GIRL BEHIND THE COUNTER:
THE IMAGE OF THE DEPARTMENT STORE
SALESWOMAN IN POPULAR MAGAZINES
1890 - 1920

A Thesis

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by

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the century, many members of the middle and upper classes felt threatened by economic breakdown, moral and social degeneration and the eclipse of democratic institutions. These men and women groped for stability in an increasingly industrial world; they sought a new set of values and a new kind of social order, one that would preoccupy them through the first World War and beyond, and one that would come to be known as the progressive movement.

Many participants of the progressive movement were alarmed at the rapid influx of women into the paid labor force at the turn of the century. Appalled by the grim realities of American industrial life, social reformers sought to awaken the uninformed social conscience and demanded that the state accept responsibility for the health and safety of its citizens in the workplace. As part of the larger campaign to ameliorate female wage-earners' working conditions, the National Consumers' League organized in the 1890s and devoted its efforts to department store saleswomen. The NCL shared the Progressive optimism of other reform groups, relying on
the power of reason to solve social problems. Members of
the NCL investigated the department store and its work
force in detail and endeavored to educate the public on
the basis of their findings. In order to "educate public
opinion," members of the NCL strategically placed their
findings on department stores in popular magazines to
reach a nationwide audience. The image of the saleswoman
created by Progressive journalists and reformers formed
the basis of the analysis on which reformers devised
public policy solutions such as protective
legislation.¹

This paper seeks to interpret the popular image of
the department store saleswoman by examining feature
articles by Progressive journalists and social reformers
in contemporary magazines. Before World War I turned their
thoughts away from domestic concerns, the American people
conducted a sensational house-cleaning. Contemporary
periodicals, through their factual articles as well as
fiction, mirrored and often shaped the popular attitudes
of a turbulent reform era. The collection of articles on
department store women constitutes a distinct body of
literature, capable of casting new light on the thought of
the American citizen as he or she confronted one of the
most controversial issues of his time - the plight of the
working-class woman.
It is, by now, commonplace to state that students of women’s history must be imaginative in their use of sources, and this is especially true when working-class women are the subject of study. Historians Susan Porter Benson and Sarah Smith Malino have relied on a variety of sources and contributed much to the study of department store saleswomen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In "The Customers Ain’t God," Benson explores the concept of work culture in early department stores. In order to analyze saleswomen’s shop-floor interactions, Benson uses social investigation reports, theses in retailing, human relations studies, and Echo, the newspaper of the Filene Co-Operative Association. In another article, "The Cindarella of Occupations," Benson makes use of retail trade journals to analyze management practices and the working relationship between managers and saleswomen. Malino’s dissertation, "Faces Across the Counter," relies on sources similar to Benson’s, but Malino views saleswomen in a much broader context by looking at the origins of the female labor force in the department store, the evolution of department store management policy, work conditions, and the advantages of department store work. In her final chapter, Malino discusses the relationship between Progressive reformers and saleswomen, but does not analyze the image of the saleswoman portrayed by journalists and reformers.
in popular magazines. This study attempts to both assimilate and to fill the gap in the literature on department store saleswomen by comparing Progressive reformers' perceptions of the shopgirl to the more realistic life and work of the saleswoman.

The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature provided listings for almost fifty articles on saleswomen or at least one aspect of their working conditions. The articles appeared in twenty magazines, representing various shades of public opinion and directed to audiences on several levels of intellectual awareness. While the issue of the department store woman and her wages was a "much discussed question," the popular image of the shopgirl set forth in these articles had a limited impact influencing public opinion.
1. None of the secondary works on the National Consumers' League actually discuss how the organization sought to educate public opinion. The conclusion drawn here is based on the fact that many of the articles' authors were members of the NCL: Josephine Goldmark, Mary Van Kleeck, Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, Rheta Childe Dorr, and Annie Marion MacLean. The writings of Mary Rankin Cranston, Alice Calvin, Anne O'Hagan, and Mary K. Maule suggest that they, too, were members of the NCL but no bibliographic information could be found. For the most part, historians mention the NCL in passing, as a manifestation of Progressive mentality. The most comprehensive study of the NCL cited is an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Louis Lee Athey, "The Consumers' League and Social Reform, 1890-1923" (University of Delaware, 1965), which, unfortunately, was unavailable for this study. Other informative secondary works include Allis Rosenberg Wolfe, "Women, Consumerism, and the National Consumers' League in the Progressive Era, 1900-1923," Labor History 16 (Summer 1975): 378-92; and William O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969).

CHAPTER I
THE DEPARTMENT STORE, WOMEN, AND REFORM

The emergence of the department store in the latter part of the nineteenth century created changes in the urban retail industry and in female labor force participation. The lavishly decorated "palace of consumption," as novelist Theodore Dreiser referred to it, eclipsed the cramped, cluttered, and dingy dry goods store. Innovative advertising techniques replaced simple newspaper announcements, and the store merchandise, displayed in an aggressive yet attractive manner, took on a life of its own and practically sold itself. By the turn of the century, women replaced men behind the counters of the grand emporiums, and by 1915, women did between 80 and 85 percent of the consumer purchasing in the United States. Department stores had grown into an essentially feminine domain.

Women recognized that a certain responsibility came with their new role in the increasingly industrial society. Most historians of reform in the Progressive Era
maintain that American consumers developed a group consciousness during this period. Although the National Consumers' League never had more than a few thousand members, it was an important manifestation of the growing concern about the consumers' role. By the end of the 1890s, middle and upper class women, who comprised the majority of the League's membership, regarded consumerism as an issue of vital importance.¹

**Origins of the Department Store**

and its Labor Force

The creation of a national market through improvements in transportation and communications revolutionized the marketing and distribution of goods in the United States by providing fast, regular, and dependable service. Modern commodity dealers, wholesale jobbers and mass retailers (department stores, mail-order houses, and chain stores) reduced the number of transactions between the producers or manufacturers and the consumer, and made it possible to increase the speed and lower the cost of distributing goods. Department stores appeared in cities across the country during the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s; some of the most popular included Macy's, Wanamaker's, Marshall Field's, Strawbridge and Clothier, I. Magnin, Lazarus, and Bloomingdale's.²
The first department stores grew out of large wholesaling establishments or small retail clothing and dry goods enterprises. Grand and lavishly decorated, emporiums not only presented their goods in an appealing fashion, but offered a variety of services and public accommodations. These emporiums generally purchased goods in large volume and made profits by selling at low prices and low margins. The one-price system eliminated haggling between clerk and customer and made the thousands of daily sales more efficient. Most important, mass retailers maintained a high level of stock-turn by marking down slow-moving items, using displays and extensive local advertising, and creating a clearly defined management structure.3

Retail merchants widely advertised their bargains to attract customers and move the stock quickly. Daily advertisements in newspapers were eye-catching and described each department store's goods as unique and desirable. Many Americans seemed to believe Macy's promise that if they would "Ride our bicycles, read our books, cook in our saucepans, dine off our china, wear our silks, get under our blankets, smoke our cigars...life will Cost You Less and Yield You More Than You Dreamed Possible."4 By 1900 department stores had little in common with the drab dry goods houses of the nineteenth century. As one of the advertising managers at Wanamaker's observed: "store
decorators 'transfigured' and 'transposed' the stores as well as the goods into 'pictures' to impress the customers." Seasonal, festive, and exotic themes were commonplace in displays of goods. Stores were decorated, for example, to resemble French salons, rose and apple-blossom festivals, Egyptian temples, and Japanese gardens.

Department stores were among the first modern institutions to make the most of new technologies in glass, mirrors, colors and lights. By 1905, department stores used forty-one different kinds of glass showcases, some using glass counters or curved and straight glass doors and shelves. Mirrors created illusions, such as the image of a product multiplied to infinity. The large emporiums designed rooms, displays, and sometimes the entire store around a single color scheme. Filene's of Boston was decorated in various tints and shades of green from the basement to the roof in 1901. And customers saw some of the first new colors manufactured from chemical dyes in the department stores. Display managers used colors to create fanciful rooms with puffed archways of colored silk, garlands of flowers, plush draperies, and cages of variegated birds. By 1905, some stores had combined the technologies of glass, color, and artificial and natural lighting for stunning effects. And some even had fountains illuminated by colored lights.
Department stores also brought color, glass, and lights to the city streets by floodlighting their exteriors or outlining them in light. In 1913, Gimbel Brothers of Milwaukee fashioned the world's biggest electrical sign. Erected on top of a fourteen-story building and spelled out by 2,500 lamps, the word "GIMBELS" could be read thirty miles away. By 1915, new kinds of advertising such as poster art, electrical signs, and illuminated and painted billboards dotted the cityscape. The department store show window also emerged as a major advertising tool. The eye-catching windows were often more important than the goods within them, for they represented the signature of individual stores and the "inner possibilities of store life."

Retail merchants did everything in their power to entice people to shop and to keep them in the stores. Merchants built their own auditoriums as early as the 1890s, and department stores were literally transformed into theaters, sponsoring plays, musicals and concerts. In 1904 Richard Strauss conducted the world premier performance of his Symphonia Domestica in Wanamaker's palatial rotunda in New York. In the early 1900s, American retail merchants took a revolutionary step and installed the exclusive and intimate Paris fashion show in the department store, a mass consumer institution. "By 1920 the department store was a zoo (Bloomingdale's
and Wanamaker's in New York had enormous pet stores), a botanical garden (floral shops, miniature conservatories, roof gardens), a restaurant (some of the major stores had lavish restaurants bigger than any other in their cities), a barber shop, a butcher shop, a museum (gift and art shops, art exhibits), a world's fair, a library, a post office, a beauty parlor."

Service was another extraordinary feature of department stores. By the 1890s, ladies' parlors, restaurants, lunch counters, and the giving of complimentary gifts and souvenirs such as flowers and ice cream were ordinary services in stores. Later small nurseries and elaborate playgrounds run by trained personnel gave shoppers the opportunity to wander about and shop unhampered. Orchestras and small bands played for customers' listening pleasure, and Siegel-Cooper even placed an all-woman orchestra in its grocery section. The large emporiums boasted branch public libraries and small infirmaries to care for customers feeling out of sorts. And by 1902 charge accounts held widespread legitimacy."

