

# In Pursuit of Justice: The Scholar-Activism of Feminist Settlement Workers in the Progressive Era (1890-1920s)

By

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## Abstract

In this paper we address the scholar-activism of some Progressive Era (1890-1920s) women who pursued social justice causes in the U.S. through their work in social settlements. As cases in point we review some of their participatory research and advocacy for workplace policies and environmental practices to improve the lives of working women, children, the poor, and immigrants of the period. The scholar-activism of the progressive era women was characterized by critical feminist pragmatism, standpoint epistemology, multiculturalism, and interdisciplinarity as reflected in the social settlement work of Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Alice Hamilton, and Mary McDowell among others. The successes of these women can be seen in state and federal labor legislative reforms, child labor laws, union activities, environmentalism, and increased public consciousness. The scholar-activism of women in the social settlements offers important lessons from the past for social democratic change today.

**Keywords:** feminist pragmatism, public feminism, standpoint epistemology, interdisciplinarity, social justice, environmental justice, workplace justice.

## Introduction

With today's twenty-four hour news, augmented by social media, we are constantly aware of threats to our comfort zone and to our sense of justice: democratic institutions under assault, hate crimes on the increase, a growing gap between rich and poor, climate change threatening our planet, health care differentials, xenophobia, and the voices of sexual assault survivors. With such a myriad of problems, we often become impervious to the troubles all around us and we rarely take time to reflect on our past. Yet there are lessons to be learned from history—lessons for today and lessons that fortify our resolve to right wrongs and to continue to fight for causes in which we believe.

This paper is about a few women who from their location in Progressive Era settlement houses took up the fight for just causes and made a difference—in their time and for posterity. These women left their mark: in theoretical explanations of social problems; in

new and interdisciplinary methodologies that yielded facts; in public education; in unionizing workers; in drafting legislation and securing its passage. We focus on two interrelated areas of activity that resulted in improved quality of life in early cities and laid a foundation for a more just society: labor-related problems and environmental justice. The women featured here believed that workers should not have to risk or shorten their lives to earn a living and that people should live in safe, non-toxic environments. We examine some of the research and advocacy of the period within the framework of four defining themes: critical feminist pragmatism, standpoint epistemology, multiculturalism, and interdisciplinarity. We examine these themes as reflected principally in the work of Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Alice Hamilton, and Mary McDowell. The context of their work was primarily that of settlement houses, particularly Hull House, the University of Chicago Settlement, and the Henry Street and Greenwich Settlements in New York. First,

the critical pragmatist orientation was rooted in the lived experience of women and their relations with their neighbors and other publics in urban settlements (Deegan 1990; Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley 1998; Williams & MacLean 2015). American pragmatism defined the scholar-activism of a network of cultural feminists (most from privileged backgrounds) who worked to create practical changes rooted in social democratic principles and public education (Seigfried 1996). These women collectively embraced what they understood to be humanistic community values while seeking social, economic, and political equality for women and other marginalized groups. The settlement context allowed for the union of theory with action, fundamental to the shared vision of equality in a social democracy (Deegan 1990)

Second, the public feminism of this period is indicative of the early roots of an epistemological orientation to generating knowledge that gave women authority as knowers reflected in what we understand today as “feminist standpoint epistemology” (Hartsock 1983; Collins 1986; Harding 1987; Jaggar 2008). From the shared standpoint of the privileged and the poor, the settlement women used a “neighborly relations” methodology to bridge the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” because to do so was mutually beneficial for settlement workers as well as for the immigrants and the poor who were their neighbors. Jane Addams of Hull House was one of the first proponents of the standpoint perspective in her claim that scholar-advocates can begin their work from a social location other than the one they commonly occupy thereby acknowledging the legitimacy of oppressed or marginalized groups.<sup>1</sup> Empower-ing participants to articulate problems that directly impact their lives and are contextualized and embodied in the lived experiences of others in their social locations is key to this perspective. Third, the public feminism of settlement women was guided by a commitment to multiculturalism as they worked with communities of the poor largely comprised of racial and ethnic minorities, a few emancipated black families migrating from rural to urban centers but mostly European immigrants entering the cities to supply industrial labor. As advocates for marginalized groups, the settlements welcomed immigrants for the gifts and insights they brought to America (Addams [1892]2002:19). While many settlement leaders fought for racial equality, in keeping with a pragmatic orientation to change, they conformed

<sup>1</sup>For a more complete discussion of standpoint epistemology, see Harding 2004; and Smith 2004.

to the segregated practices of the day by sponsoring and spinning off separate settlement houses for Blacks.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the public feminism of settlement workers encompassed an interdisciplinarity that transcended traditional academic boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

The solution to urban problems required multiple sources of knowledge, tools, and strategies. For example, tackling environmental problems and their social consequences necessitated the bringing together of expertise in fields such as industrial hygiene, medicine, economics, political science, law, sociology, and social work.

