houses.*

**Keywords:** *African Americans; social services; social welfare history; women*

The Progressive Era was particularly volatile and provocative for African Americans. Although many White Americans were enjoying significant advances in technology, increased citizen participation, greater governmental responsiveness, and new social legislation, African Americans experienced a much more dismal lifestyle (Day, 2003). As the country became more urbanized and industrialized, its wealth increased. Along with the increase in wealth came a widening disparity between the rich and the poor. As Stuart (1999) noted, "the likelihood of a personal relationship between poor people and wealthy people lessened" (p. 336). For many African Americans, the late 19th and early 20th centuries were extremely oppressive and disillusioning. African Americans experienced increased economic and social hardships, exclusion from labor markets, and discriminatory governmental legislation. Social hardships included Jim Crowism, lynching, neglected environments, and the cruel and foreboding sharecropper system.

During this time of a harsh economy, denied opportunity, and tremendous need, African American female reformers developed and delivered a complex system of social welfare services (Hodges, 2001). Generally excluded from participation in the White social service system of care that was emerging, they established a parallel system of services. Their energies focused on uplifting the race, and, as McDougald (1925, p. 691) stated, their

"feminist efforts [were] directed chiefly toward the realization of the equality of the races, the sex struggle assuming a subordinate place." These pioneer women were certain that their work to enhance the lives of the women and girls of the race would ultimately develop the race. For these reformers the boundaries of race work and gender work were fluid. Essentially, race work encompassed gender work because race work was essentially community work (Peebles-Wilkins, 1994).

Scholars of social welfare history have agreed about these shared fluid boundaries for African American women. For example, Giddings (1984) noted that for "African American women, it was the issue of race that sparked their feminism" (p. 55). Shaw (1996) found that via national organizations, African American women "could speak more profoundly about problems specific to them as Black women and problems that affected them as they affected the race" (p. 20). And White (1999) argued that the women's club was the African American woman's primary vehicle for leadership of the race. Essentially, improving the lives of women meant improving the lives of the entire race. Through this shared sentiment, services and programs for African American women and girls became the primary focus for African American female reformers in the Progressive Era. This article focuses on these women's strategies for serving the women and girls of their race.

#### AFRICAN AMERICAN REFORM WOMEN

The socioeconomic distance between the African American reformers and the women and girls whom they sought to help was tremendous, although both experienced institutionalized racism and sexism. Social class was certainly an important factor among these pioneer reformers as well. Harley (1993) identified three groups of African American middle-class women during the decades from 1880 to 1930. She found that with some overlap, African American "middle-class women [could] be categorized loosely as belonging to three basic groups—the upper-middle-class social elite, the new professional middle class and the lower middle class" (p. 787). Harley surmised that for these middle-class women, class status was not a birth-right but resulted from their educational and professional achievements. She further noted that middle-class African American women understood that their social class was not a status symbol but instead indicated "a call to duty" and a mandate to become "servants of their people" (p. 789). Even though class was clearly a factor among social welfare reformers, it was based largely on educational success. And it was this educational achievement that seemed to create the greatest distance between the African American reformers and the community at large.

Many of the reform women of the Progressive Era were privileged, with access to an elite education and, within limits, its accompanying

advantages, including access to prominent people, comfortable homes, a modicum of wealth, and a sense of superiority to other African Americans. These amenities also brought a sense of social indebtedness and *noblesse oblige*. Generally, the women's educational attainment exceeded that of their White counterparts, and among African Americans, it placed them in a category of only 1% of all who had four or more years of college. These women were members of a small, elite network with a common goal—to improve the quality of life for the race by serving its women and girls.

Most of the African American female reformers were educators (Gordon, 1991). Through this genteel occupation, they combined gainful employment with social activism. The fact that they shared common experiences as educators also helped them build a more coherent network. Jones (1986) noted that teachers who worked in large southern cities “worked on the political frontier of racial group consciousness” (p. 144). Similarly, in her memoir, Mamie Garvin Fields, who began her teaching career in 1909 on John's Island, South Carolina, recalled that her actions of advocacy had come from her “old aunts and uncles of the early days [who] had race pride” (p. 110). She believed that “it must have been those ancestors working through her” that encouraged her political activism (Fields, 1983, p. 110). The choice to enter the teaching profession carried an implicit and simultaneous mandate to commit oneself to social and political activism on behalf of the race.