Modern department stores sold to the growing urban market in the largest American cities. New York City experienced a profuse growth in department stores, for it was the largest concentrated urban market in the nation at the turn of the century. In other American cities, such as
Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago, the timing of the arrival of the department store and the quantity of stores correlated closely with the expansion of the city.10 Because commercial centers had not developed as rapidly in the West, there were fewer department stores in this part of the country. Consequently, observers of department store women focused their exposes on eastern stores, especially those in New York City.11

As the size and number of department stores grew, so did the ranks of employees. After 1870, the male monopoly behind the counters yielded to a preponderance of females. The number of women actually employed in stores in 1870 was probably less than 5000. By 1920, over half a million women were classified as saleswomen or store clerks under Census Bureau listings for trade occupations. This number constituted nearly ten percent of all women employed in nonagricultural occupations.12 Historians do not have a standard explanation for why sex changes occur in a particular occupation. It is commonly recognized that women were a large, available, and inexpensive source of labor in the late nineteenth century, but why women were especially available for store work and why store owners chose to hire them requires further examination.13

To some extent, general economic trends determined the extent of women's participation in the paid labor force. As an obvious consequence of industrialization, the
occupational distribution of the labor force changed drastically between 1870 and 1920. This meant that the number of workers engaged in agriculture dropped as new opportunities arose in manufacturing, transportation, and trade industries. More opportunity for new non-manual employment was available, and the majority of the new jobs were in distribution, frequently in retail stores. In addition to these general trends, more specific economic factors and social attitudes toward women’s roles and abilities have traditionally defined women’s place in the work force.¹⁴

The supply of women who had to work for wages came from numerous sources. The Civil War took the lives of many men, causing some of their widows to seek employment. Industrial accidents and diseases consumed the lives of many men. And seasonal work, high unemployment rates, and low wages encouraged married and single women alike to contribute to their families’ economic survival. Most young girls who lived at home turned over their earnings to the family. A study conducted in 1908-09 found that 55.6 percent of Boston female store workers contributed all of their earnings to their families.¹⁵

Women’s personal preferences as to the type of work they wanted to do often yielded to family circumstances, the availability of work, and the skill levels required for the position. Where they had choices, immigrant women
preferred factory jobs to domestic-service jobs, but ethnic origin and economic position often left them no choice. Large numbers of Jews and Italians, for example, worked in the garment industries of large cities, while Polish and Slavic women tended to work in the textile mills in New England or the South, or in meat-packing and food-processing plants in the Midwest. Women of tightly knit ethnic groups desired companionship and felt the need to be close to home, so the number of job possibilities available to them was automatically reduced."

Most female store workers came from the cities where the department stores were located. They were not, however, the unskilled immigrant workers commonly associated with industrial work. Historian Alice Kessler-Harris has shown that within their own economic sphere, working women developed hierarchies of desirable occupations that were class-based. Professional jobs, like teaching and nursing, headed the list. Less skilled women chose office work or perhaps department store work. And those with few skills entered the ranks of factory workers, waitresses, and domestic servants, in that order. In part, this hierarchy reflected class, ethnic, and racial distinctions in the work force as well as the preferences of employers for "American-born" workers.

The desire for gentility and morality overrode poor working conditions and low pay. Department store work was
appealing because it maintained values appropriate to future home life and it attracted "a nice class of girls." Factories took second place to the mercantile houses even though the pay was often higher. Domestic servants and waitresses usually earned more than a factory operative, but those positions carried a social stigma. Domestic-service jobs were often thought of in terms of downward mobility, while waitressing had a "demoralizing tendency." Women treated waitresses as social pariahs because they were said to be "more free and easy in manners and speech" (especially if they wanted generous tips) than other wage-earners. Class lines and status between different jobs within the hierarchy were rigidly defined and women did not cross them socially.18

Native-born white women most commonly emphasized morality and refinement, and social reformer Elizabeth Butler noted that "native-born girls of Anglo-Saxon stock prefer when possible to choose an occupation socially superior to factory work." Retail merchants preferred to hire native-born girls as well; they could both turn a profit and please their middle and upper-class customers who "prefer[ed] to be served by Americans." Department store selling required basic literacy, a speaking knowledge of English, the fundamentals of arithmetic, and a socially acceptable manner and appearance. These criteria eliminated most immigrants except British and
Irish anyway. And classifying jobs along lines of respectability and adhering to the divisions created another advantage for retail merchants. Employers could offer reduced wages to those who sought rectitude and the privilege of working with native-born girls.19

Elizabeth Butler's classic study of Baltimore's saleswomen shows that out of thirty-four of the city's largest stores, all tried to hire some "American girls" in order to maintain their distinction. Native-born girls were the majority in twenty-two stores, while two stores employed only American girls. Eight department stores refused to hire Jewish girls, but they were employed in twenty-six other stores; and Jews were a majority in seven of those. "Girls of German extraction" worked in twenty-seven stores, predominating in five. "The reason for the latter," Butler explained, "lies not in a policy of the stores but in the character of the neighborhood, which is largely German." Butler reported that stores would not hire Slavic girls except in those cities where Slavic children had had the benefit of American schooling. Only three stores in Baltimore employed about forty-five Polish and Croatian girls and at least thirty-five of that total worked in alterations. Retail merchants employed more native-born females than any other industry.20

The question still remains as to why retail merchants chose women over men for department store work. Economist
Valerie Oppenheimer contends that men's jobs become women's jobs only if economic conditions change radically or if the job description changes. If a job has a sex-identified label, few members of the opposite sex will pursue that occupation. Merchants did not hire women to work in department stores simply because they were available. The nature of retail work was undergoing a transformation and women fit into the scheme of change.

Men found store work increasingly less desirable. Before the advent of the large department stores, men's selling skill was considered to be an inborn knack, a talent, and a fine art. The one-price policies of the new department stores eliminated the haggling and bargaining that were the trademarks of individual clerks; thus, clerks played a relatively smaller role in generating store profits. The salesclerk's duties were reduced to locating and displaying merchandise and collecting money from the sale as the job became more standardized and required less responsibility. Additionally, as retail merchants hired more clerks at the same level in the store hierarchy, chances for promotion decreased. Store employment became less desirable to men because it presented less of a challenge and less promise for upward mobility than it had earlier in the nineteenth century.
In the 1850s, some time before retail merchants hired women in significant numbers, trade journals advocated the employment of women as sales clerks. In 1855, Freeman Hunt's *Merchants Magazine and Commercial Review*, a comprehensive business periodical, informed its readers that women's innate qualities and genteel manner made them more suitable for clerking than men. One writer commended the employment of women as retail clerks because it allowed men to pursue "more athletic and useful employments." The underlying notions about the aptness of women for department store work were prevalent nineteenth-century perceptions and beliefs about women's nature and place which evolved in response to early industrialization. The central convention which governed feminine social roles and education in the nineteenth century was the idea of "domesticity." Spheres of activity for men and women were essentially different; the women's sphere was the home while men dominated in the marketplace. The home was to be a peaceful haven, or sanctuary, from the stress and strain of the work place. As guardian of the home, it was the woman's function to see that her house provided the proper environment for her husband and family. She was to support and nurture her husband and children, and to uphold such feminine virtues as patience, gentility, obedience, cheerfulness, and diligence. She achieved fulfillment through the rewards of
being a wife and a mother, and her education was to be directed towards that end. As a teacher of religion and the keeper of morals, she was responsible for the future of the Republic.24

Middle-class Americans cherished these ideals of womanhood throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These notions influenced not only store owners and managers, but Progressive reformers and even the saleswomen themselves. And it was these "womanly" characteristics that made women more suitable for retail employment - "an adeptness at manipulating people, sympathetic ways of responding to the needs of others, and a familiarity with things domestic."25 A Progressive journalist who addressed the question of why there were more women clerks than men, argued that it was women's "character superiority" that made them preferable. "Women are more patient than men under nagging; they have more self-control when they are asked a hundred unnecessary questions a hundred times a day - they do not so readily resort to blows when their veracity is doubted, as men do; they are more adaptable than men - they have had to be; they are less likely to answer with impertinence with its own kind, or to reply: "None of your business." There are also, of course, the facts that women are cleverer with their fingers than men and that they are better suited to sell women the things that women wish to buy."26
A few stores preferred to employ male clerks as late as the 1870s, particularly in New York City. It was said that A. T. Stewart, a pioneer in large-scale retailing in New York, "hired the handsomest men he could obtain as clerks because he had noticed that ladies who shopped in his store liked to gossip and even to flirt with them." Observers noted that "Stewart’s nice young men" were so popular that other stores used the same ploy to attract customers. "He-biddies" were still commonplace in New York in the 1850s, but retail merchants in other cities were hiring women as clerks at an increasing pace. Men indisputably filled the highest managerial ranks and some men did remain as clerks, but women were the backbone of the department store labor force by the 1880s.

Thus, various economic conditions and the new character of department store work gave retail merchants incentives to hire women. As economic changes supported the feasibility of retail employment for women, social attitudes emerged which encouraged public acceptance of female clerks. A journalist writing in 1910 captured the overwhelmingly female flavor of the department store:

Buying and selling, serving and being served — women. On every floor, in every aisle, at every counter, women...Down in the basement buying and selling bargains in marked-down summer frocks, women. Up under the roof, posting ledgers, auditing accounts, attending to all the complex bookkeeping of a great metropolitan department store, women. Behind
most of the counters on all the floors between, women...Filling the aisles, passing and repassing, a constantly arriving and departing throng of shoppers, women. Simply a moving, seeking, hurrying mass of femininity, in the midst of which the occasional man shopper, man clerk, and man supervisor, looks lost and out of place.

Consumerism and the National Consumers' League

As industrialization and mechanization accelerated throughout the nineteenth century, production within the household continuously declined. Goods that had once been produced in the home—such as candles, soap, baked bread, canned and preserved food, and clothing for the entire family—were mass-produced and could be bought at the store for a far more reasonable price. While these changes created employment opportunities for working class women, the social dictates of domesticity, leisure, and "true womanhood" still confined middle and upper class women to the home. New possibilities led some of the young women from well-off families to education as coeducational universities and new colleges for women opened in the 1870s and 1880s. Others joined together in clubs "to enlarge women's sphere of interest both for self and for communal improvement." And yet another group of middle and upper class women interpreted their social functions more broadly, reaching across class lines to help poor working class women and children in their struggle for higher wages and better working conditions.29
Of this latter group of women, some recognized that their role as industrial society's chief consumer was a way to participate in the larger reform movement of the Progressive Era. The National Consumers' League grew out of the Working Women's Society, a New York based organization which was the foundation of the New York Consumers' League. In 1890, under the auspice of the Working Women's Society, a group of department store saleswomen and cash girls organized a mass meeting to publicize their low wages, long hours, and poor working conditions. Their presentation was so effective that a committee of prominent citizens - including clergymen and wealthy reformers like Josephine Shaw Lowell, Maud Nathan, and Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi - investigated the conditions themselves and met to discuss what action they could take to improve them.30

The participants of that meeting, which included working women, agreed that saleswomen and girls could not organize a union, for they faced too many obstacles. The women were too young and they were too unskilled to join any of the existing craft unions. Since the workers could not organize themselves, the reformers assumed the responsibility for improving working conditions for women. The New York League formulated strategies and goals that fell into two basic categories: protective
legislation and ethical control of consumption. The New York League employed a variety of techniques to publicize wages and working conditions in department stores. In its most unusual one, socially prominent members blocked traffic on busy street corners to distribute leaflets, got themselves arrested, and then granted interviews to reporters to explain their behavior and the cause they were fighting for. Through lobbying, letters and petitions to the state legislators, and lectures at churches and settlement house meetings, the League played an important role in persuading the New York legislature to pass the Mercantile Inspection Act in 1898. The act limited the number of hours for women under 21 and boys under 16 to sixty hours per week and required retail merchants to observe a working day of ten hours, not to begin before 7:00 a.m. and not to last after 10:00 p.m. The act also required mercantile establishments to furnish sanitary rest rooms.