Public feminist settlement workers belonged to women’s clubs, various commissions and committees, and were part of a network of writers and lecturers. Settlement workers left a paper trail that gave voice to overlooked and unknown populations. They were, however, criticized for their pragmatist orientation as some were accused of reinforcing the “separate spheres” doctrine that required women to conform to traditional gender divisions (Davis 1984; Sklar 1985; Sarvasy 1992). Alternatively, the women’s shared sphere of cultural feminism provided a space for garnering and mobilizing resources among women’s groups, scholar networks, charities, clubs, and public servants. One of the best examples of the women’s initiative and political acumen is in the launching of the Children’s Bureau and appointment of its first director, Julia Lathrop of Hull House (Costin 1983; Muncy 1991; Scott 2004). So even as we see pictures of yesterday’s feminists and wonder how, dressed in the restrictive attire of their day, they could have been advocates for radical social change, no doubt at times adherence to feminine roles worked to their advantage. As a former Hull House neighbor put it, “The Hull-House suffragists . . . were ‘rather polite’ in their demeanor and considered it best to remain ‘ladylike’ so as not to offend the men who had the power to enfranchise them” (Weiner 1991:xvii).

Most settlement women were from middle and upper-middle class families and among the first generation of female college graduates. Imbued with

<sup>2</sup>Most settlements provided some activities and services for Blacks although often segregated. Many of the well-known settlement leaders such as Jane Addams and Lillian Wald were among those who founded the NAACP.

<sup>3</sup>Although their work penetrated disciplinary boundaries, settlement workers can be credited with developing an early American public sociology outside of the traditional academy (MacLean and Williams 2012, Williams and MacLean 2015). Ironically, the contemporary call for a return to the publics from which this tradition originated represents for sociology a coming full circle to its roots in earlier praxis (Burawoy 2005).

a service ethic and seeking a meaningful life outside the traditional family roles expected of them, they left homes of comfort to live among the poor, among immigrant neighbors on streets reeking with the stench of garbage, and among teen-age prostitutes and street urchins. While many began with the idea of sharing their middle-class life style with the poor, that motive was soon subsumed by the need to secure a just life in America for these citizens in progress. Settlement women were public feminists (Burawoy 2005) on two levels. Through speeches, writings, and media activities, the women aimed to educate the public in general. For example, they educated about the “costs” to workers who produced the necessary and luxury items of everyday life in unsafe work environments. They warned of public risks when home sweaters<sup>4</sup> spread infectious diseases in the garments they stitched and when slaughter house workers spread sickness through contaminated meats. Locally, feminists directed their activism to more visible audiences such as legislators, educators, employers, union leaders, civic organizations, and workers themselves. There were also overriding issues to bring to public awareness such as women’s right to vote and the on-going controversy as to whether progress for women should be measured by their equality with men or by “protectionism,” to accommodate their ascribed family roles (Sarvasy 1992).

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 19 % of women were in the workforce. Six percent of workers were children between the ages of 10 and 15 and younger children were often uncoun­ted in the home sweating system (Fisk 2001). Women and girls were typically employed in retail shops, in domestic service, in canneries, and in factories where they produced garments, artificial flowers, and cigars. Young boys typically worked as “dinner toters,” spinners, messengers, “boot blacks,” news boys, and water “dogs” in the glass blowing industry. Understandably then, much of the early public activism of settlement women was aimed at alleviating problems embedded in and emanating from the workplace. Work was the inescapable activity that touched every individual and every family. Work was the determinant not only of quality of life but of survival.

<sup>4</sup>The sweating system was used by a number of industries but especially garment-makers. The system eliminated the cost of rental space by hiring workers to cut and sew in their living quarters, crowded, poorly lighted and inadequately ventilated tenement spaces. Sometimes the entire family worked in the one or two rooms where they lived. Diseases were often present in such conditions and were then spread in garments cut and stitched by the sweaters.

## **Earning a Living: Workplace Policies and Social Change**

The Hull House neighborhood, the 19<sup>th</sup> Ward of Chicago, was largely populated by Southern and Eastern European immigrants who came to the United States in search of work and a better life for themselves and their families. A living wage, however, often required that an entire family work in order to survive. By observation and daily interaction with their neighbors, settlement women were quickly familiarized with problems associated with earning a living: child labor, the home sweating system, health hazards in the work place, lack of a living wage, and unreasonably long work hours. These problems impacted the quality of life for settlement neighbors and robbed families of leisure or shared time. The demands of daily survival edged out consciousness of, or attention to, the linkage between the personal troubles in “making ends meet” and the public issues surrounding work. Settlement house residents became actively involved in all aspects of labor-related problems—especially those involving women and children. They collected data; wrote articles, pamphlets, and books; gave speeches; and lobbied for remedial legislation and enforcement.<sup>5</sup>

Florence Kelley (1859-1932), a resident first of Hull House and then Henry Street Settlement in New York, was among those who supported what some viewed as “protective legislation” for women workers, making her unpopular with advocates of women’s equality. Kelley, however, was quick to argue that the conditions of working men were not such that women should seek their equal (Sklar, Schuler and Strasser 1998: 84). Kelley recognized the practicality of lobbying for protective legislation for working women and children because “It is much easier to find approval by appealing to the sympathy of the masses [and of legislators] for the welfare of helpless working women and children than . . . measures to protect the lives, bodies, and health of men . . .” (Sklar, Schuler and Strasser 1998:103-104). Kelley saw “protective” legislation for women as paving the way for improving working conditions for all. She was commissioned by the US Bureau of Labor to collect