Even though education was presented as the mechanism that was most needed to bring about desired social change, it did not spare many college-educated teachers from having to take on demeaning or menial jobs as well. African American educators in the South had to rely on the beneficence of White school boards or on the resources of impoverished African American communities for their salaries. Thus, they often did not earn enough to live on without working as “laundresses or seamstresses in order to tide [themselves] over during the long school ‘vacation’” (Jones, 1986, p. 146). Still others worked as domestic servants to supplement their modest teachers' salaries (Clark-Lewis, 2000). Despite these hardships, education was strongly valued by African Americans.

### SERVING THE NEEDIEST GIRLS AMONG US

The term “colored girl,” noted one social reformer in 1905, “is almost a term of reproach in the social life of America . . . [the colored girl] belongs to a race that is best designated by the term problem and she lives beneath that shadow” (Williams, 1905/1987, p. 150). Reform women recognized the position of the “colored girl” and identified her as “a cause as well as an effect” (Williams, 1905/1987, p. 151), indicating that any understanding of American womanhood must include her and that the “very character of our

social fabric depends upon the quality of her womanliness" (Williams, 1905/1987, p. 152).

The "colored girls" who were served by the beneficence of African American reform women included poor and isolated women and girls as well as their middle-class contemporaries. Life in rural agrarian southern areas was characterized by hard work and social isolation. The young country woman's urban counterpart was subjected to similar isolation in her work as a live-in domestic servant with one day off per month. Another form of isolation was that imposed by urban African American families with whom the young migrant women resided either as boarders or members of extended families. These families, having migrated earlier, invited young women to live with them and to assume the role of babysitters or housekeepers until they "got on their feet" (Clark-Lewis, 2000). Yet for many of these young women, it took a considerable length of time to become self-sufficient. Whatever the circumstances, they were often overwhelmed by their lives and saw few opportunities for advancement. Moreover, some were at once awed and intimidated by the well-educated, middle-class women who expressed interest in their well-being.

In the 1900s, a southern migrant to Washington, DC, contritely recalled being embarrassed about her meager formal education, stating that she

wasn't scared of nothing but the people [in Washington, DC] was different. My talking was so bad. Oh, they sounded so different, nice, clear and sweet to hear, like music. Hold their head to a side and all. Then, I heard me talking so bad. I didn't like to talk to them, never. (quoted in Clark-Lewis, 2000, pp. 124-125)

This quotation illustrates prevalent feelings of inferiority and intimidation among lower-class African American women that could have presented powerful barriers to racial progress. Although African American reform women were, on one level, aware of their less privileged sisters' trepidation, they nonetheless "did not hesitate to represent poor Black women" (White, 1999, p. 55) and wrote in *The Women's Era* as early as 1895, "We . . . believe we speak for the colored women of America" ("Notes and Comments," 1895, p. 6).

As we noted earlier, many African American women and girls who were helped by the reform women were agricultural or domestic workers, who held the least desirable and lowest paid jobs. Others were urban women, most of whom worked as servants and laundresses (Hine, 1990). Laundering was heavy, hot, and unpleasant work, especially in the sweltering southern climate. Laundresses were required to purchase their own starch and soap, to pick up clothes from several families on Monday, and to return the "washes" on Saturday. There was no guarantee of payment if the family decided that the laundry was improperly done or an item was lost, and, of course, there was no recourse for a laundress if a family refused to pay (Jones, 1986). Both the urban and the rural women were eager to find better

lives for themselves and their families, but, according to Hine (1990, p. 78), "dreams of acquiring higher education and better jobs were little more than delusions" for some.

Yet many women and girls were tenacious in their efforts and were eager to seize any opportunity to improve the quality of their lives and to escape the limiting opportunities of their small isolated worlds. Elizabeth Ross (1909, p. 2), who became Elizabeth Ross Haynes in 1910 on her marriage to George E. Haynes, a cofounder of the Urban League, was a special worker with the YWCA at that time. She noted that many African American college girls

work during and after school hours in order that they may be in school. In some of them (colleges) many work from the early morning hours steadily with just a few minutes between for meals until night and then attend night school. Most of them are able to get work in the schools but it is necessary for some who support themselves entirely to live out in private families and do the cooking or the laundry work, or the general house work. (Ross, 1909, p. 1)

Ross (1909) recognized these girls' determined but stressful pursuit of education, indicating that "occasionally an almost discouraged girl has made her way to my room seeking advice, information and more than all a word of encouragement . . . [nonetheless] determined to push ahead" (p. 2).