The New York Consumers' League also organized a "White List" campaign to aid the consumer in buying ethically. To get on the White List a retail merchant had to meet the "Standard of a Fair House": equal pay for equal work, a minimum wage of six dollars per week, paid overtime, a forty-five minute lunch break, a six day week, at least one week paid vacation during the summer, no children hired for store work, seats for saleswomen, a
locker room, a lunch room, and adequate rest time for all workers. The White List was published in newspapers and posted on subway walls, and consumers were supposed to frequent only those stores listed. The League distributed one thousand contracts embodying the Fair House provisions, but only thirty were returned; upon inspection, only four of those passed. Most stores ignored the campaign and newspapers who had department store accounts refused to print the White List.\(^\text{33}\)

The New York Consumers' League inspired the founding of other leagues, even though its achievements were few. In 1899, the four existing Leagues of New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Illinois created a National Consumers' League to coordinate the activities of the state organizations. And, they maintained, a national organization would be more effective in lobbying for federal legislation. The National League adopted many of the tactics and goals of the New York League. The National League, however, extended its program beyond retail clerks to include workers and conditions in factories. According to Florence Kelley, the guiding spirit of the National League, the organization was to have two main objectives. The first goal was to make all consumers aware of the amount of power they could exert. The second was to use this power to improve working conditions for women and children wage-earners.\(^\text{34}\)
The national and various state leagues fought for protective legislation for women and children. They campaigned for a shorter day for women employed in department stores, but only two states passed legislation on a reduction of hours. In 1908, the National Leagues' leaders attended an international conference in Geneva, Switzerland. The Consumers' League of France called the meeting to discuss the sweating system and minimum wage legislation. As a result of the conference, the National Consumers' League made the demand for minimum wage legislation part of its program. An essential part of the campaign for minimum wage legislation consisted of educating the public about the working conditions of women and children in various occupations.39

Reformers rejoiced at another breakthrough in 1908. When the Oregon Ten-Hour law was challenged in 1907, Louis Brandeis and his sister-in-law Josephine Goldmark, working at the time for the National Consumers' League, prepared a brief to defend before the Supreme Court. Since the Court had earlier ruled that the state's police power extended to matters of public health, Brandeis and Goldmark collected data on the grim effects of overworking women and children. Their argument was a persuasive one, relying on strong language and extensive quotations from state and federal labor officials and physicians. The brief basically combined arguments for womanhood with evidence
on woman's relative lack of stamina. The Court's ruling in *Muller v. Oregon* finally legitimized protective legislation for women and children.36

At first the prime target for legislation was hours, and manufacturing and department store work were first on the list. Regulations differed from state to state and from industry to industry within each state. By 1914, twenty-seven states had some form of regulation restricting women's working day, and three years later, only nine states had not passed legislation limiting hours for women. The limits, however, were often evaded. Retail clerks were not held to the lawful limit on hours during the holiday season. And some employers would overwork saleswomen twelve or fifteen hours a day for four or five days to stay within the restricted number of hours per week. Minimum wage legislation was even less successful. Only states where rural concerns far exceeded industrial and mercantile interests passed such legislation. By 1920, the only industrial state with minimum wage legislation was Massachusetts.37

Historian William O'Neill asserts that the National Consumers' League was a "protypical specimen of the Progressive mentality." The NCL fully believed in the power of reason to change society. It investigated each problem in detail and then educated the public on the basis of its discoveries. Finally, the organization relied
on moral indignation to influence public policy. While members of the NCL lobbied when necessary, they relied mainly on the Progressive formula of investigation, education, and moral persuasion. One of the most powerful and far-reaching ways to "educate public opinion" was to report the findings of department store investigations in popular magazines. Many of the journalists and reformers who wrote feature articles on shopgirls were members of the Consumers' League. Their studies showed how long hours and low wages deprived young women of wholesome lives and endangered their fitness for motherhood. By publicizing a certain image of the young shopgirl, the Consumers' League hoped to appeal to middle and upper class readers for support of protective legislation.
ENDNOTES – CHAPTER I


3. Ibid., 227.


8. Ibid., 326-28.


16. Ibid., 127.
17. Ibid., 128, 135.


23. Malino, "Faces Across the Counter," 31-32; Hower, History of Macy's, 192-93.


27. Hower, History of Macy's, 192-93.


30


35. Ibid., 386-87.

36. Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, 186-88; O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave, 151-52.


38. O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave, 97-98.
CHAPTER II
PORTRAIT OF A SHOPGIRL

On behalf of saleswomen in department stores, journalists and reformers, many of whom were members of the Consumers' League, led a three-pronged attack against the department store. As consumers and as concerned citizens who adhered to the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, journalists assumed the responsibility of disclosing the stores' corrupting influences on the young girls who worked there. In addition, they revealed the adverse working conditions in department stores and, finally, they discussed the potential dangers resulting from low wages.

Who is the Shopgirl?

In creating a new image of the department store woman, reformers tried to dispel the old, or the common, perception of saleswomen. Some writers briefly mentioned this stereotype, which characterized the shopgirl as
especially rude and indifferent toward female customers. According to the shoppers, none of the shopgirls saw women when they entered the store or heard them when they asked to see goods. When a shopgirl finally took notice of the customer, she was unfamiliar with the stock, loud, impertinent, and disrespectful. "'Sadie, where is that pink organdy?' or Maggie, can we match this stuff?' or 'Where's that ten-cent muslin?" After she pushed or flung the article across the counter, the salesgirl would quickly resume gossiping with her fellow workers, making it difficult for the customer to attract her attention again. The female customers interpreted this behavior as an attempt by shopgirls to assert social equality. It was as if the shopgirls were saying "I am as good as you and I want you to know it, though I am a saleswoman". Indeed, "to the lady out for a day's shopping, the girl behind the counter seems a veritable 'haughty Lady Imogen,' who disciplines insistent mortals until, in despair, they take their departure, chastened in spirit."

The reformers argued that this dismal picture did not represent all department store women, however. And, if the picture was true of any shopgirls, as some customers may have argued, it was due to the poor attitude of either the customer herself or of that particular store management toward its employees. The reformers believed that the department store's rules, regulations, and wages
determined the sort of employee it would have. "It would be as easy to imagine a Bowery waiter bawling an order through Delmonico's," one journalist wrote, "as to picture the indifferent, impertinent saleswomen of certain stores rapping upon the counters of certain others and calling, in the high pitched, rasping voice affected for these occasions, "Cash, cash!" And, if the shopgirl was not always cheerful and courteous even in the best of stores, her behavior was still excusable. The reasons for this become clear in the portrait of the shopgirl disclosed by Progressive reformers and journalists.

According to their writings, the shopgirls were young, naive girls who were drawn to department store work from small towns and farmlands. The shopgirl worked out of economic necessity. She did not aspire to be a "saleslady," rather her family encountered some sort of financial hardship which forced the girl to enter department store work. As the oldest of six children, one girl interviewed by Mary R. Cranston worked to help support her family when her father died. Another girl's father was an iron worker who broke both of his legs on the job. The shopgirl, then, was often an unsung heroine. She had to shoulder "the burden of caring for a widowed mother and younger children, or [work] for a sick and helpless father." Perhaps she rose early and before going to the store, did a day's work at home, while most people still enjoyed their morning's sleep.
Why Work in a Department Store

Some writers wondered what attracted these simple, innocent girls to work in department stores, especially when reports instigated by Progressive reformers showed such poor working conditions. Shopgirls received low wages, barely enough for sustenance and shelter let alone any comforts or luxuries. The long hours were physically and mentally grueling, and the sanitary conditions were less than satisfactory. The young girls were robbed of proper amusements, the stores placed restraints on their behavior, and store workers had to conform to dress codes. Their tasks were routine and the stores required that employees be polite and courteous to a variety of customers, most of whom were tired, rude and cross. If the rewards were few in department store work, reformers wondered why girls did not choose factory work instead, for according to the journalists, the conditions were no worse and the wages were most often higher.

Progressives suggested that the luxurious environment of the new emporiums dazzled and captivated young girls. Journalists William Hard and Rheta Childe Dorr described how a susceptible young girl who cut pork every day for a
living perceived the opulence of the store. "What tiers of glass levels in the perfumery section! What rows of bottles! What odors of violets and orris! And what clothes in the aisles everyday! What dressing! And what talking!" Progressives believed that being surrounded by wealth and beautiful things each day naturally appealed to the girls. And each girl would be assigned her own section of stock for arrangement and sale - "pretty things, to touch and have the care of delicate fabrics with their dainty colorings." Shopgirls wore nicer clothes, as well, so they would blend in with their elegant surroundings. Indeed, the factory woman would gladly cast off her "rough working skirt, her frayed working waist, her battered working hat (nobody will see them except the foreman, so why should she worry about them?)" and don the "trim-rugged skirt; close-hauled waist; [and] fresh, feather-circled, fluttering hat" of the shopgirl.

Working in a department store was also more enjoyable for girls than factory work, the reformers believed. One of the reasons Mary Smith wanted to work at Filene's in Boston was that she had heard "that it is a mighty good place...[and] the girls say they have awfully good times there. They have parties and plays and picnics and concerts." Welfare programs of the larger stores, particularly the recreation and entertainment benefits,
were enticing to the young girls. The shopgirl could also eat in the cafeteria, where she picked out her own lunch and ate off a plate. There were many girls to meet and talk with in the cafeteria or to gossip with later in the store when business was slow. The shopgirl could expect to "gather all the latest hints about the latest fashions if you know the right girls, and all the best bargains in the street can be held out for you if you'll hurry round by noon to-morrow. And you can hear so much talk! And you can get in some wise remarks of your own with a wise audience to hear them." The various talk also included their health, their pains, their grievances against management and customers, their evenings out, and their "fellows." If faced with the choice between sub-human toil in a factory and sub-human wages in a department store, reformers were sure which route the young wage-earner would prefer.

According to reformers, the shopgirls believed that the department store promised them social position. When Hard and Dorr sought to determine what drove "Maggie" from the factory, at a sacrifice of three to five dollars a week, to become "Miss Sanborn" in the department store, they found that "a social distinction is a fact, just as the law of gravitation is a fact." What made one job more desirable than another had as much to do with status as with the income it produced. Women favored department
store work because it attracted a "better class" than factory work or domestic service. Even the language used in department stores was sophisticated and refined. "A lady is not a 'Lady.' She is 'Madam.' Customers are annoyed by the abrupt query, 'Something cheaper?' They are soothed by the statement that the stock contains 'something less expensive.'" The politeness exercised with shoppers even flowed into conversations with fellow employees. A flat was no longer a flat, for example, it was an "apartment." For those who had to earn wages and could make a choice, department stores reflected such values as cleanliness, affirmation of home roles, and possibilities of remaining "good." Thus, department store workers possessed elements of "a certain Prejudice, a certain Convention, a certain Snobbishness" and an "absolute, effective Social Superiority" over their wage-earning counterparts.