<sup>5</sup>Hull House resident Sophonisba Breckinridge examined labor issues for women over time (1933), citing lack of union support and lack of voting power as “bargaining weaknesses” resulting in work-place problems and exploitation. Edith Abbott, another Hull House resident, wrote *Women in Industry* (1910), concluding, “The woman of the working classes finds it, so far as her measure of opportunity goes, very much as her great grandmother left it” (1910: 323). They advocated for women’s unionization and enfranchisement.

data on poverty in the city of Chicago and recruited other Hull House residents to assist in this task. Their work produced *Hull House Maps and Papers* (1895) and, armed with the authority of facts, Kelley set about educating the public and public officials. She was joined by Hull House neighbors as well as people of power and influence in lobbying for legislation to establish a factory inspection system, limit hours of women workers, and regulate child labor. Kelley drafted The Workshop and Factories Act, passed in 1893, establishing the first factory inspection in the state of Illinois. Kelley was appointed the first factory inspector and Hull House resident Alzina Stevens her assistant. This Act prohibited the employment of children under age 14 in industry or manufacturing and prohibited requiring females to work more than eight hours per day or 48 hours per week. The law kept some children in school but did nothing to reduce those in jobs such as cash-carriers, newsboys, or bootblacks who were “ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-clothed, illiterate, and wholly untrained for any occupation” (Kelley and Stevens [1895]2004:55). Jane Addams frequently spoke out on the evils of child labor, on one occasion admonishing club women for their blindness to working children (Addams [1908]2002: 256).

The benefits of the Workshop and Factories Act were negated when the Supreme Court of Illinois found it unconstitutional in 1895.<sup>6</sup> The justices reasoned that a person’s labor was personal property which the individual, under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, had a right to contract. The same logic was applied when Alice Hamilton, in researching workplace poisons, found employers rationalizing that workers entered the dangerous trades aware of their risk (Hamilton 1943:4-5). In New York as head of the National Consumers League (NCL), Florence Kelley took her campaign nation-wide in an effort to improve conditions and pay for workers through the triad of capitalists, labor, and consumers. The NCL had two major goals: to awaken in the public (particularly women) a consumer conscience, and to use consumer power to improve working conditions (Kelley 1899). Acutely aware of the constraints of a social structure where capitalists held power, Kelley never failed to educate her audiences on the need for structural reforms. She was disdainful of what she called “bourgeoisie philanthropy,” seeing it as simply propping up an exploitive capitalistic system (Kelley [1887]1986; Williams & MacLean 2018).

<sup>6</sup>In *Ritchie v. People* the Court ruled that the law imposed unwarranted restrictions on the right of workers to contract their labor to an employer (Kelley 1905: 261).

She aspired to achieve an American brand of socialism through a process of evolution propelled by human intervention rather than by revolution. The activities and strategies of the League can be summed up in Kelley’s mantra of “investigate, educate, legislate, and enforce.” Adjudication could also be added because as Kelley once observed, “Until it has been sustained by the Supreme Court of the United States, a statute is merely a trial draft, the enactment of which is but the first step in its development into valid law” (Kelley 1905:127).<sup>7</sup> The NCL was public and vocal in advocating for legislation protective of workers, particularly women and children. Kelley used to her advantage the gender-role norms of the day, arguing that to sacrifice women and children to oppressive work conditions was to sacrifice the future of the nation. Men had the power of the vote and could secure protective legislation for themselves while women and children had to rely on male protectors. However, as laws were passed and tested in the courts, as often as not they were pronounced unconstitutional.<sup>8</sup> Kelley followed every decision, looking for an opportunity to “rescue” the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment from what she called its “perverted application” (Kelley 1905:12; Goldmark 1976:144). When the opportunity arose, Kelley and colleague Josephine Goldmark (also a resident of Henry Street settlement), enlisted the help of well-known and widely respected lawyer, Louis Brandeis, to argue *Muller v. Oregon* (1908) before the Supreme Court. Goldmark and Kelley, along with volunteers from the NCL and women’s groups, set to work researching the scientific literature and contacting various “experts” in order to collect the facts needed for Brandeis to argue the case successfully.<sup>9</sup>

As the women advocated for a workers’ minimum wage, they also argued for a guaranteed wage adequate to ensure a minimum family income without the

<sup>7</sup>In addition to being trained as a social scientist, Kelley held a law degree from Northwestern University.