Similar to Ross's observation, Progressive Era club woman Fannie Barrier Williams (1905/1987) said this about the African American female: "She is irrepressible. She is insulted, but she holds up her head; she is scorned, but she proudly demands respect . . . upon her devolves the marvelous task of establishing the social status of the race" (p. 151).

Recognizing themselves in the lives of their lower-class sisters, African American reform women were determined to provide opportunities for the less fortunate and friendless women of the race and in so doing to raise the social status of the entire group (Bent-Goodley, 2003). Alexander (1995) noted that these reformers "viewed the arenas of politics and culture, from the grass roots to the elite echelons, as realms that needed to hear African American women's voices in order to survive" (p. 337). Toward that end, they engaged in an array of activities that were designed to serve women and girls through various organizations, including sororities, social settlements, church groups, schools, and clubs. Through these organizations, reform women provided education and character development, protection and shelter, and refinement.

## EDUCATION AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The national African American sororities made "educational welfare" one of their chief concerns. The Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, the oldest such

group of college-educated African American women, had "a systematized and continuous program of educational and vocational guidance for students of the high schools and colleges" (McDougald, 1925, p. 691). On one occasion, the Lambda Chapter of the sorority sponsored a session to give more than 150 girls in New York and New Jersey an opportunity to gain inspiration from the "life-stories of successful Negro women in eight fields of endeavor," including, nurses, artists, and physicians, all of whom had risen to prominence in their fields (McDougald, 1925, p. 691). The Lambda Chapter also sponsored essay contests for high school girls in New York and New Jersey. For several years, the noted Harlem Renaissance poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen served as judges for the essay contests (Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Ross Haynes, 1926). According to McDougald (p. 691), "progressive and privileged groups of Negro women" expressed their "community and race consciousness" through their commitment to the educational welfare of the next generation of African American girls.

Several African American school founders shared the sororities' commitment to "educational welfare." Lucy Laney, for example, emphasized "character building and academic competence" at her Haines Institute (McCluskey, 1997, p. 407). Mary McLeod Bethune thought that the "greatest hope for the development of [the] race lies in training our women thoroughly and practically," a philosophy that she enfolded in her Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls (quoted in McCluskey, 1997, p. 411). Charlotte Hawkins Brown's Palmer Memorial Institute "melded an emphasis on cultural assimilation with her earlier focus on the dignity of all work" (McCluskey, 1997, p. 406). According to McCluskey (1997), these women all believed that education was "the best response to the dire conditions besetting their race and sex" (p. 406). Nannie Helen Burroughs, for example, dubbed her National Training School in Washington, D.C., the school of the three B's because of her belief that trained and educated African American women must advance the race through the Bible, bath, and broom (Higginbotham, 1993a). Although her school emphasized domestic training, Burroughs also recognized the importance of broad-based self-sufficiency and trained women to find employment in nontraditional areas such as barbering and shoe repair. Although some criticized the reformers' focus on domestic training, others, such as Burroughs and Williams, saw it as "the way to exalt the colored girl [and] to place a higher premium on character than we do upon the quality of her occupation" (Williams, 1905/1987, p. 156).

African American settlement houses also included an educational and character-building component in their programs. For example, mothers' clubs, which were a central part of settlement house programs, were avenues through which reform women taught the "fundamentals of child rearing, homemaking, and self-improvement to their poorer counterparts" (White, 1993, p. 249). The educational component of Margaret Murray

Washington's Elizabeth Russell Plantation Settlement sponsored an array of group meetings, including girls' clubs and sewing classes for girls as well as mothers' clubs, all emphasizing motherhood and wifeness. The highly successful mothers' meetings attracted a large number of rural women, who traveled many miles to attend the educational sessions. The meetings instructed rural women in a range of subjects, such as child care, home management, and ways to buy land and build homes for their families, summarily promoting economic self-sufficiency (Rouse, 1994).