Department store work was also socially acceptable to others, especially potential husbands. An important feature of store work to shopgirls, according to the journalists, was the opportunity to meet a middle-class man whom she could marry. A shopgirl in Fall River, Massachusetts sold furs she could not afford to the mill girls. Although she could have made more money in the mill, she explained that a family she knew invited her to dinner regularly. And they knew "a lot of men, awfully
clever men" who attended college. "They don’t mind the store, but they really couldn’t invite me if I worked in a mill." Hard and Dorr commended the business shrewdness of the shopgirl. "Consider her destiny! A few years of work. Then many years of marriage...What was her work to her compared with her marriage?" Although she sacrificed economic rewards as a shopgirl, it was little compared to the "social bearing on the financial and social environment in which, after marriage, she and her children would move."14

Another journalist interviewed a shopgirl about the advantages of employment in a big store versus domestic work. The shopgirl reported that in a department store there were more opportunities for advancement, less people to answer to and take responsibility for, and her evenings were free to enjoy. If there was any prejudice about a girl’s job, she clarified, "it is with the young men who come to see the girls. You won’t find many men who would go to see a girl who was a ‘kitchen mechanic.’" A girl’s "chances of securing a good husband are certainly much better if she is working in a store than if she is a domestic servant."15 Thus, the reformers believed that women could achieve their version of upward mobility in a job, like department store work, based on more traditional roles and values.
The Dangers of Department Store Work

The Progressives identified, then, what they thought mattered most to the young shopgirls: fun, luxuries, a sense of social importance, their wardrobe, and finding a husband. Drawing their own conclusions, it seemed to follow that young girls sacrificed higher wages for the glitter and glamour of the department store. The reformers worried deeply about the dangers of store work, for their studies showed that the realities of department stores were far different from what the girls had imagined or hoped for. Their concerns reflect the Progressive fear of big business and the materialistic corruption of department stores.

Progressive reformers believed department store work endangered the health and vitality of shopgirls and lowered their "child-bearing and child-rearing attributes." The work required both physical and mental effort, for trying conditions surrounded department store women - "hard days, disagreeable customers and long hours, and the fatigue and nervous headaches that so often result from these." Regardless of the seats required by law behind the counter, the workday involved ten long hours of standing; standing gave the store an air of briskness which the management believed attracted
business. One of the women Mary R. Cranston interviewed had worked in a department store three years. The saleswoman reported that "her ankles had increased one-half during that time" because of the incessant hours on her feet. The constant strain of raising and lowering goods affected women's arms and backs. The floorwalker only grudgingly, and sometimes not at all, gave out floor passes for brief breaks. In some large stores there were not enough restroom facilities and store workers found it impossible to wait in line and return to their position in the time allotted. The air did not circulate well in the store and shopgirls inhaled "deoxidized" air all day. Department store work also afflicted mental hardships upon its employees.

Journalists and reformers stressed the tedious routine of store work and exasperating exchanges with customers. Arranging the stock, particularly during a holiday rush or bargain sale, was extremely trying for the shopgirl. Rheta Childe Dorr worked behind the counter in a large store during Christmas rush in order to experience the shopgirl's life and then report her findings to the public. She sold handkerchiefs, which had to be kept "mathematically straight...and in strict alphabetical order." She was sure she arranged them at least a hundred times in the course of the day. Hands would swoop down and scatter her neat piles before she arranged the first four
letters. By the end of the day, this ordeal alone caused her "much effort and emotion." The shopgirl found difficulty in keeping track of prices on bargain items, which were frequently changed during the day. She tried to write prices and addresses quickly on numerous slips of paper, give correct change, and take parcels to the cage of the wrapper-girl, often with great speed and with a string of waiting customers, each demanding immediate attention. Any mistake on the part of the shopgirl resulted in a penalty from her already meager wages or, in extreme cases, immediate discharge.

Reformers felt that shoppers were unduly hard on shopgirls, causing them great emotional distress. Journalists reprimanded customers who felt they had a right to abuse the shopgirl simply because "she is paid for it." The articles identified several types of customers who proved annoying to the shopgirl. The "professional shopper," for example, was business-like and patronizing toward the shopgirl, and she asked for and examined as many articles in as many stores as time and her physical endurance permitted. In the language of the shopgirls, she was a "rubber-neck." Other types included the "cheap skate" and women who ordered purchases sent C.O.D. to a fictitious address. The latter reportedly happened often, and all of the items were returned. Then the shopgirls had to unpack the rejected articles and
replace them on the shelves. "Oh," Rheta Childe Dorr remarked, "the trials of a department store clerk are not few." Progressives believed succumbing to the stress and strain of store work, both physical and mental, threatened the well-being of future mothers and homemakers.

The misery of the long day did not end as soon as their shift was over. After a strenuous day at the store, shopgirls hung "precariously" to straps in streetcars "packed to suffocation." Rheta Childe Dorr commented on the misery of hanging on to a strap after standing all day. When the car jolted or started suddenly the girls were thrown against each other, causing them to laugh hysterically. "This caused well-bred passengers to look at us with annoyance and disapproval," she wrote. "I have often been disturbed by the loud laughter of working girls, but that was before I understood." Dorr gave her account of the ride home after work one night. The streetcar stopped because of an automobile accident. While most of the people in the car yelled at the auto driver for running over a pedestrian, Dorr and her co-workers protested only against the delay. "Our sympathies," she wrote, "were drowned in an aching desire to get home and to bed. Overwork brutalizes the gentlest. I am sure I never dreamed I could be so callous to suffering as I was that night." Dorr's admission that she lacked
compassion exemplified reformers' concern that department store work would alter women's traditional roles and values.

The shopgirl's evening was also a cause for concern to progressive social reformers, for the shopgirl had no time for pleasure or "higher things." Since she could not afford to have her laundry done or her clothes mended, she had work to do every evening. It was her responsibility to look neat and respectable each day at the store. So, after she made dinner and cleaned up, there were "shirtwaists to be laundered, stockings to darn, a coat to mend, a binding to sew on a skirt," and shoes to polish. 

Journalist Mary K. Maule conducted a personal investigation of working conditions in New York City Department stores, including living in the homes for working girls in various parts of the city. Maule observed that "there is no time for pleasure in her [shopgirl's] life, no time for the softer, sweeter, tenderer things of womanhood. It is a life stripped of humanity, robbed of most that makes life beautiful, and spent in one ceaseless, perpetual grind - simply to live." 

The sumptuous environment of the palaces of consumption created additional problems for shopgirls. Some Progressives saw the atmosphere of the store as a potentially corrupting influence on shopgirls' lives. They were afraid the shopgirl "would want all the pretty things
she daily sees and to end by thinking of nothing but
dress." Stores required store women to wear all black
except in the summer, when they wore a plain black skirt
and white shirt waist. The dress code encouraged store
women to "overdress" with powder and paint, an elaborate
hair arrangement, or rings and bangle bracelets. Reformers concerned themselves with the shopgirls' desire
to dress up in fancy shoes and hats and adorn themselves
with jewelry, all of which were beyond their economic
means. The girls often scrimped and skipped meals to pay
for what the Progressives considered frivolous items. Not
only were the shopgirls endangering their health by
starving themselves, but reformers believed that the
shopgirls were trying to give the appearance of social
standing similar to that of the female customers who
frequented the large emporiums. Progressives believed that
shopgirls sought upward mobility by dressing like their
social betters in hopes of marrying into a higher class,
and the reformers found this behavior discomforting.

Progressive reformers feared that the temptation
caused by the shopgirls' surroundings would drive them to
immoral acts. One of the shopgirls interviewed by
journalist Anne O'Hagan worked in a store renowned for its
beautiful and expensive imported goods. "Like all
prosperous stores," O'Hagan reported, "it numbered among
its customers many of the demimonde, whose histories
were familiar to the saleswomen. The combination here presented of insidious examples in the persons of many patrons, and of insidious temptation in the goods in which the shop so largely dealt, was...a more potent cause of immorality among its force than...wages and the cost of living." It was an accepted fact throughout the staff and among the customers that many of the store's "saleswomen were subsidized by private illicit relations." By way of proof, O'Hagan heard testimony from several patrons of the store and employees "that one of the department heads - a capable, good-looking, extremely well-dressed, and rather expensively jeweled woman - spoke frequently of the riding-horse which she kept at one of the Park riding-academies." Thus, feared the reformers, the shopgirl could grow dissatisfied with her simple and wholesome life, adopt false standards, and be led astray by her surroundings.

Reformers further expressed their anxieties about the shopgirls' vulnerability in the workplace. A shopgirl's position put her on guard, for "a pretty, attractive girl...prominently placed...becomes the target for the attentions of male admirers, employees and customers who happen to patronize the store." The floorwalker had a great deal of power over the young shopgirls, and this alarmed the reformers. "In many instances he [was] unprincipled and designing," and if a shopgirl refused his
advances, the floorwalker had the authority to ruin her chances for advancement or have her fired. The reformers worried that the naive girl would submit to the floorwalker's advances in order to keep her job. Journalist Mary K. Maule reported that of all the stores in New York City, only two had a policy in which the shopgirl could go "straight to the head of the firm with all her difficulties."\(^5\) In other words, reformers saw no safeguards against lecherous store employees requiring unworldly shopgirls to face what they called "the moral question" each day.

The "high-class establishments" employed detectives to protect "the attractive young girls from the machinations of 'mashers' and young men about town."\(^5\) If a detective caught a customer flirting with a shopgirl, he was given a warning, but if he committed a second offense, the detective would have him arrested. To the reformers' dismay, this still left a great many shopgirls unprotected, for "in stores of the lower grade this precaution is not taken and serious consequences have been known to occur."\(^5\) Walking home after work also posed a danger. Many shopgirls walked home at night in order to save the streetcar fare. "There were always men on the street corners ready to speak to a girl alone, and one hesitating step meant danger. Almost every morning the girls had some story to tell of encounters with men of
that class.\textsuperscript{37} These kinds of concerns reflect the uneasiness Progressives felt toward bigness, including big business and big cities, and their obsession with prostitution and "white slavery."

\textbf{Wages - The Shopgirl's Dilemma}

Those Progressives who did not believe the department store itself was the agent of corruption pointed to the destructive consequences of long hours and low wages. According to their own investigations, the ancient creed of shopgirls working for pin money proved to be the exception to the rule in the department store. Furthermore, government reports proved that the majority of store women living at home either contributed substantially to the family income or were themselves the sole or main wage-earner in the family. These findings disproved the public belief that women living at home were somehow relieved of the necessity of earning a living wage.\textsuperscript{38} The vast majority of shopgirls worked out of economic necessity, yet wages remained low, and Progressive reformers grew increasingly concerned over how young girls managed on their salaries.

Reports on wages varied somewhat, but the average weekly wage publicized by journalists was five to six dollars. Depending on the store itself and whether wages
included a commission, this meant that some shopgirls
earned between six and eight cents per hour. A 1912
report issued by the New York Factory Investigating
Commission cited even lower earnings. The typical shopgirl
in New York state began at a weekly wage of $4.71,
advanced to $6.30 after two years, and earned $8.06 at the
end of four years. The cost of a shopgirl's clothing alone
amounted to approximately sixty-five dollars a year. Room
rent, three meals, and car fare expenses consumed much of
her weekly wage and left almost no money for medical
emergencies and amusements.

Dorr recalled an incident from her work in a department store. One of her fellow
workers lost a quarter in the hectic Christmas rush, "and
her distress was a pathetic revelation of a poverty so
dire that 25 cents one way or another was happiness or
misery." Reformers commiserated with the shopgirls for
their situation, for "so many times they [shopgirls] were
overcome by the utter hopelessness of the future."