<sup>8</sup>In 1898, in *Holden v. Hardy*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Utah law limiting the workday of men in mines and smelters. Contrarily, in 1905 in *Lochner v. New York*, the Court found unconstitutional a law limiting work hours for bakers, their decision again based on the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

<sup>9</sup>His plan was to prepare a “social brief” documenting the harmful effects of long work hours on women and their families, thereby on society at large. Such briefs, used frequently today, are written to show the social and economic impact of particular laws or practices, the most famous being that which accompanied *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954, presenting evidence of the negative effects of segregation on children. Some scholars identify the Brandeis brief as the beginning of the field of sociological jurisprudence or “legal realism,” that is, interpretation of the law in keeping with a changing society.

necessity of children working. Income research began in the settlements with the “wage maps” constructed by Hull House residents (1895). These maps depicted “family income” as including labor such as house cleaning, washing, and errand-running by women and children. One researcher commented, “The theory that ‘every man supports his own family’ is as idle in a district like this as the fiction that ‘everyone can get work if he wants it’” (Holbrook [1895]2004: 21). The work of Mary Simkhovitch (1867-1951) and residents of Greenwich House in New York contributed data in support of a minimum wage or what Simkhovitch described as “a healthful life with a little margin” (Simkhovitch 1917:165). Poverty among workers was well documented in research such as Simkhovitch’s *The City Workers’ World* (1917) that provided qualitative and quantitative descriptions of the “industrial class” of workers.<sup>10</sup> The Greenwich House research helped turn attention from individual wages and money-management, often a form of victim blaming, to the exploitive capitalist wage system. The testimonies and data collected by settlement women played a key role in the minimum wage legislation but so did the dispute over protective versus equal legislation for women. Some argued that if women required protective legislation, minimum wage laws should not apply, and a 1923 Supreme Court case affirmed this argument,<sup>11</sup> leaving states with protective legislation and equal-pay minimum wage laws in limbo until federal legislation more than a decade later.<sup>12</sup> In 1938, the president signed into law the Fair Labor Standards Act establishing the first nation-wide minimum wage (25 cents per hour) with requirements for overtime pay. The road leading to this legislation was circuitous and many attributed the final achievement to Florence Kelley (who had by then passed away). Professor Holcombe of Harvard University wrote, “every statement of the early history of the minimum wage movement should give her the most credit” (Goldmark 1976:141). Justice Felix Frankfurter

<sup>10</sup>Other Greenwich House residents published *Five Hundred and Seventy-Four Deserters and their Families* (Brandt 1905), *Wage-Earners’ Budgets* (More 1907), and *Old Age Poverty in Greenwich Village* (Nassau 1915).

<sup>11</sup>*Adkins v. Children’s Hospital of Washington D.C.* overturned the precedent set by *Muller* which was rooted in the argument that women must be protected because they were “mothers of the race,” thus of special value to society. If this argument prevailed, the court reasoned, it was at the cost of the 14th Amendment’s “right to contract”—the backbone of free-enterprise capitalism.

<sup>12</sup>For a comprehensive discussion of the issues involved in protective versus equal work legislation and for the legal arguments of the right of individuals to contract their labor versus free labor, see Kessler-Harris (1991: 87-109).

wrote of Kelley that she “had probably the largest single share in shaping the social history of the United States during the first thirty years of this century . . . hers was no doubt a powerful if not decisive role in securing legislation for the removal of the most glaring abuses of our hectic industrialization” (Frankfurter 1953:v).

Settlement feminists were friends of labor. The women viewed unions as the most effective means of improving wages and working conditions for all and strong unions as the best means of producing structural changes in the economic system. Most settlement houses hosted labor meetings and their leaders helped to organize workers and arbitrate strikes. Some settlement feminists walked picket lines with striking workers while others posted bail for those arrested and raised funds to meet family necessities during strikes. Mary McDowell of the University of Chicago Settlement failed in her attempts to mediate the stock yard strike of 1904 but took her activism public in speeches and writing as she appealed for non-violence and a higher standard of living for workers. However, McDowell later wrote, “The cause of the unskilled or underpaid is not dead—it will keep on forcing itself to the surface because it is a live question that deals with the *raising of a standard of living*” (Wilson 1928:115).

Henry Street settlement women helped to organize female garment workers after the New York Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911 that killed 146 workers, 123 of them young girls or women. Lillian Wald, reported: “women who had never known . . . poverty or oppression found satisfaction in picketing side by side with the working girls.” Settlement residents made bail or paid fines for girls who were arrested (Wald [1915]1991: 210). Wald and Florence Kelley testified before the Factory Investigating Commission, representing workers and emphasizing the need for a “living wage” and for employers to be held responsible for worker safety. Wald, along with other settlement women, traveled to Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912 to support mill workers. Upon return, she opened the Henry Street settlement for meetings to educate “the people of New York who had no link with the working people” (Wald [1915]1991:279)).

The cities where the earliest settlement houses were located were destinations for the largest number of immigrants, the major source of cheap labor but exploited and unrecognized by decision-makers and the general public as future citizens. Alice Hamilton (1869-1970) of Hull House observed that the practice of many employers vis-a-vis migrant workers was “pay them as low wages as possible, and then, when

American ideas began to penetrate and revolt to raise its head to put it down with force, discharge and blacklist the troublemakers, and start afresh with a new lot of immigrants” (Hamilton 1943:5). Because of such practices, settlements became centers of activism aimed at protection of immigrants and at securing social justice for these citizens in progress. Typically, the settlements had representatives stationed at points of entry where they offered help to new arrivals. Settlement workers were particularly sensitive to the needs of young women or girls to prevent their being intercepted by unscrupulous persons seeking to lure them into prostitution or slave labor. Some of the settlements offered employment assistance and all conducted research to benefit immigrants. The public and most officials were interested in the benefits of immigrants’ labor and in their rapid assimilation to American, Eurocentric culture. Settlement activists tended to be more appreciative of diversity, seeking to preserve immigrant “gifts.” Hull House, for example, offered programs designed to reverse a division between immigrant parents and their children by “building a bridge between European and American experiences” (Addams [1910]2008:151). Addams observed that children of immigrants often came to look down on non-English speaking parents steeped in the ways of their homelands. She established a Labor Museum at Hull House designed as “a continuing reconstruction of experience” for the public as well as for second-generation immigrant children. The Museum educated by displaying “the complicated machinery of the factory” as having evolved from the simple tools and skilled labor of first-generation immigrants (Addams [1910]2008:152). The museum took its place in the history of Hull House representing but one example of multiculturalism advanced by settlement women.

