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“The Cornerstone of a New Civilization”: The First International Council of Women and the Campaign for “Social Purity”

BY KATHI L. KERN*

In 1888, American suffragists organized an International Council of Women (“ICW”) to acknowledge the fortieth anniversary of the first woman’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. In the process, they launched a movement of international feminism that would flourish well into the twentieth century. From its modest beginnings, the ICW grew into a premier international organization which claimed to represent thirty-six million women by 1925.¹

Convened by the National Woman Suffrage Association (“NWSA”), the purpose of the ICW was to “devise new and more effective methods” for securing justice and equality for women “in the State, in the Church and in the Home.”² Male sovereignty transcended national differences, the organizers argued, as “the position of women anywhere affects their position everywhere.”³ The ICW would be a fitting tribute to the memory of Seneca Falls, wrote abolitionist and women’s rights advocate Frederick Douglass, stating

how great that little meeting now appears! It seems only yesterday since it took place, and yet forty years have passed away and what a

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¹ Leila J. Rupp, *Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women’s Organizations, 1888-1945*, 99 AM. HIST. REV. 1571, 1574 (1994). Rupp points out that the very first transnational meeting of women was the short-lived Association Internationale des Femmes, begun in Geneva in 1868. *Id.* at 1573 n.8.

² Letter from Susan B. Anthony to Frederick Douglass (Feb. 6, 1888) (printed enclosure *Call to NWSA “International Council of Women” Founding Convention*), microfilmed on PAPERS OF ELIZABETH CADY STANTON AND SUSAN B. ANTHONY, series 3 (Patricia G. Holland & Ann D. Gordon eds., Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1991) [hereinafter PAPERS].

³ *Id.*

revolution . . . we [have] seen in the sentiment of the American people. . . . Who could have thought that humble, modest, maiden convention . . . would have become the mother of an International Council of Women, right here in the capital of this nation?⁴

At issue for ICW organizers Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, however, was how little had changed for women since Seneca Falls, particularly in the male-dominated realm of electoral politics. Conscious of their unique place in history, the organizers of the ICW hoped to provide a pivotal moment to assess the past and to seize the future. Although the ICW was sponsored by suffragists, the scope of the meeting was to be entirely inclusive of women's varied concerns, not focused exclusively on women's political rights. Drawing together leaders in temperance unions, literary clubs, labor unions, peace movements, missionary societies, moral purity campaigns, and charitable, professional, and educational societies, ICW organizers hoped to amass "the ablest and most imposing body of women ever assembled."⁵

Encouraged by the support the ICW drew from various avenues of women's work, Anthony wrote to a participant, "I know it will gladden your heart as it does mine — that *all women* are coming to see that *woman* should have her place & power in the state as well as the home!"⁶ In fact, response to the idea of the ICW was so enthusiastic that the organizers were forced to develop criteria for the inclusion of individuals and organizations as official delegates to the ICW. They opted for a plan of recognizing nationally constituted organizations as delegates and inviting individual women to speak on "various kinds of unorganized work."⁷

The first ICW met for eight days, from March 25 to April 1, 1888. A total of fifty-three different organizations of women were represented; eighty women spoke on the platform; forty-nine women served as delegates from the countries of England, France, Norway, Denmark,

⁴ Letter from Frederick Douglass to Susan B. Anthony (Feb. 1888), in IDA H. HARPER, LIFE AND WORK OF SUSAN B. ANTHONY 634 (1898), in PAPERS, *supra* note 2.

⁵ Letter from Susan B. Anthony to Frederick Douglass, *supra* note 2.

⁶ Letter from Susan B. Anthony to Laura Carter Holloway (Feb. 10, 1888), in Laura C. Holloway Collection, Brooklyn Public Library (Brooklyn, N.Y.), in PAPERS, *supra* note 2.

⁷ *The Woman's Jubilee: What Miss Susan B. Anthony Thinks of the Suffrage Cause*, NAT'L REPUBLICAN (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 12, 1888 (an interview with Susan B. Anthony), in PAPERS, *supra* note 2.