Journalists and reformers focused their attentions on
those shopgirls who lived "adrift." If a young girl did
not live at home, her salary defined where she could
afford to live. Perhaps she "existed" in a "tiny back
bedroom, badly ventilated" in "some cheap boarding house."
Or the shopgirl lived in a rooming house where she ate out
or cooked "indigestible messes over the gas jet and
saturate[d] her system with debilitating cups of tea" in
an unheated room. Young girls tended to skip meals or "economize on food" to save money, which caused the reformers concern for their health. One shopgirl interviewed by Anne O'Hagan cooked substantial breakfasts and suppers but they were somewhat monotonous and included large quantities of cooked cereal. And "sometimes," O'Hagan wrote, "youthful appetite conquered common sense, and the girls bought cream-puffs, or sausages, or something "tasty" - at the risk of paying the price of their indulgence in indigestion or faintness." In addition, the shopgirl could have "practically no social life," for there were no parlors to entertain "their men friends." This in itself encouraged improper behavior, for a shopgirl's only means of seeing her fellow was to "meet him on the street and carry on the acquaintance - possibly courtship - in restaurants and on street corners."42

Although the shopgirl had to put up with inconveniences such as the lack of a parlor or heated room in a boarding or rooming house, she was still content because she was independent and free to come and go as she pleased. If she lived in a working girls' home the shopgirl felt she had to forfeit both her pride and her freedom. Yetta, a young girl interviewed by Anne O'Hagan, was "a proud little person," who did not know "that the two dollars and fifty cents which supplies her with a clean lodging and most of her food is the price of a
compromise between charity and self-respect." Yetta did not realize that private benevolence made up the difference between what she paid and what it actually cost for her to live respectably. And, O'Hagan thought it would be "a needless cruelty" to tell her. The shopgirl resented the feeling of patronage associated with the "home" and the fact that she would be accepting charity, for she considered herself a self-respecting woman earning her own way in the world. "The endless rules and regulations, the apparent assumption that she is by nature immoral and can be prevented from going straight to ruin only by being hedged about by all sorts of iron-clad restrictions, are insulting and humiliating to her, and make the inmates of the 'home' both rebellious and unhappy."43 Despite many girls' aversion toward the homes, reformers believed they served the girls' best interests.

The reformers thought highly of the working girls' homes because they were cheap, clean, and comfortable, and they provided decent food, a safe shelter, and a wholesome, respectable environment — and they were dominated by middle-class values. As promising as the working girls' homes sounded, though, O'Hagan and Maule warned the public that the homes were not the solution to the housing problem. The homes were always overcrowded, for in New York City alone there were approximately thirty homes accommodating fifteen to
eighteen hundred working girls. With a rumored "something over three thousand department store employees alone 'adrift' in New York; and the department-stores supply a smaller proportion of self-dependent women living alone than any other of the industrial occupations...it will not suffice to content oneself with the reflection that there are 'plenty of places where the girls can live cheaply if they have no homes.'" At least, the shopgirls could not live cheaply and still remain respectable and good.**

A theme reiterated in many of the works on shopgirls during the Progressive era was the reformers' preoccupation with the connections between the shopgirl's wages and immorality.*** Progressives feared that expensive housing, low wages, and oppressive working conditions in stores might demoralize young girls, even force them into prostitution. The white slavery scare expressed itself in a sensational literature which included department stores as a source of prostitution.**** From within the stores, reformers recognized the threat that floorwalkers and other male employees posed to the shopgirl's virtue. When discussing wages with shopgirls, managers were said to allude to finding gentlemen friends who could buy "extras" that their salaries would not cover.***** While factory inspectors could not validate the claims against managers, the fact that this kind of talk widely circulated among
the employees of prominent stores suggested an implicit legitimacy in such behavior. To the social reformers, this only added ammunition to the arsenal against immorality and prostitution.

Commercial amusements were another target of Progressive reformers. Anne O'Hagan summarized the Progressives' fear in her discussion of what shopgirls could afford to do for fun and relaxation: "The only hope of amusement which the poorly paid young store-employee has rests in the young men of her acquaintance, or, if she is not squeamish, in the young men whom she may 'pick up.' Cheap amusements, public dance-halls, excursion-boats, moving-picture shows, are conducted apparently in the interest of the powers that prey upon young girls. Drink is sold in the former, and the doors of the last are the lounging-places of corrupt men ready to invite the eager little shop and factory girls within - but at a price." Despite an exhausting day at the store, many shopgirls flocked to dance halls, amusement parks, clubs, and nickelodeons when they had the opportunity. Reformers feared for the young girls because they faced immoral temptations and lacked the proper supervision.

Surprisingly, many of the articles which raised fears of prostitution concluded that very few store women actually became prostitutes and that department stores were not "hotbeds of immorality" after all. O'Hagan
informed her readers that a Federal Commissioner of Labor study indicated that domestic and personal service furnished seventy-seven percent of all female criminals, including prostitutes. And only two percent of all female criminals were employees in stores and offices—"those unprotected young women upon whom so much sympathy, so much advice, and so many misgivings have been expended." Rather than blame department stores for young girls "gone astray," some sources concluded that a girl's morality was instead a matter of principles, ideals, and uprising. The changing character of the American city led many Progressives to believe that social and parental controls inherent in community life no longer existed.

Journalists and reformers created an image of a depressed and exploited labor force. Rheta Childe Dorr, for instance, described the following scene during Christmas rush in a large department store: "I worked there only one week, but in that time what things I looked upon! I saw girls of seventeen and eighteen weeping with pain and weariness at eleven o'clock at night as with shaking fingers they made their counters attractive against the next day's brutal rush. I saw one young girl drop in a dead faint while selling dolls to a fond mother of children. I saw little boys fall asleep in rubbish corners at the noon hour, their untasted luncheons in
their tired hands." The articles on department store women stressed the worst of conditions, but if their tone and flowery language were not effective in arousing the sympathies of a reading audience, the pictures illustrating the shopgirls' "portrait" probably were.

Some of the feature articles included pictures and illustrations with graphic captions. Several pictures vividly show why young girls would rather work in a department store than a factory. For example, in one picture a solemn-faced young woman stands dressed in fine clothes and a billowing hat; the caption below reads "IN A STORE YOU CAN BE A MODEL, BUT NO ONE NEEDS A MODEL IN A HORSENAI LI FACTORY. Another picture shows eight young women, none of them smiling, standing behind a narrow counter lined with bottles and fancy containers. They are completely surrounded by beautiful articles including mirrors, picture frames, and vases, and below the caption reads: "SELLING PERFUMES SUITS SOME GIRLS BETTER THAN CUTTING CHUNKS OF PORK." Nellie, who was interviewed by Anne O'Hagan, was a shopgirl assigned to the toy department. An illustration featuring Nellie suggested that she was young and innocent enough to be playing with the dolls displayed in the cabinet behind her. In contrast, an older and stern woman stood with her hand placed staunchly on her hip as she gave Nellie a bit of advice: "NELLIE WAS WARNED TO BE DISTANT IN HER ATTITUDE
TOWARD A CERTAIN FLOORWALKER." The young and attractive man in question loomed in the background straightening his tie.  

Pictures of where the girls lived showed stark, cramped quarters, and again no one smiled. And a large illustration consuming one half a page in The Ladies' Home Journal featured an attractive young woman besieged with exacting customers, mostly female, who were dressed in rich and fashionable clothes. The look on the woman's face is rather sad, and her large eyes are distant and forlorn. The title underneath reads "'SHE IS PAID FOR IT'," implying it is alright to abuse the shopgirl verbally, for it is all a part of the job. The pictures were designed to attract attention and emphasize the gravity of the shopgirls' condition.

So what was the fate of the shopgirls according to the reformers? A few journalists were optimistic about the possibilities for advancement in both pay and position. They wrote that the demand for good salespeople was greater than the supply and "the chances for promotion excellent." Each year the management conducted a "taking of stock" which would result in a pay increase for the diligent salesgirl. "The head cashier of Macy's," boasted one writer, "who now gets $6,000 a year, began as a cash girl in that establishment at $3 a week." Mary K. Maule believed it was possible for women to move through the
ranks of the department store hierarchy and fill positions as cashiers, bookkeepers, assistant managers, assistant buyers, buyers, superintendents of advertising, and heads of departments. These positions were particularly available for the woman who was earnest and ambitious and who exemplified superior character.\textsuperscript{97}

What most reformers foresaw for the shopgirl's future was not as bright, though. In the better department stores the shopgirl's weekly salary might be raised one dollar each year until she reached fourteen dollars per week, or if she was lucky, eighteen to twenty dollars a week as the head of a department. While some women managed to climb the ranks of the department store hierarchy, investigations showed that very few of them were recruited from the shopgirls "who were adrift at an early age." Only those who grew up in "homes of more or less comfort, where their physical strength was maintained by proper care" achieved success in the large emporiums. "Even at best," O'Hagan concluded, "there are not a great many women buyers in the New York department-stores; and some of them...perhaps, they have had some family connection with a shop."\textsuperscript{99}

Reformers were convinced that the immediate way to escape the life of a shopgirl was through marriage. In his vehement attack on white slavery, John O'Shea revealed that many of the shopgirls "were condemned to work in the
store until they are past the period of youth, and then ruthlessly thrust out on the world to seek a living by any means they can, or seek a refuge in the grave. The lot of the average store-girl, unless she is fortunate in matrimony, is the most tragic note in the whole threnody of industrial misery. Nellie M., one of the shopgirls interviewed by Anne O'Hagan, was not so fortunate in her marriage, though. She accepted the first offer she received in order to escape, "as probably two-thirds of her associates do, with health, vitality, child-bearing and child-rearing attributes lowered, but with virtue unimpaired, by the familiar path of matrimony from the dangers and hardships of the saleswoman's lot." Unfortunately, Nellie married "somewhat against her own better judgement, and with some misgivings" a friend of her brother's. The man was a carpenter who drank often and "was given to sprees and to violence." O'Hagan wondered which was worse, working in a department store or being the wife of such a dreadful man and the mother of his children; and on that matter, the article had "no concern."
How to Help the Shopgirl

Journalists and reformers offered various ideas on how to improve the shopgirls' condition. The easiest request made of customers, and one that would reap immediate benefits, was simply to show "consideration" like a true "gentlewoman" and to "extend to clerks the same courteous treatment they offered their friends." Some appealed to women to make careful preparations before shopping, thereby expediting transactions efficiently. Margaretta Tuttle asked one shopgirl what kind of woman she preferred to wait on. The girl replied that there were several kinds of customer she enjoyed helping, but especially those who knew exactly what they wanted. For example, one woman made the request: "'I want four yards of pale blue satin ribbon about two inches wide, not over twenty-five cents a yard - cheaper if you have it - and two yards of yellow flowered ribbon - .'" Reformers also tried to convince shoppers that the store required the shopgirl to comply fully with its regulations and policies. So "if you are in a rush and want your 'charged' package delivered to you before the charge check is returned," do not "storm and rage" at the shopgirl, for "she did not make these rules." These appeals reflect the desire of female reformers to maintain the Cult of True Womanhood as well as to enforce the Progressive creed of efficiency and order.
Others pleaded with women to shop early, particularly during the holiday season. Rheta Childe Dorr wrote a detailed account of the frustrations and growing discontent among salesclerks during the Christmas rush. Working "feverishly" and "unceasingly" reduced even "the nicest and most refined girls...into a passion of tears." By the fourth day of the week she started work, "the restless, swaying, moving, perspiring mass of humanity" irritated Dorr and caused a "sudden loathing disgust for the whole Christmas idea." One of Dorr's fellow workers warned her that she would "get to hate people too" if she continued working at the department store. The shoppers were cross and irritable and the department stores were still crowded "at half past eleven o'clock at night, December 24! Is the world indeed heartless and inhumane," Dorr asked. "Did one impulse of pity for the worn-out shop people visit a single breast?" The National Consumers' League adopted the phrase "Do your Christmas shopping early" and urged women nationwide to consider the shopgirl and other department store employees.62