### **Environmental Justice and Places for Unpleasant Things**

Improving the lives of workers was naturally linked with improving the quality of living. The early cities grew quickly, with little or no planning, and they were not healthy; “garbage lined the streets and open privies abounded” (Sicherman 1991:132). Little thought had been given to problems of infrastructure, polluted air, or sanitation facilities. The poor were especially vulnerable to diseases associated with inadequate housing as most lived in densely populated, poorly ventilated tenements. Since the early settlement houses were by design located in some of the worst and most congested

areas of cities, health and sanitation were problems for the middle-class settlement residents as well as for their neighbors. Settlement women moved in two worlds—the neighborhoods around the settlements and those of their families and wealthy benefactors. They were among the first to call attention to environmental injustices that resulted in poor people, mostly immigrants, being dumped on or exposed to hazards through the actions of more powerful populations, corporations, or governments. One of the reasons for some early environmental successes in settlement neighborhoods is that environmental work was seen as an appropriate role for women, often referred to by public officials as “municipal housekeepers.”

Some of the first fights for environmental justice took place in Chicago. Major stakeholders in Chicago’s garbage wars “included the Hull House, the city of Chicago, private waste haulers and dumpers, and the immigrant ethnic groups constituting the wards and neighborhoods where dumping was occurring” (Pellow 2004: 22). These stakeholders were in conflict over simple environmental justice—the distribution of solid waste in immigrant neighborhoods lacking in power. Settlement involvement in garbage issues began with Jane Addams who educated her neighbors as well as public officials about the consequences of inadequate garbage collection, one being the very high death rate in the 19<sup>th</sup> Ward (Addams [1910]2008:182-184). Because of her continuing complaints, Addams was appointed Ward garbage inspector. She formed a garbage patrol to follow wagons as they rolled through the streets in route to the dump, making sure that they did not spill as much garbage as they picked up as was often their practice. Addams’ “garbage patrols” were a means of collecting information by first-hand observation and a tactic of public education as her entourage often included settlement workers, neighborhood parents, and children.

Addams greatest contribution to environmental justice was her ability to connect with individuals and to boost public consciousness, thereby linking personal troubles and public issues. She did this in one-to-one interactions with neighbors and in interactions with various publics—neighborhood groups, city, state and federal decision-makers. Addams also championed environmental justice in her writings and speeches. In a 1908 speech, she began with the basic and traditional roles of women—to keep a clean house and care for the children. However, as Addams noted, “If she lives in a tenement house, as so many of my neighbors do, she cannot fulfill these simple obligations by her own

efforts because she is utterly dependent upon the city administration for the conditions which render decent living possible” (Addams [1908] 2002: 252). Addams enumerated tenement problems requiring public action: dirty, non-fireproof stairways, city streets collecting water and garbage, lack of plumbing for baths and toilets, and insufficient windows for light and ventilation. A woman who grew up in the Hull House neighborhood described city streets after heavy rainfall where, “smelly water would remain for days.” She remembered also that “some of the young people erected a sign reading “The Mayor and the Aldermen are invited to swim here” (Polacheck 1991:30). Addams educated her neighbors that if they were to keep on with the business of caring for home and children they must “have some conscience” regarding public affairs. Addams effectively linked the personal with the public: “the individual conscience will respond to the special challenge and will heed the call . . . as the individual is able to see the social conditions and intelligently to understand the larger need” (Addams [1908]2002: 259-260).

The work of Dr. Alice Hamilton spanned the fields of industrial diseases and accidents and public health associated with environmental poisons. Gottlieb proclaimed Hamilton as “this country’s first major urban/industrial environmentalist” (Gottlieb 2003:249). Hamilton observed that industrial diseases were neglected in the United States in comparison with Europe because the subject was “tainted with Socialism or with feminine sentimentality for the poor” (Hamilton 1943:249). She became interested in industrial accidents and diseases while living in Hull House: “coming in contact with laborers and their wives, I could not fail to hear tales of dangers that workingmen faced, of cases of carbon-monoxide gassing in the great steel mills, of painters disabled by palsy, of pneumonia and rheumatism among the men in the stockyards” (Hamilton 1943:114). As a physician, she was interested in treatment but as a researcher she sought the root cause of a problem, always with the goal of remediation and prevention. For example, in 1902, she traced a typhoid epidemic to a sewage overflow and contaminated water that the city had covered up rather than correct.