Finland, India, Canada, and the United States. In other words, "international" was understood as Western Europe (with the notable exception of Germany), as well as North America and India. In some respects, however, the delegation was more diverse than one might expect from a fledgling organization in the late nineteenth century. Among its members were at least two women of color, including famed African-American poet and temperance leader Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Pundita Ramabai Saravati, a leader in women's education from India. More often than not, however, white middle and upper-class women simply presumed an ability to "represent" the racial and social diversity of women.⁸

As the membership of the first ICW convened, so too did the press. A reporter from the *Washington Post* assigned to the meeting literally followed delegates from their hotel rooms to the ICW's opening session commenting that the women "conducted themselves as a body of men would have done under the same circumstances, except that they did not smoke after breakfast."⁹ In addition, Clara Colby, editor of the *Woman's Tribune*, relocated the offices of her paper from Beatrice, Nebraska, to Washington, D.C., for the duration of the Council. Colby produced what is considered to be the first woman's suffrage daily. The meeting was marked by yet another technological innovation: a phonographic record of the proceedings was made.

All public sessions were held in Albaugh's Opera House with ticket prices ranging from twenty-five cents for a single admission to four dollars for a season ticket with a reserved seat. The Riggs House served as the headquarters of the ICW, as it did in virtually all the NWSA annual conventions held in the nation's capital. The hotel charged the association between two and three dollars a day per person "with two in a bed."¹⁰ But if the Riggs House were too extravagant for participants,

⁸ Working-class women in particular were represented largely by middle-class reformers. Suffragist and philanthropist Mary Livermore delivered an address on the condition of women in industry. Harriet R. Robinson, who married into a wealthy reform family, recounted her glorious days as a factory operative at the Lowell Mills, her "alma mater." And M. Louis Thomas, President of Sorosis, extolled the literary merits of the *Lowell Offering*, a company-controlled literary magazine that celebrated the benefits of factory work. See, e.g., *Industries*, REP. OF THE INT'L COUNCIL OF WOMEN (1888) [hereinafter REPORT OF THE ICW].

⁹ WASH. POST, Mar. 27, 1888, in PAPERS, *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ Letter from Susan B. Anthony to Julia Bullard Nelson (Feb. 20, 1888), in American Museum of Historical Documents (Las Vegas, Nev.), in PAPERS, *supra* note 2.

lower fares were available at local boarding houses that offered a day rate of \$1.50. For continental travel, ICW organizers negotiated reduced fares (one-third off a first-class round trip ticket) from most of the major railroads. Women traveling from Europe were offered reduced rates on a steamer originating in Liverpool. A round trip ticket cost twenty-eight pounds. All expenses of the invited delegates and platform speakers were paid from the dwindling treasury of the NWSA. Participants funding their own trips were cautioned to budget for at least ten dollars a week. As the ICW expanded, the financial implications of a transnational organization became increasingly complicated. The costs of international travel threatened to limit the participation to wealthy women and, at the same time, to narrow the geographical locus to Western countries. ICW meetings were routinely held in Western Europe or the United States, a practice which placed an unfair burden of travel and expense on women from other parts of the world.¹¹

Financial problems were not the only stumbling blocks to successful international organizing. Not unlike the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in 1995, and the controversy over Hillary Rodham Clinton's participation in it, the first ICW endured a media scandal before its opening session.¹² The British delegation to the ICW was up in arms over the participation of one of its delegates, a Mrs. Ashton Dilke representing the Newcastle Liberal Women's Union. Dilke's name was well-known to the press who had a field day over the adultery case of her brother-in-law, Sir Charles Dilke. Mrs. Ashton Dilke, although not personally implicated in the scandal, suffered the misfortune of being related to several of its participants, causing at least some British delegates to refuse to appear on a public platform with her. Elizabeth Cady Stanton became embroiled in the Dilke affair when she assumed the unpopular position of supporting Mrs. Dilke's right to participate in the program. Adding insult to injury, Stanton took the steamer from Britain to the United States with Dilke and castigated her British detractors in the press. British luminary Helen Taylor, the step-daughter of John Stuart Mill, withdrew from the program and cited Stanton's support of Dilke as her reason.¹³ Stanton's actions

¹¹ Rupp, *supra* note 1, at 1577.

¹² Some human rights activists cautioned that Clinton's trip to China would be read by the international community as acquiescence to China's record of human rights abuses and urged Clinton not to participate in the conference. *See, e.g., China Won't Be Challenged by First Lady at Conference*, WASH. POST, Sept. 3, 1995, at A13.