Settlement house clubs, like schools, advocated the importance of "manners and morals and charged women with the mission of promoting clean and cultured homes" (Higginbotham, 1993b, p. 30). Most settlements in the African American community shared this mission and offered a plethora of similar activities for mothers and girls. Such settlements included Sarah Collins Fernandis's Colored Social Settlement, Janie Porter Barrett's Locus Street Settlement, Lugenia Burns Hope's Neighborhood Union, the Chicago Wendell Phillips Settlement, and New York's Lincoln House Settlement. Training and educating mothers and girls in homemaking and child care were critical and essential services. Yet some settlement house programs went beyond these basic services to emphasize greater educational concerns. For example, Fernandis's Colored Social Settlement established a branch of the public library within its doors, and Victoria Earle Matthews's White Rose Mission boasted a special library of African American literature that became part of the mission's teachings on "race history" (Cash, 1993). To guarantee "self-esteem, racial pride, racial consciousness, and racial accountability," many educational components of settlement house programs included courses on Negro history (Rouse, 1994, p. 39).

The YWCA was another avenue that was used to reach African American girls. Ross (1910, p. 2) encouraged local communities to establish and become involved with the YWCA. She thought that

the opening up of city Associations will make, aside from furnishing professional opportunities for college girls, large places for them to serve the less favored young women . . . college Associations work is going to improve the caliber of many young women who go out as teachers.

She also believed that the YWCA was a mechanism for

strengthening and broadening the social life of . . . girls, and through special meetings in which each girl is permitted to tell what she can of the social life and conditions of the young women at their home, their thoughts along these lines are being turned inward to their own beliefs and ideals, and outward to the part they can play in helping to better the social conditions of their home and communities. (p. 2)

Essentially Progressive Era reformers focused on character development as an essential part of education for service.

## PROTECTION AND SHELTER

African American women knew that the burden of responsibility for protecting the virtue of young women and girls did not lie in the public domain. Rather, they fully expected that the burden was theirs. Watchful of their responsibility through the Women Era Club's Committee on Manners and Morals, for example, these reformers wrote that after "having had their attention called to the very common practice of putting tickets in the hand of children to be sold for the benefit of different objects," they resolved

that inasmuch as the custom of permitting young girls to solicit men to buy tickets from them is damaging to modesty and a menace to morality, we do set the seal of our condemnation upon it, and call upon the church people especially to help us abolish the custom. ("Notes and Comments," 1895, p. 1)

Furthermore, African American women understood that a highly virtuous image was needed to counter the pejorative image that Whites had popularized (Abrams, 2000; White, 1999). Moreover, the pejorative images served "as critical indices of social worth, political significance, and economic power" (Hine, 1990, p. 87). These women understood the significance of "images" as determinants of the type of treatment that African American girls and women could expect from the larger society.

Many women who engaged in reform work to enhance the images of African American women believed that social service programs for boys could provide outlets for their juvenile exuberance and simultaneously challenge the negative valuation of African American women's morality. Furthermore, they thought that eradicating negative images of African American women would help to protect them from criminal abuse and sexual assaults (Hine, 1990). Moreover, they were not simply affronted by the negative image of African American women; rather, they understood the far-reaching consequences and ramifications of that image and knew that women's treatment in the economic, social, and political arenas and their physical safety were enfolded in that pejorative image.

African American women who moved to cities alone were vulnerable to unscrupulous employment agents and others who desired to prey upon their naiveté and social isolation. These young single women did not have access to the "pink-collar" boarding houses that served single, working-class White women in cities. The pink-collar boarding houses served "business women" or clerical employees and provided a safe, protective, home-like living environment for them (Fine, 1986).

Victoria Earle Matthews was among the first African American women to identify the risks experienced by single African American women who migrated to cities. Matthews founded the White Rose Mission and

Industrial Association in 1897 in New York City to provide housing for African American girls and women. In addition to a safe home, these young women received educational opportunities and training in the principles of self-help and racial uplift. According to its 1906 annual report, the White Rose Mission provided temporary housing to shelter and protect young women who were new to the city. In addition, the mission became the headquarters for many women who were employed as domestic workers and had no place of their own to go on their days off; the women also received their mail at the mission. For many of these girls and women, other residents at the mission became the surrogate family with whom they discussed problems and shared advice and successes (Waites, 2001). The White Rose Mission's Travelers Aid service provided protection for self-supporting African American girls who moved to New York alone. Agents who were stationed at the piers to meet boats allayed the young women's anxieties, answered their questions, and escorted them either to their new jobs or to the White Rose Mission if no one met them at the docks.