Hamilton’s autobiography details the “shoe-leather epidemiology” method in all her work: “going straight to the homes of people about whom I wished to learn something and talking to them in their own surroundings. . .” (Hamilton 1943:125). In fact, she triangulated data from a number of sources. Hospital

records allowed her to connect specific occupations with specific illnesses and field visits to plants and home visits (without regard for race/ethnicity) with workers provided data on work conditions and exposure to dangerous substances. The facts collected were used in writings and speeches for different audiences: the general public; public officials; fellow scientists; women’s groups; laborers, their families, and their unions.

In 1910, Hamilton was appointed managing director of the first Occupational Disease Commission for the state of Illinois where she became the leading expert on lead-related diseases in the workplace as well as their direct consequences for families, communities, cities, and the public. Hamilton was quick to dispel the myth that lead poisoning was caused by workers unwillingness to wash their hands and scrub their nails. She also found the health impact of lead contamination to be underreported, often concealed by workers who feared that complaints would cost them their jobs. On the other hand, Hamilton refrained from blaming employers for workers’ diseases or accidents because in most cases she found them ignorant of the dangers and receptive to changes once they learned the facts. Research in the US was non-existent; public officials and the general public seemed to accept industry’s explanation that careless workers were responsible for their diseases. By primary interviews and visits to factories, she determined that “the men were poisoned by breathing poisoned air, not by handling their food with unwashed hands” (Hamilton 1943:121). Apart from the obvious lead-manufacturing plants, an immediate problem for Hamilton was the presence of lead in so many unexpected industries and the fact that workers who simply handled lead-related products were at risk. While her Illinois work was underway, Hamilton attended the International Congress on Occupational Accidents and Diseases in Brussels and was reminded again of how advanced Europe was in comparison with the United States in the prevention and treatment of industrial diseases (Hamilton 1943:128). Following the conference, Hamilton was appointed by the US Commissioner of Labor to conduct a nation-wide survey focusing on lead and other poisonous trades. Travels for this assignment took her throughout the country but her base of operation remained Hull House. She used a similar methodology to that used in Illinois: factory visits, hospital records, and interviews. Hamilton did not just collect data, submit her report, and wait for Washington to act. She conducted exit interviews with the heads or managers of plants studied, laying out findings and recommendations for improving worker

safety (Hamilton 1943:136).

It was Hamilton's interest in lead-induced workplace diseases and her knowledge of the dangers of lead that led to an expanded interest in environmental issues such as lead poisoning in substances and materials that families use on a daily basis. Later, Hamilton lent her voice to the battle against the use of leaded gasoline in motor vehicles. With two colleagues, Hamilton wrote one of the earliest studies on the poisonous effects of Tetra-Ethyl lead (TEL), with projections into the area of public health.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1925, she wrote in favor of regulating the sale and use of TEL to protect the public and the environment against "slow, cumulative lead poisoning." She declared, "I am not one of those who believes that the use of this leaded gasoline can ever be made safe" (Hamilton [1925]1972:99-100). However, it was not until 1963 that a more environmentally conscious public and mounting scientific data convinced Congress to pass the first *Clean Air Act*, setting in motion the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency and, ultimately, the removal of lead from gasoline.<sup>14</sup>

In 1919, Hamilton was offered a position in industrial medicine at the all-male Harvard Medical School, the first woman to receive such an appointment. She negotiated a contract to teach only one semester a year so she could continue her hands-on research and return to Hull House for part of each year. While at Harvard, Hamilton wrote *Industrial Poisons in the United States* (1925), the first text in the field, and *Industrial Toxicology* (1934). After retiring from Harvard, she continued to do research and writing as a medical consultant to the U. S. Division of Labor Standards. Hamilton lived to see some of her work vindicated and used in the passage of significant legislation. The Occupational Safety and Health Act passed three days after her death and the Clean Air Act not until 1963. She has received considerable recognition posthumously as several organizations now sponsor annual Alice Hamilton memorial lectures or awards. In a lecture in her honor, Morton Lippmann paid tribute because "the virtual elimination of lead in gasoline and food packaging shows that we have learned one of Dr. Hamilton's important lessons. . .the most effective means of reducing excessive exposures are through control of the environmental sources" (Lippmann

1990:1). A commemorative postage stamp was issued in her honor in 1995. In 2002, the American Chemical Society placed a plaque in the Jane Addams Museum honoring Hamilton (ACS <https://www.acs.org>).

Interestingly, Hamilton attributed much of her success in research and in legislation to the fact that she was a woman, "It seemed natural and right that a woman should put the care of the producing workman ahead of the value of the thing he was producing; in a man it would have been (seen as) sentimentality or radicalism" (1943: 269). Such statements suggest that settlement feminists, familiar with the sex-role stereotypes of their day, did not find them entirely contradictory to their goals as advocates for the disadvantaged. Instead, as public feminists, women's humanitarian values were extolled as more just than equal male-female rights to labor in an unsafe, unhealthy environment.