By 1915, a number of the better stores sponsored welfare programs for their employees, but many journalists and reformers offered scathing reviews of the stores' ostensible generosity. While reformers admitted that there had been many improvements in the shopgirls' working
conditions, they also condemned department store owners for their "panegyrics" of welfare work, when in fact, owners described only "certain isolated and prominent examples." Josephine Goldmark pointed out that the majority of retail establishments did not provide "rest-rooms...with comfortable rocking-chairs, appetizing lunch rooms," gymnasiums "for pleasure and relaxation during the noon recess,...[and] hospital rooms with free medical consultation and treatment." Goldmark asked the public to consider that for every department store featuring ventilated lockers for the employees, there were at least as many with ill-ventilated basements "where hundreds of girls are employed in stifling atmospheres." 63

Moreover, the "well-known" department store that Nellie worked in maintained a lunch room that boasted food supplied at cost. O'Hagan found that the prices were no less than those charged in cheap markets and restaurants, though, and the quality of both the food and the lunch room were even worse. "The meat was usually stewed or hashed, and Nellie was too suspicious of its origin, and too fastidious as to its present condition, to eat it." There was not enough silverware to go around, and knives and forks "were not washed between services, but merely wiped off. Glimpses of the kitchen where the food was prepared were not conducive to the appetite." Furthermore,
The lunch room contained several cots and doubled as the so-called "rest-room." Nellie later sought employment in another well-known department store in order to earn higher wages. The building was modern and sanitary, and the employees' "cloak-rooms, rest-rooms, [and] toilet-rooms were all admirable." The store also maintained an employees' benefit association to which the members paid a weekly sum in proportion with their wages. Membership entitled the employee to the services of a doctor during an illness and a "certain sum" in case of forced absence due to sickness or death. Membership was compulsory and "was more or less the subject of cynical jest among the employees; for the store management was the custodian of the fees, and the woman changing her job to another store forfeited not only her rights in the association, but the money which she had contributed to it."

Before department store owners "hold up for public applause such mere commonplaces of efficiency as clean toilets and wash-rooms and elevators, or even the exceptional advantages furnished by some of their members," reformers argued that the retail merchants needed first to address the basic needs of the employees - wages and hours. Journalists and reformers stressed the issue of wages above all else. By improving wages, retail merchants could ameliorate working and living
conditions for shopgirls as well as lessen the moral dangers they faced each day. Hard and Dorr attributed low wages to a surplus of labor. Despite the low wages, there was always an abundance of girls to fill shopgirl positions, for the advantages of working in a department store outweighed those of working in a factory. From Hard and Dorr’s analysis it followed that one method of improving store wages was to improve factory toil. “When by legislation, the states of this Union have humanized their factories...we shall see the department store managers of America bidding higher and higher in the labor-market for the intelligent, adaptable kind of labor they need and must have.”

With regard to hours, reformers indicted the department stores for keeping shopgirls after closing hours to take inventory and rearrange and ticket stock. The National Civic Federation conducted an investigation into the grievance of hours but had only to report: "How general it is to require work after hours, it cannot be said. That all firms do not rigidly prevent it is apparent." Finding the federation’s investigation questionable, a member of the Retail Clerks Union stood outside "a great down-town store" and counted 325 shopgirls leaving through the employees' entrance between 7:05 and 7:18 pm. A spokesperson for the union suggested that ‘perhaps the federation experts were over-occupied in
the examination of the 'exquisite solariums' (destitute of clerks) the 'charming pergolas' and the 'snow-white hospitals' to which some three-fourths of their report is devoted."

Provoked by the exploitation of young girls, reformers attacked the Retail Dry Goods Association as well as the National Civic Federation. Until 1914 "the great commercial State of New York" offered no protective legislation governing the hours of adult women employed in department stores. According to reformers, the obstacle to this legislation arose from the membership of the Association. Josephine Goldmark heard one of the Association's prominent members, "a most flagrant offender in employing girls overtime at night," express his indignation before a legislative committee "that the law or any 'outside agency' [Consumers' League] should attempt to interfere with his management of 'a family of 3,000 workers all under one roof.'" Thus, Goldmark concluded, "the political power of the associated merchants was great enough to defeat all legislation limiting hours of labor of women in stores up to the year 1913" in New York City."

And, according to reformers, it was due to the merchants' insistence that this law was suspended for the six days preceding Christmas. In December 1914, the New York Consumers' League reported that eleven large
department stores remained open after 6:00 P.M.; seven stayed open until 10:00 or 10:30 and two others did not close their doors until 11:30 P.M. The employees working in the latter two stores received neither overtime pay nor time off during the day. Thus, reformers denounced retail merchants for stressing welfare benefits as "the real sources of inspiration of the working force" over the hardships of hours and wages.

Magazines recorded the emergence of a new type of social consciousness on the part of the American citizen during the Progressive Era. The portrait of the shopgirl and her condition created by crusading Progressive journalists and social reformers emphasized the most degrading characteristics of department store work. This imagery formed the basis of the analysis on which reformers devised public policy solutions such as protective legislation. Rather than make a formal plea for votes and support over a "much-discussed question," the writers let their image of the shopgirl arouse a sense of moral obligation in the middle class.


3. Anne O'Hagan. "Behind the Scenes in the Big Stores," Munsey's Magazine 22 (January 1900): 533, 535; The Bowery refers to a street (originally located in Manhattan with a second one laid out at Coney Island) teeming with working-class saloons, arcades, penny slot machines, shooting galleries, freak shows, dime museums, dance halls, variety houses, and a rowdy atmosphere; Delmonico's was the greatest restaurant and gathering place for the upper class in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Tuttle, "'She Is Paid For It',' 21; Delia Austrian. "How Shoppers Can Help Girls in Stores," The Ladies' Home Journal 23 (November 1906): 66.


8. Hard and Dorr, "Woman's Invasion," 76.

9. John R. Commons. "Why Mary Smith Wants to Work at Filene's," The Independent 102 (7 August 1920): 137; welfare programs are discussed in more detail later in this chapter and also in chapter 3.


12. Ibid., 80.

13. Ibid.


22. Tuttle. "'She Is Paid For It'," 21. 91.

23. Dorr, "Christmas Behind the Counter," 1343; MacLean, "Two Weeks in Department Stores," 726.

24. MacLean, "Two Weeks in Department Stores," 727; Cranston, "Girl Behind the Counter," 271; Dorr, "Christmas Behind the Counter," 1343.


33. Cranston, "Girl Behind the Counter," 271.


37. MacLean, "Two Weeks in Department Stores," 731; Maule, "What is a Shop-Girl's Life," 9313; Cranston, "Girl Behind the Counter," 271.


41. Dorr, "Christmas Behind the Counter," 1344; MacLean, "Two Weeks in Department Stores," 737.


43. O'Hagan, "Shop-Girl and Her Wages," 258; Maule, "What is a Shop-Girl's Life," 9315; Hard and Dorr,


52. Dorr, "Christmas Behind the Counter," 1343.

53. Hard and Dorr, "Woman's Invasion," 74-75.


55. Ibid., 257; Hard and Dorr, "Woman's Invasion," 80.


61. Two articles published in *The Ladies' Home Journal* were dedicated to pointing out shoppers' faults and offering ways to make shopping easier for both parties. Tuttle, "She Is Paid For It," 21, 91; Austrian, "Shoppers Help Girls," 66.


63. Goldmark, "Another View," 280-82; see editor's note in Anne Emerson, "Behind the Scenes in a Department Store," *The Outlook* 109 (24 Feb. 1915): 450; only two journalists wrote favorably of the welfare work sponsored by retail merchants: Maule and Cranston.

64. O'Hagan, "Shop-Girl and Her Wages," 253; see also MacLean, "Two Weeks in Department Stores," 728: "The second day I partook of what the management magnanimously called the 'free supper.' We were fed in droves and hurried away before the last mouthful was swallowed. The menu consisted of a meat dinner and an oyster stew, the latter of which I always elected with the lingering hope that it had not been made of scraps left from the regular cafe dinner earlier in the day. The said stew consisted of a bowl of hot milk, in the bottom of which lurked three oysters, except on that memorable day when I found four.


70. Ibid.

CHAPTER III

THE SHOPGIRL'S PORTRAIT:

A PLEA FOR PROTECTIVE LEGISLATION

In some ways, journalists and reformers exaggerated the condition of the shopgirl. Government reports and the personal accounts of several saleswomen suggest that journalists exaggerated the shopgirl's background and purposefully overlooked the advantages of department store work. These journalists, many of whom were members of the Consumers' League, felt they could communicate effectively to an audience of literate middle-class Americans. They addressed a public with whom they shared the same values, fears, and worldview, seeking to arouse a sense of moral indignation.

The Shopgirl's Background

Progressive journalists and reformers portrayed department store women as helpless and unprotected to evoke sympathy and gain support for legislation. In an
investigation of sales occupations in four cities in 1908, the Bureau of Labor found that 37.56% of female sales workers were between the ages of sixteen and twenty, 21.97% were between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four, and 37.31% were twenty-five or older.¹ Although a large percentage of these women were over twenty years of age, outside observers almost always described store workers as young and inexperienced girls.

Although some shopgirls were drawn to department store work from small towns and farmlands, most came from the cities where the department stores were located. Portraying department store women as farm girls gave them a certain naiveté and vulnerability compared to girls who were born and bred in the city. Journalists and reformers also focused their attentions on the shopgirl living "adrift," when in fact, the U.S. Senate's Report on the Condition of Women and Child Wage Earners noted that 84% of department store women lived at home in 1910.² Reports that shopgirls worked out of economic necessity were true, though, and the majority of shopgirls living at home contributed all of their earnings to the family.

**Department Store Work**

The Progressives' description of department store work might have seemed too simple to the saleswomen.
Journalists and reformers described only the obvious and most degrading aspects of department store work, such as daily toil, hours, and wages. They did so in order to attract public attention to the shopgirl's dilemma and persuade readers of the need for protective legislation. Reformers did not exaggerate the actual physical working conditions department store women endured, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Saleswomen persevered despite the crowded work space, unregulated room temperatures, poor ventilation, and store rules against sitting down. They were also subject to a system of fines for a variety of offenses, they worked extra hours for which they were never compensated, and there were no uniform policies on vacations. To arouse their readers' indignation, journalists focused on the mental, physical, and moral hardships of department store work and purposefully neglected the advantages, such as long-range rewards, job fulfillment, and comradery among the saleswomen.