Like Matthews, Jane Edna Hunter recognized, on her arrival in Cleveland from South Carolina, that there was a similar lack of housing for young African American women in that city. Hunter, a trained nurse, moved to the city to better her life. Yet limited employment opportunities, coupled with low wages, left her and many other similarly situated young women living in low-income boarding houses, where prostitution was commonly practiced. In response to this crisis, Hunter established the Phillis Wheatley Association in 1912. One year later, the association opened a boarding house, the Phillis Wheatley Home. The home became a safe residence for "friendless" African American girls and a way for them to avoid the disreputable tenements in the city's red-light districts. Eventually, it became a political base for mobilizing working-class African American women. By the beginning of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Phillis Wheatley Home had become a national program that was modeled in other major cities. Hunter oversaw the development of Wheatley Homes in such cities as Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and Minneapolis, Minnesota (Hine, 1990).

By 1926, the Emma Ransom House, a facility operated by the Harlem Branch of the YWCA, provided a "safe, cheap, and clean temporary residence that also made available good, cheap food, job training and placement, and social activities" for young African American women (Weisenfeld, 1994, p. 72). When the facility opened, it boasted housing space for over 200 young women. Ransom House's parental bent imposed strict rules and close supervision on its young residents. The house also sponsored dances and parties that became acceptable and popular social outlets for the young women residents (Weisenfeld, 1994).

## REFINEMENT

African American reform women developed various ways to “refine” African American women and girls. Many of these reformers harbored the belief that the race would become more acceptable to Whites if African American girls and women were “refined” and discarded racially demeaning habits and practices. In an effort to provide acceptable social outlets and to expose African American girls to the finer things, the National Association of Colored Women affiliates throughout the country hosted “numerous literary, art, and music appreciation clubs aimed at cultural improvement” (White, 1993, p. 250). Charlotte Hawkins Brown, the founder of Palmer Memorial Institute, was determined that her students should be refined and cultured. To Brown, culture and refinement meant

the discipline of the mental and moral powers manifest in the ease, grace and poise one exhibits in the performance of one’s life. It is the result of the development of the intellectual and the appreciation of the esthetic. Culture may be achieved through intensive training and continued practice. (quoted in White, 1993, p. 261)

Brown used various methods to teach this refinement to her students, including holding teas in her home on the campus that students were required to attend on a staggered but regular basis. These teas provided opportunities for the “continued practice” needed to develop culture that Brown advocated. Brown also developed what she called the “Palmer triangle of achievement” to emphasize her strict code of conduct, which included religion, culture, and educational excellence (McCluskey, 1997).

The idea of refinement was emphasized in many different venues, and middle-class families encouraged and reinforced cultured behavior in their children. Constance Fisher’s parents, for example, sent her money for new clothes just after she obtained her first social work job in 1924. In their letter, they wrote, “We are with you in your determination to ‘look the part,’ since you are so determined also to act the part of the fine woman we have wanted you so much to be” (quoted in Shaw, 1996, p. 111).

Looking and acting the part of the fine woman was critical to the refinement that reform women encouraged. The literature is filled with references to the impact that reform women’s appearance and cultured manner had on others. For example, a former student at Palmer Memorial Institute described Brown with admiration, saying “head to toe she was dressed in perfect taste; even the carnation on her well-tailored white suit was still slightly dripping with dew” (quoted in McCluskey, 1997, p. 415).

About 1916, Mamie Garvin Fields, a teacher and community activist in South Carolina, commented similarly on Mary Church Terrell’s appearance and refined manner. Describing the occasion when Terrell traveled to

Charleston to encourage African American women to organize for community development and racial uplift, Fields said that Terrell “brought the excitement” to them on the hot, sultry night when she spoke at the crowded Mt. Zion A. M. E. Church. According to Fields (1983), Terrell “walk[ed] onto the podium in her pink evening dress and long White gloves, with her beautifully done hair . . . [the epitome of] the Modern Woman” (p. 189). Fields said that Terrell was “regal, intelligent, powerful, reaching out from time to time with that long glove” and so “stirred up” the women that “nobody wanted to wait till morning to pick up our burden again” (p. 191). Although Fields vividly recalled the impact of Terrell’s dress, manner, and comportment, she also remembered the strength of the message that encouraged all the women to “go out into our communities to improve them . . . [and to] go out into the nation and change it [and] above all . . . [to] organize ourselves as Negro women and work together” (pp. 189-190). Terrell’s powerful message to the Charleston women was amplified that night not just because she was an excellent orator with a strong message but also because she was the epitome of refinement and culture—qualities that were worthy of emulation.