Pellow's history of garbage in Chicago acknowledges not only the work of Hull House women but also that of Mary McDowell (1854-1936), head of the University of Chicago Settlement. McDowell came naturally to the cause of environmental justice as she lived in one of the most polluted and unhealthy areas of the city, the area known as "Packingtown" or "Back of the Yards," the noxious stockyards and packing plants. Chicago was among the dirtiest of cities due in large part to its meat packing industry—the leading source of water and land pollution (Pellow 2004:4). McDowell was an early social justice activist, raising her voice against environmental injustices endured by European immigrants in her ward and also speaking out against violence and discrimination directed at African Americans (Pellow 2004: 21). Because of the resistance led by women such as Addams and McDowell, their neighbors became more socially and economically conscious and began to voice their own concerns. For example, McDowell described an appearance at city hall with a group from her neighborhood, there to request better garbage disposal. A young lawyer representing the city began his presentation with the assertion that "in all great cities there must be a place segregated for unpleasant things, and of course the people living there are not very sensitive" (McDowell 1938:1). The people's response was laughter and laughter followed his every statement, rendering the man's words ineffective.

Of the many issues associated with Mary McDowell and the University of Chicago Settlement, garbage became their *cause celebre*, dictated no doubt by location and surroundings. First had come the stockyards, which the city rapidly grew toward, with live animals from all over the country. The stockyards drew slaughterhouses

<sup>13</sup>Tetraethyl lead, known commercially as Ethyl or TEL, was added to gasoline beginning in 1921, marketed as an octane rating booster with an "anti-knock" quality producing higher engine efficiency.

<sup>14</sup>The phase-out of lead from gasoline was estimated to reduce the number of children with toxic levels of lead in their blood by 2 million per year between 1970 and 1987 (Stolark 2016: 2).



and packing plants, five large ones by 1920. All of this industry drew workers—eventually more than 30,000, mostly European immigrants—who lived nearby in poorly constructed housing. This area where McDowell and her neighbors lived was an unpleasant and unhealthy environment where at one point infant mortality accounted for one in every three babies born (McDowell 1938:2). Two Hull House researcher-activists described the area as one with “the suggestion of death and disintegration” all around, “the mingled cries of animals awaiting slaughter, the presence of uncared-for-waste, the sight of blood, the carcasses naked of flesh and skin” (Breckinridge and Abbott 1911:434). There were only two paved streets and no paved sidewalks in Packingtown, an area according to McDowell as set aside for “unpleasant things.”

Thanks to the railroads and refrigerated cars, the meat industry became one of the first forms of monopoly capitalism, with little thought given to the environmental consequences for workers and their families. Local interests also contributed to and profited from environmental injustice. For example, large clay holes in Packingtown were the result of a brickmaking operation owned by a city alderman who needed the holes filled and accomplished this by charging the city to dump the garbage of almost three million people in the holes. As McDowell put it, “He got rich and the city was not troubled” (1938:1). For almost two decades, McDowell “used the facts of her neighbors’ lives’ to better their living condition” (Wilson 1928:145). She used every means at her disposal to create a healthier environment in Packingtown, including evoking the guilt of her affluent neighbors in Hyde Park by educating them that their garbage was contributing to environmental injustice. A local judge, after hearing her speak, granted an injunction against the city to prohibit dumping in the open pits. Another official advised McDowell that nothing would change until sufficient public support was aroused, whereupon she doubled her speaking engagements, determined to convince the public that garbage was Chicago’s problem, not just that of her neighborhood.

In 1911, on a trip sponsored by a “loyal woman citizen,” McDowell traveled to Europe to study the “scientific disposal and collection of city waste,” the first person to seek a scientific method of garbage disposal for Chicago. She traveled to Glasgow, Scotland, reported to handle the disposal of garbage in “the most economical and sanitary way.” Glasgow officials urged her to visit Hamburg and Frankfurt because they were yet more advanced. There she learned about methods of incinerating refuse and

garbage whereby “Science . . . can take ugly stuff and make it over into that which is useful and beautiful” (McDowell 1938:4). She returned to Chicago “primed with facts and pictures” that she shared with public officials and with “every social group from the esthetic ball room on the North Side to the Chicago Federation of Labor in the center of the city” (1938:4). A reporter from the *Chicago Daily News* helped McDowell launch a public campaign for environmental justice (Wilson 1928:150). McDowell supporters—women’s groups, other settlement workers, and settlement neighbors—became known as garbage experts as they frequently appeared at city meetings and were in demand as speakers throughout the city. They learned to explain to a variety of audiences the most effective methods of garbage disposal: incineration and reduction and why incineration was recommended for cities the size of Chicago. McDowell was well informed on the number of tons of garbage generated by Chicagoans. After reporting and making recommendations based on data collected in Europe, McDowell recalled that the city fathers “ignorantly urged economy instead of sanitation” (McDowell 1938:5). Nothing changed until Illinois women were enfranchised in 1913 and, armed with facts, tested their new power by demanding scientific disposal of the 172 tons of rubbish and 534 tons of garbage generated every day in Chicago. “An appropriation of ten thousand dollars was made in ten minutes and a commission with two women on it was appointed,” McDowell being one (1938:5). In Chicago, the power of women’s vote was proven true even though women were not enfranchised nationwide until 1920. Although never just a “woman’s issue,” garbage disposal and the larger issue of environmental justice were treated as such because they were made public issues by settlement women. Presumably, because “a woman’s simplest duty . . . is to keep her house clean and wholesome,” environmental activism was accepted as an extension of that duty (Addams [1908]2002: 252). The reasoning was faulty, but some neighborhoods were healthier because the facts they gathered imbued women with authority as “municipal housekeepers.”