Reformers expressed their perplexity over the shopgirl's choice of job when she could make more money in a factory. Their supposition is misleading, however. Aside from the differences in wages between industries, wages
paid in a given year varied from store to store, from city to city, and from region to region. For example, department store wages were higher than factory wages in certain cities. And, more often, department store wages fell into an intermediate category, with some industries paying higher wages and some lower. Furthermore, wages in stores had greater potential for increase than in the factory. The factory worker reached a high level of payment in approximately ten years, after which her salary would not increase any further. The saleswoman, on the other hand, continued to receive wage increments throughout her department store career.

Challenging Progressive observers' reasoning, historian Sarah Smith Malino argues that women did not seek store employment simply to satisfy their social aspirations by achieving middle-class status or to meet a potential husband. Women were attracted to store work because it offered economic rewards other than wages. Store employment at the turn of the century was a more reliable job with more of a future than factory work. Because of its limited seasonality, its incentives and rewards for long employment, and its promise of promotion, department store work encouraged women to consider the potential for long-range employment and for occupational growth. Women at high levels of authority with substantial wages, such as buyers, floorwalkers, and department heads,
were an example of what hard work and persistence could achieve. They were women with non-traditional economic independence. Thus, the department store may have attracted younger less experienced women with dreams of a steady wage and future glory. 

A few popular magazines featured women's stories of how they rose from the ranks of cash girls to become department store buyers. Such stories offered encouraging words for any woman willing to dedicate herself to her job. All of the women agreed that their experience was not unique, but asserted that a woman had to show ambition and initiative and she had to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the store management. The biggest stumbling block to success was "indifference," for the "majority of saleswomen are content to do their day's work, and grumble." The women maintained that anyone was capable of taking the step "from an ordinary position to one of authority and financial reward." And one of the success stories challenged "any business to show better opportunities for women in as large numbers." Department store work had a reputation for achieving economic independence for anyone willing to work at it.

Malino also asserts that department store work offered women economic security in another sense. Merchants encouraged women to think of themselves as essential members of the permanent department store work
force; they were not marginal employees. By 1900, the department store was a well-defined women's institution, featuring female customers and female employees. Because managers viewed selling as a job particularly well suited for females, department store women could be confident that they were not easily replaceable. Selling could not be mechanized, like factory work, for it required an artful skill which store managers taught. And store work was firmly entrenched as a "native-born" white women's job, so saleswomen could not lose their jobs to new groups of immigrants willing to work for lower wages as factory women sometimes did. Malino asserts that these real and potential economic rewards helped to compensate for low department store wages.7

Furthermore, the departmental organization of the store promoted solidarity among department clerks. Often department solidarity reflected an elaborate hierarchy of status within the store. Saleswomen in an expensive clothing department might look down on the clerks who worked in the bargain basement, but the basement staff had an equally firm conviction of their superiority to upstairs departments. While one department placed value on the prestige of higher-priced merchandise, the other emphasized the lively atmosphere of the basement. The tensions between departments encouraged cliquish behavior among members of each section. Sometimes this exclusivity
led to outright hostility toward other departments. Saleswomen might allow a customer to leave the store rather than recommend another department's goods to her, and clerks were frequently heard bad-mouthing other departments' service and merchandise to customers.⁸

Solidarity within each department expressed itself in numerous ways, growing out of the intense social interaction which co-workers shared.⁷ Saleswomen went out of their way to make a new clerk feel welcome in their department. One buyer who recalled her sales experience remarked that "there are no truer friends and comrades made than those won by working together, shoulder to shoulder, day after day." If one of the saleswomen was sick, or in some sort of financial trouble, "tired girls will walk miles out of their way to offer help; girls with healthy appetites will repeatedly do without lunches to help 'make up a purse.'" One saleswoman saved fifty dollars, nickel by nickel, but when one of her fellow workers encountered financial difficulties she "gave it; asked no questions as to the trouble; [and] never asked for a penny of it back."¹⁰

Although there was some tension among departments, everyone pulled together when the need arose. In one of the department stores, a cash girl who came from a "cruel poor" family could not afford the required black dress. Saleswomen from various departments donated part of their
wages to cover the cost for the girl's outfit. A committee went shopping for the necessary items and the alteration forewoman used her lunch hour to sew a skirt for the cash girl. When the "youngster" was called into a fitting room she trembled, thinking it was for a scolding, but "her face as first that skirt was tried on, and then the warm, prettily tucked waist! And the pretty white collar went straight to her beauty-hungry little heart - the collar with its big, effective bow of black." Other observers related the impressive ability of departments to rally for mutual support as well.

Comradery also grew out of gathering together and talking, or huddling. The mixed-sex environment of the department store led to gossip and the discussion of romance, trysts, and male-female relations. Each store had its own network for communicating information about store employees. While some store employees published their own gossip sheet, "rumor" was the "store newspaper" in others. One woman warned that "every department has its Dame Gossip. And a rumor - true or false - can run through a store in an hour or less. It can follow you, too, from store to store." Women also traded information on their beaux and communicated sexual knowledge and the rituals of courtship and dating.

Shop-floor vocabulary furthered the intimacy of the huddles. A "crepe-hanger," for example, was a saleswoman
who ruined a sale by talking a customer out of something she had resolved to buy. Talking about their customers particularly reinforced the sociability of the work group. Saleswomen prided themselves on the ability to "read a customer," or predict the type of shopper approaching her station. They privately used pet names for different kinds of shoppers, like cheap skate, rubber-neck, lookers, and professional shoppers. "A saleswoman who called 'Oh, Henrietta,' while waiting on a customer was alerting her co-workers to the fact that the customer was a hen, or a difficult type."

Stylish clothing was especially important to many department store clerks. Many saleswomen, observed a clerk, exercised restraint and sensibility in their clothing, but "there are others of us who powder and paint, who bleach our hair, whose bodies suffer for food because every penny goes for clothes...some of us (on six dollars a week) pay twenty-six dollars for a single willow plume, buying it on the installment plan." In order to pay for their finery, saleswomen sewed shirtwaists for their co-workers at night, made bow ties, or baked cakes "so as to get that plume the sooner." Sometimes the merchandise that clerks sold created an intense desire of longing. One saleswoman skipped lunch for days to save enough money for an opera cap. "She sold them; had learned the different 'fetching' ways of putting them on - of
fluffing up the hair here, pulling it down demurely there, 
letting a curl escape somewhere else — until she felt she 
just had to have one...then, after the opera cap was got, 
she wanted a cloak to go with it..."18

To the journalists and reformers writing about the 
shopgirl, department store women sought upward mobility, 
dressing like their social betters in order to marry into 
a higher class. While this interpretation was not without 
foundation, it obscures the complex role of fashion and 
style in the social life of saleswomen. Historian Kathy 
Peiss asserts that clothing, shopfloor language, and 
social rituals in the work place were a way for department 
store women to display a new identity as wage-earners, 
distinct from family traditions and the customary 
practices of their ethnic groups. Dress was a particularly 
powerful way to experiment with identity and notions of 
respectability, independence, allure, and status and to 
assert a distinctive identity and presence.19

Clerks had a genuine pride in their selling skill. In 
an account of her department store career, a buyer 
attributed the following "secrets" to her success as a 
saleswoman: a thorough knowledge of the merchandise and 
how it was made, remembering the name of every customer, 
waiting on customers as promptly as possible, knowing what 
stYLES looked good on certain figures, inducing customers 
to buy becoming clothes, making the customer think that
she is using her own good taste in selecting clothes, and believing that she was as responsible for the results of her department as though the store were her own. She also kept a personal record of all her customers and notified them of stock that would be arriving, or of a special sale they might be interested in. Saleswomen also shared a respectful admiration for each individual's selling tactics.²⁰

Saleswomen cultivated a shop-floor wisdom about their merchandise. They refused to sell articles of substandard quality, and some designed elaborate displays for their wares.²¹ Many department store women took an avid interest in their merchandise. One saleswoman was especially knowledgeable on towels. "She learned laces—because some laces were used on certain sorts of towels. She studied towel fashions; knew cross-stitch and monogram patterns; knew which towels were best for wear, which for beauty; knew the prettiest trousseau ideas." When a newspaper writer interviewed the clerk one day for a woman's page, she "talked for three hours, the most fascinating, newsy, interesting facts, 'illustrated' by towel after towel." When the reporter asked her if there was anything she did not know, she replied: "I've been selling them for twenty years and I haven't learned all yet!"²²

Some department store women even showed an eagerness about their wares that went beyond store training
programs. Management assigned the task of selling marble statues to one clerk. Since customers had so many questions about various pieces, she frequented the library after work to learn the story behind each statue and something about the artist and the studio in which it was reproduced. She gradually grew interested in ancient history, and as one of her co-workers remarked, "today her conversation is a delight."^{23}

Journalists and reformers either attacked or ignored department store welfare programs and sales training. Welfare work combined worker's facilities - rest rooms, lounges, dining rooms, gymnasiums, solariums, summer cottages, infirmaries, and libraries - with some rudimentary educational activities along the lines of personal hygiene, etiquette, and grammar classes. Welfare work had many meanings. Among these were the desire for good publicity, the hope of preventing union organization, and the belief that happy, healthy workers meant more efficient workers. Whatever motives retail merchants had, welfare programs helped to improve the physical working conditions in the department store after 1910.^{24}

At its best, selling provided job fulfillment for department store clerks. The work offered variety, opportunities for socializing, and the chance to exercise initiative. Saleswork also provided more autonomy than a
factory job. Journalists and reformers chose not to publicize the positive aspects of department store work, however. Their goal was to educate public opinion on the harsh and immediate realities of store work. Journalists popularized their version of the helpless young shopgirl hoping to awaken the uninformed public social conscience. Through their grim portrayal of department store working conditions, they demanded that the state accept responsibility for the health and safety of its citizens — and future mothers — in the workplace.

Wages and Morality

Morality constituted one of the central features of most articles. And wages were important because they were the key, although not the only, variable in keeping women "moral," or fit for motherhood. Adequate income could provide nutritious food, decent clothing, and a comfortable place to live with a parlor for entertaining gentlemen friends. Reformers worried about a shopgirl's vulnerability in the mixed-sex atmosphere of the department store and the shopgirl's desire to frequent cheap amusement places after hours. They believed that a woman with adequate means to support herself was less prone to submit to the temptations of a seducer, from
within or without the department store. The reformers' deepest fear was that shopgirls would slip into the ultimate disgrace of prostitution.