In some cases, however, the “refined and cultured image” sent mixed messages that may have diffused the image of power that these women also wanted to send. African American reformers knew that their poise and restraint put White audiences at ease. This poised behavior was sometimes mistaken for a lack of commitment, zeal, or racial pride. Or perhaps it may simply have been more comforting to perceive these women in this manner. For example, when Hannah Mitchell (1923), a journalist with the New York City *Tribune* (Washington Bureau), wrote about Elizabeth Ross Haynes and her colleague Helen Irvin, she committed a good deal of space to describing the women’s appearance, dress, and manner. She also discussed their roles with the Women in Industry Service of the U.S. Department of Labor but seemed to need to let her readers know that these were refined “ladies” who were worthy of her newspaper’s coverage. Mitchell described the women as “immaculate in their dress and gentle of manner” (p. 7). She noted that “Mrs. Irvin [was] small, of light complexion and wears simple brown clothes. . . . Mrs. Haynes is of medium height and of slightly darker complexion than Mrs. Irvin. Her speaking voice is beautifully modulated, and her diction is perfect” (Mitchell, 1923, p. 7).

Mitchell was clearly comfortable with and approving of these two labor experts. Their “refinement” made her feel safe. She commented that Irvin

had the manner of a person wholly detached. She has the charm of not appearing to possess consciousness of her race. Her talk of negro [*sic*] working women is as dispassionate as it would be if she were speaking instead of White women. The listener loses race consciousness himself and can feel no prejudice or pity. (Mitchell, 1923, p. 7)

Why did Mitchell find Irvin's "dispassionate" interview so comforting? Whatever the reason, African American reform women in the Progressive Era were fully aware of their White counterparts' feeling, reactions, attitudes, and values. As many scholars have indicated, these women knew their White sisters well and used that information to their advantage. Wilson (1997) pointed out, for example, that Ross Haynes "had learned to play a skillful mediating role between the competing interests of Black and White women" (p. xviii). Furthermore, these women knew that being too animated was neither ladylike nor cultured and might have made White women feel ill at ease in their presence and hence result in poor working relationships. Ergo, emotionalism was frowned on within the cadre of refined reform "ladies." These women discouraged emotionalism as a spectacle of lower-class life and an embarrassment to the "better" classes.

Also embracing a preference for "middle-class habits," Ross Haynes, in her research on African American women and labor issues, described the humdrum and mundane social life of these lower-class workers and lamented their lack of acceptable social outlets. She advocated more refined outlets for African American women who were engaged in common labor. She noted that farm women's recreational outlets came "through the monthly church meetings, the occasional burial of a friend or the annual trip to town at cotton-seed time" (Ross Haynes, 1922, p. 68). In her assessment of urban domestic workers, Ross Haynes found that church involvement supplied the only social life that older domestic workers had, whereas younger workers found their social outlets in "such places as dance halls, moving pictures, pool and billiard rooms, and the like. The social stigma attached to domestic services bars young domestic workers from many of the entertainments of real value and benefit" (Ross Haynes, 1923, p. 565). Ross Haynes (1922, p. 69) further advocated for better prepared ministers, teachers, welfare workers, and nurses to help make working women's lives "more endurable."

## CRITIQUE

For emphasis, this article has artificially divided and perhaps oversimplified the myriad activities of African American reform women. However, the women's philosophy of reform was holistic, and the uplift of the race, as they saw it, rested with the women of the race. Education and character development, protection, and refinement were all part and parcel of the whole picture and essential to the general goals of racial uplift.

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the women and girls who were being targeted for assistance appreciated these reformers, resented them, or felt ambivalent toward them. The private papers of many of the better known reformers are spotty at best, and significant records that tell a

story from the personal perspectives of lower-class illiterate or poorly educated women are even more elusive.