### **Some Lessons for Today**

We can learn from and be inspired by the lives and work of these early scholar-activists. The women discussed here drew from a standpoint methodology to advocate for a more just and safer world in which childhood, worker safety, a living wage, and leisure would become human rights for all, not merely for

the privileged. By living among the working classes and with their doors always open to their neighbors, settlement women were able to improve their communities and to begin the process of bridging the gap between rich and poor. The scholar-activism of feminists in progressive era settlement houses was grounded in a critical pragmatism that identified the social structural origins of social problems and their democratic solutions. Public problems were situated in the everyday lives of women and children, the working poor, and newly arrived immigrants. Feminist pragmatists saw the settlement as both a method and as an approach to the “social question” of inequality. It was in the words of Jane Addams ([1910] 2008:83) “an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems . . . the over accumulation of one end of society and the destitution of the other.” The “neighborly relations” paradigm practiced in the settlements informed a public feminism as women pursued social justice and formulated legislative and action-oriented agendas independent of the constraints of academic or other institutions. For settlement women, “To study a problem out of only abstract scientific interest with no attempt at remedy is...practically illogical and morally indefensible” (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley 1998:244). Central to the feminist vision of settlement women and their standpoint epistemology was the view that the voices and lived experiences of their neighbors should lead any effort to create change. In this way, they recognized the agency and cultural diversity of their neighbors and helped to maintain that diversity and extol its gifts.

Settlements were not restricted by ideologies, religious dogma, or disciplinary boundaries in providing the first social laboratories for data collection and analysis. Although part of the developing sociological tradition of the day, in seeking solutions to urban problems, settlement workers drew on all available knowledge and resources. Fellow residents contributed their diverse interests, expertise, and networks: Ellen Gates Starr of Hull House and her network of artists and printers; Florence Kelley and her Consumers’ League; Lilian Wald of Henry Street and her network of nurses; Alice Hamilton and scientific colleagues documenting the toxic properties of lead. Settlement work represents one of the earliest examples of community action research. Participatory action formed the basis, for example, in union organizing, labor reforms, workplace regulations, garbage disposal and sanitation, and adequate housing. An early example of the action-oriented settlement scholarship is represented in the interdisciplinary,

collectively written, *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895).

By living among the working classes, settlement feminists were able to improve their communities and to begin the process of bridging the gap between the rich and poor. While these women made important inroads for improving the plight of those in need, similar problems, and perhaps even more threatening ones persist today. Many workers still do not make a living wage and there is evidence that the gap between the rich and poor is growing with some CEOs making over 300 times as much as their average worker (Top to Bottom 2020). Social inequalities abound in access to health care, in the disproportionate impact of crime in poor neighborhoods, in contaminated environments, and in the risk of unemployment and homelessness. Child labor and, particularly, sex trafficking rob many children and youth of childhood and of a safe transition to adulthood. The erosion of industrial regulations has made toxic workplace pollutants and water contamination a threat to community safety. Global warming and climate change threaten the sustainability of the planet as “natural disasters” in the form of tornadoes, flooding, and the melting of glacier ice caps leave communities devastated and threaten their very survival.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from the settlement model is that while the physical neighborhoods and social worlds of the privileged and the poor remain profoundly segregated by race, ethnicity, and class, we all share a common interest in creating global social change. Contemporary problems cross cut class, race, age, and gender. When women of all walks of life raise their voices to share experiences of workplace sexual abuse, the power of collective action is understood as women simultaneously “speak truth to power.” When communities are devastated by wild fires, tornadoes, and flooding, the public is witness to these tragedies as the daily news reminds us that both the rich and the poor are impacted by climate change. When new viruses spread, threatening the economy with “lock down” and antibiotics no longer effectively treat some diseases, the shared interests of our publics begin to resonate.

Critical feminist pragmatists worked with their neighbors by raising consciousness and privileging the voices of the marginalized to speak on issues that impacted them daily. Their pragmatist approach to social change, feminist standpoint, multiculturalism, and interdisciplinarity offers important lessons for today as we collectively seek solutions to the myriad of

problems confronting our various publics. Settlement women changed the dominant narrative from individual reform and rights to the more political social reform and social democracy needed to create structural-level changes through social policy and community mobilization.

Although the focal issues of the public feminists were grounded in the family lives of their settlement neighbors, their causes were readily parlayed into remedial campaigns for the common good. Like the public feminists of the past who turned the private troubles of their neighbors into public issues of urban-industrial life, public feminism today can bring into collective awareness the institutional and structural basis of growing inequalities, threats to environmental sustainability, contemporary attacks on democracy, and the abuses that undermine social, economic, and political equality. Without doubt, we will never achieve a world of perfect justice. However, to continue our pursuit of this ideal requires the facts, knowledge, action, and determination possessed by the scholar-activist women of more than a century ago, strengthened by our diversity in class, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and a greater technological knowledge.

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