Fears of immorality and prostitution were not new to the twentieth century. For nearly one hundred years, moral reformers had been trying to warn the public about the evils of prostitution, yet it was not until the Progressive Era that the fight against prostitution became a sophisticated nationwide campaign. The battle against prostitution was part of a general social movement which was started before 1900 by religiously inspired reformers dedicated to purifying American life. After 1900, secular "purity groups" endorsed personal purity, public stands against immorality, and rescue work to save "fallen women" and their patrons. Members also advocated feminism and a limited moral sex education to protect their children from vice and disease. While the bordello was only one among many noxious social institutions fought by the Progressives, the issue of prostitution assumed an overwhelming significance at the turn of the century.29

Although no statistics are available, historians think it is likely that the peak of women's engagement in prostitution occurred between 1850 and 1900 rather than during the early years of the twentieth century when, suddenly, it assumed the status of a crucial social problem. In his study of German prostitution, Richard
Evans argues that prostitution most likely reached its peak during the second wave of industrialization, when heavy industry excluded women's participation in the work force. Then prostitution declined with the expansion of the tertiary clerical and service sector, for women found greater opportunities for employment. Agreeing with Evans, historian Ruth Rosen further argues that while rates of prostitution probably did not increase at the turn of the century, the important fact is that "most Americans perceived enormous increases in both venereal disease and prostitution and thought that both had reached epidemic proportions...[so] it is not the prevalence of deviance which triggers social reform, but rather what deviance symbolizes." Thus, what is deviant in one period of history may receive public tolerance in another. The public's new awareness about venereal disease and its consequences may have even instigated the sweeping alarm and exaggerated fears.26

Changes in attitudes toward prostitution occurred simultaneously with major transformations in American society. Faced with rapid advancements in science and technology, industrialism, urbanization, and immigration, the Progressives' traditional world view eroded at the turn of the century. Progressives clung to their conventional, nineteenth-century beliefs in individualism, progress, "morality," and the social stability of
community life. Most reformers pointed to the changing character of the American city and the large-scale businesses which exploited public women as the sources of prostitution. Thus, prostitution was a focus for expressing uneasiness and anxiety about the changes that were polluting traditional American society and debasing "the old morality, the life of purity, thrift, sobriety, the family tie." In this sense, Rosen asserts, "prostitution became a powerful symbol of forces, only dimly understood, that were transforming the social order."27

Progressives also expressed discontent with the new consumer orientation of American society. Reform groups connected the display of luxuries and the pursuit of expensive pleasures with the theme of prostitution.28 On one level, consumer life in the department store had a "sensually suggestive and remissive side," for displays and advertising promoted "the loosening of sensual boundaries." The editors of the Dry Goods Economist, the main trade periodical for the stores, found the opposition from purity and reform groups hard to believe: "Certain organizations of women are claiming [that] the stores...are ruining the youth of the land by display of corsets and garments" and "that the 'scandalous hussies [wax figures]' should not be permitted to display their waxen charms so publicly. What sort of minds do
these venerable women possess? Do they suppose that the youth of our land are equally advanced in prurience with themselves?" Display windows showed a variety of merchandise, from teacups to evening gowns "that clearly outlined the body with 'slits up one side to leave still less to the imagination.'" Store advertising and displays, moreover, sought to spark impulsive buying which was based on feeling instead of rational thought; such behavior preoccupied people further with sexual pleasures. Reformers probably considered department stores to be the most corrupting influence of consumer life.

Progressive journalists and reformers who publicized the plight of the shopgirl also believed that the festive, luxurious environment of department stores created an intense desire for the beautifully displayed goods. They claimed this had adverse affects on saleswomen as well as customers, causing them to steal or commit immoral acts to obtain the luxuries they longed for. Another disturbing aspect of the "commercialized" department stores was the merchants' lack of humanitarian concern for saleswomen. According to the reformers, low wages drove them into prostitution to support themselves or their families.

Another aspect of concern with prostitution was the major shift in American manners and morals which occurred after 1910. The revolution took the twofold form of more
permissive sexuality and diminished femininity among the American youth. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, American popular culture began a reorientation away from the confinement, restrictions, and conventions of urban industrial society and the code of gentility. New institutions of amusement and leisure—nickelodeans, vaudeville, ragtime, dance halls, and cabarets—grew and gained mass appeal in working-class, black, and immigrant cultures. Reformers saw in cheap amusements a challenge to their conception of the proper role of women, and they feared that cheap amusements would lead the working-class away from the proper Protestant values that held them in check.

Historian Mark Connelly argues that reformers used the familiar label of prostitution to include a wide variety of sexual behaviors challenging "civilized morality," the code which infused American middle-class life for most of the nineteenth century. What reformers deemed sexual misconduct ranged from premarital sex to seeing men friends unchaperoned. Some reformers even viewed less restricted relations between the sexes as leading to prostitution. Moreover, reformers depicted every urban amusement as a den of prostitution. While some places did live up to their sensational reputations, most centers of urban amusement did not promote prostitution in its strictest sense.
In her recent study of working-class amusements in turn-of-the-century New York, Kathy Peiss explores the social custom of "treating." Because working-class women received low wages, they often relied on men's treats to see them through an evening's entertainment. For example, a wage-earning woman did not attend a dance hall with her fellow or "steady." Instead, she arrived alone or with one or more women, expecting to "couple off" during the dance. "Picking up" unknown women or men was a widespread practice which took place in various places of amusement, and it was considered an accepted means of gaining companionship for an evening of fun. Women overdressed to win male attention, and reformer Louise de Koven Bowen noted with dismay the "almost universal custom among the girls of keeping their powder puff in the top of their stockings, from which it is ostentatiously taken and used whenever a girl wishes to attract the attention of a young man." Women's popularity also depended in part on their willingness to drink, smoke cigarettes, participate in kissing rituals, and engage in loud talk and laughter.33

While reformers worried about the girls' behavior in dance halls, Peiss argues that only a few women actually reciprocated men's attentions with sexual favors. Those who went beyond the role of the coquette were referred to as "charity girls" in underworld slang. The term
differentiated them from prostitutes because they traded sexual favors of varying degrees for male attentions and gifts, but they never accepted money in their sexual encounters with men.\textsuperscript{34}

Reformers feared that the pleasure-loving woman would also destroy male identity. For those Progressives who supported the nineteenth-century conception of masculinity contained in the self-made man, "passionate women would lead men away from self-control toward a life of sensual expressiveness." Men would become distracted and ruin their business affairs, losing all their money. Thus, if men gave in to the demands of the body, they would lose both self-control and their identities.\textsuperscript{35} The same pleasure-seeking women could also ruin younger men who did not have the experience and wisdom to reject female attentions. A Chicago investigator reported the misfortune of a young man in a dance hall: "a young boy, evidently new to the city, was seen looking for a partner. He was taken in hand by a prostitute who, after drinking with him all evening, persuaded him to give up his job the following day and go with her to St. Louis to act as cadet for a disorderly house."\textsuperscript{36} In some respects, reformers' exaggerated concern for young people being led astray by prostitution reflects their fear and ignorance of the expanding working class and its culture.

Progressive reformers were particularly concerned with changes in the family and the role of women. Profound
social and economic change undermined traditional patriarchal and familial values at the turn of the century. The divorce rate was rising rapidly, the birth rate was declining, and both working and middle-class women left the home sphere to participate in the outside world. In the minds of the reformers, prostitution was either a cause, consequence, or sign of all changes in family life.37

Reformers' obsession with prostitution indicates an underlying social fear with far-reaching implications. Progressive moral reformers' primary concerns focused on the changing character of the American city, which offered new freedoms to people who, the reformers thought, were ill prepared to handle them. This concern went beyond the working class, however, and grew to include the preservation of the middle-class family. In the reformers' minds, the temptations that young women faced at their jobs, as well as the potential dangers outside of the work place and the protected home environment, seemed to threaten all women. And because women were the keepers of morals, all of society was in jeopardy. Thus, reformers sought to eradicate prostitution and save the family as the foundation of moral life. Part of the strategy for their plan included the passage of minimum wage legislation to reduce the monetary need that often led
young women into a life of prostitution. The state's role was to act as an umbrella, shielding society from the modern anarchic city and protecting the family itself. In this sense, minimum wage legislation was a way to control morality as well as ameliorate working conditions.

Thus, Progressive journalists and reformers promoted an image of the shopgirl that differed markedly from the reality of the department store saleswoman's work and personal life. Reformers manipulated the image of the shopgirl by overstating the shopgirl's background, magnifying the shopgirl's hardships, and overlooking the advantages and promise of department store work. Based on their fears of immorality and prostitution, reformers initiated protective legislation policies designed to protect the family and preserve nineteenth-century notions of femininity and masculinity.

Based on the unenforced maximum hour legislation and the non-passage of minimum wage legislation, it appears that the shopgirl's image portrayed by NCL members and other Progressive journalists was unsuccessful in influencing public opinion. Perhaps the general public had a different perception of the shopgirl, nestled amidst the
luxuriousness and opulence of the newly-arrived grand emporiums. Despite their immediate unsuccessful efforts, the Progressives left posterity with a tradition of social legislation and a distinct set of beliefs about working women based on their conceptions of feminine nature and woman's place.


8. For more information on "departmentization" and its significance in the work place see Benson, "The Customers Ain't God," 190-91, 195-96.

9. Ibid., 195.


15. Ibid., 196.


18. Ibid.


27. Ibid., 40; Robert H. Wiebe. The Search for Order, 1877-1920 (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967);


35. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 82.


Because Progressives did not believe that department store women could organize themselves, wealthy reformers established the national and state consumers' leagues to improve working conditions in department stores and help saleswomen attain higher wages. Their efforts were part of a larger social movement designed to help all wage-earning women. Reformers sought legislation for working women to protect their health as future mothers and to destroy the forces that they feared tempted the morality of future homemakers.

Progressive journalists and reformers created the image of an exploited and depressed shopgirl who was seduced into employment by the luxuries and social promise of the department store. She expected her job to reflect the frills and finery of her surroundings, but instead the young girl encountered long days fraught with physical and mental hardships. Temptations abounded in the department store, seeking out the young and innocent shopgirl; she would grow discontented with her wholesome life, adopt false standards, and be led astray by her surroundings.
The shopgirl did not receive sufficient wages for nutritious food, a comfortable place to live, or respectable entertainment; her only escape was to marry a man she did not love, or to join the ranks of the "fallen women."

Reformers based public policy solutions such as maximum hour and minimum wage legislation on this image, and they publicized their version of the shopgirl to evoke sympathy and concern among the middle class. Journalists and reformers manipulated the image of the shopgirl by exaggerating the shopgirl's background and by neglecting the advantages of department store work. In part, their views resulted from a fear of the expanding working class and an ignorance of working-class culture. Fears of immorality and prostitution governed the reformers' strategy for protective legislation. And, in effect, they attempted to preserve the family unit instead of reconstructing the economy.

The NCL was only one Progressive women's reform group that advocated protective legislation as a panacea for wage-earning women. The Women's Trade Union League and the League of Women Voters also enthusiastically supported protective labor legislation, for it sought to help women without violating traditional female roles or trade union sensibilities. And all of these groups relied on the arguments originally set forth in the Muller v.
Oregon case, that women had a special need for protective legislation "to permit efficient motherhood and healthy children." These very arguments contributed to splitting feminist ranks in the first two decades of the twentieth century, for the appeal of women's weakness conflicted with the struggle for women's equality. The National Women's Party, the militant wing of the women's suffrage movement, and other critics of protective legislation feared that it would hamper women's access to good jobs and prevent the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment.¹ The state and national consumers' leagues contributed much to the struggle for protective legislation, but it was not until the New Deal period that these and other reform groups saw their efforts reach fruition.
ENDNOTES - CONCLUSION

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