There were, nonetheless, some working-class women who were self-assured and assertive enough to express their views in ways that left a historical record. Pinky Pilcher (1936/1972), for example, wrote to Franklin Delano Roosevelt expressing her resentment toward White Works Project Administration workers for blocking opportunities for employment by African Americans. Another example is the oral history interviews with elder African American women who migrated from the rural South to Washington, DC, during the early 1900s. These women shared their discomfort with Washington, DC's, middle-class African American community, thus providing an unusual systematic glimpse of lower-class women's thoughts and feelings about their middle-class sisters (Clark-Lewis, 2000).

Furthermore, African American women who chose "race work" and service to the community, especially to women and girls, were challenged on many fronts. As "race women," they had continuously to prove their commitment to the race. They had to maintain a hypervigilance with regard to their elitism and had to make certain, by admonishing each other and by self-reflection, that they were not "falling into the trap of using their education and position to escape from contact with other classes of African Americans" (Weisenfeld, 1994, p. 68). In other words, they had to be sensitive to the way that they were perceived by the women and girls whom they sought to help.

In addition, African American women reformers had to function in a society in which Whites discouraged and even thwarted their efforts to help themselves. O'Donnell (1994) identified three themes that White social welfare reformers emphasized with regard to African American social welfare: The first theme was that African American "institutions are out of step with modern policy visions" (p. 769). This belief helped to keep African American institutions small and sometimes led to their demise. The second theme was that African Americans could not manage a program, and the third theme was that they could not manage money.

Settlement house matron Birdye Haynes found herself embroiled in a similar quagmire when she was head matron at Chicago's Wendell Phillips Settlement from 1911 to 1915. On inspecting the settlement, the White secretary of the Julius Rosenwald Fund recommended that there needed to be someone "in charge" of the settlement before additional money would be provided for the settlement's operating budget. He concluded that "there is no responsible head for the place as a whole," hence suggesting that Haynes was not capable of managing the program or the money even though she was a college graduate and was completing her social work certificate at the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy. Carlton-LaNey (1994) concluded that Birdye Haynes "was required to be diplomatic, tactful, and reticent as she interacted with the professionals, educators, advisory boards,

and clients who were all key players demanding success, but expecting failure" (p. 269). White philanthropists' negative valuations of Birdye Haynes complicated her job and prohibited the timely and competent delivery of needed social services. It also led potential consumers to become suspicious of service providers who approached them (Haynes, n.d.).

Another issue that shook the faith of African American consumers of services was class. Club women, for example, were sometimes criticized for mimicking White women and for using club work as an excuse to socialize (White, 1993). Others claimed that the reformers promised an array of activities but did not always deliver on their promises. Birdye Haynes's close relationship with the community helped her to understand the source of this skepticism. In her solicitation to her board for greater support and commitment, she stated,

We hope for a time when the work will have sufficient backing to put it upon a permanent basis, when confidence of its existence can be assured so that the people for whom it stands will feel satisfied to take hold in a substantial way and our friends who have helped and will help shall be able to feel that it is surely worthwhile. (Haynes, n.d.)

## CONCLUSION

Worthwhile and useful social services that targeted women and girls were central to African American reform women's race work and feminine instincts. Whether labeled with negative descriptors such as "uppity" and arrogant or more endearing, favorable terms, the Progressive Era reformers were tenacious in their efforts of social betterment for neglected members of society. Their efforts to protect, refine, educate, and shelter vulnerable females were crucial. In sum, working for the betterment of African American girls and women allowed the reformers to repay a social debt, to develop and use skills for designing and managing programs, and to engage in policy practice.

The same elements and dimensions of practice that emerged during the early part of the 1900s continue to be useful in practice today. Many contemporary social workers know little about their African American clients and, further to their detriment, do not see the significance of immersing themselves in African American history and culture. Martin and Martin (1995) noted that historical understanding fosters sensitivity to the plight of African American people in contemporary society by providing a sense of historical continuity that helps one to see the relationship and the parallels between the past and the present. Young African American women and girls could benefit from similar programs and services. Pioneer social welfare reformers have provided a model and guide for contemporary social

workers to modify and implement. Our responsibility is to accept the challenge and to respond with timely and creative programs and services.

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*Iris Carlton-LaNey, Ph.D., is a professor in the School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 301 Pittsboro Street, CB 3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550; e-mail: ibc9717@email.unc.edu.*

*Vanessa Hodges, Ph.D., is the associate dean and an associate professor in the School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 301 Pittsboro Street, CB 3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550; e-mail: vghodges@email.unc.edu.*