¹³ Letter from Helen Taylor to Susan B. Anthony (Mar. 7, 1888), in Ida

embarrassed Susan B. Anthony who had successfully kept Dilke's name out of all the advance publicity for the ICW. Anthony worried that the controversy might echo past scandals — the free love oratory of Victoria Woodhull, for example — and once again link in the public mind woman suffrage with sexual impropriety. At the very least, the discussion of the Dilke ordeal threatened to take precedence in the press over the ICW proceedings.¹⁴

Once under way, however, the ICW succeeded in focusing attention on the many broad public areas of concern in women's reform work, including: education, philanthropy, temperance, industries, professions, organization, legal conditions, social purity, political conditions, and religion. Taken together, these themes emphasized two key issues undermining women's quest for equality. The cornerstone was equal *access*. Whether in the halls of elite educational institutions or on the industrial shop floors, women sought equal access to learning and wages. At the same time, women called for equal and shared *responsibility*. Access to opportunity was insufficient in and of itself without a dramatic change in the moral codes guiding the behavior of men. As delegates wrote in their official statement at the conclusion of the ICW, "an enlightened society should demand, as the only adequate expression of the high civilization which it is its office to establish and maintain, an identical standard of personal purity and morality for men and women."¹⁵

Concern over the commercial, sexual exploitation of women would continue to resonate with activists over a century later at the United

Husted Harper Collection, HM 10610, Henry E. Huntington Library (San Marino, Cal.). See also Letter from Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Helen Taylor (Mar. 6, 1888), in Mills-Taylor Papers, British Library (London, Eng.).

¹⁴ Opponents of the woman's movement attempted to associate women reformers with sexual scandals to discredit the movement. In 1874, Stanton and Anthony were badgered by the press for information on the Beecher-Tilton adultery scandal. Interview with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, July 26, 1874, BROOKLYN DAILY ARGUS, in Beecher-Tilton Scrapbook 7, at 54, at New York Public Library. At other times, suffrage and temperance leaders were themselves falsely accused of sexual scandals. For instance, Susan B. Anthony was accused during the campaign for woman suffrage in Kansas during 1867. Helen Gougar in Indiana had to go to trial to defend herself against an accusation of sexual impropriety. Letter from Helen Gougar to Elizabeth M. Boynton Harbert (Jan. 28, 1883), in Harbert Collection, Box 4, Folder 51, Henry E. Huntington Library (San Marino, Cal.). Harbert's testimony provided Gougar's defense. See "Helen M. Gougar vs. Henry Maudler," portion of direct examination of Mrs. Elizabeth Boynton Harbert, in Harbert Collection, *supra*.

¹⁵ REPORT OF THE ICW, *supra* note 8, at 454.

Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing. Indeed, while the Victorian phrase, "Social Purity," may sound dated to contemporary readers, the social problems veiled by the phrase remain quite timely. As Margaret Plattner reports in her discussion of the Beijing Conference, participants prioritized violence against women — and more specifically prostitution and the trafficking of women and girls — as one of twelve planks on the Platform for Action issued from the meeting.¹⁶ Similarly, in sessions closed to male participation, women delegates of the first ICW discussed a myriad of problems confronted by women of all nations: the trafficking of women and girls in prostitution, the spread of disease, the criminalization of women prostitutes, the age of consent, the double standard in sexual codes, and the disregard for a woman's right to "control her own person."¹⁷

"We are here in search of foundation principles on which to lay the corner-stone of a new civilization," declared U.S. suffragist Elizabeth Boynton Harbert, the presiding officer of the Social Purity session, as she convened the meeting.¹⁸ Believing that "the history of prostitution is the history of woman," delegates at the ICW rallied around those women reformers who had made the elimination of vice their special area of endeavor.¹⁹

Prostitution contaminated public space. Moreover, reformers argued, prostitution did much to erode the barrier between public and private by infecting the home with both disease and moral decay. Religious discourse provided women reformers both the metaphorical tools and the moral authority to launch their arguments about Social Purity. Where the Bible and woman's rights were concerned, men and women alike had for too long "preached Christ and practiced Moses."²⁰ While the New Testament might offer up more hopeful possibilities to nineteenth-century women, the Hebrew Bible could not be ignored entirely. The proclamations from Genesis, in particular, which anticipated the trajectory of "the fall" had already manifested in contemporary life. In her speech to the ICW, U.S. participant Elizabeth Saxon portrayed the Garden of Eden as a symbolic struggle between spirituality and lust in which spiritual truth

¹⁶ Margaret Plattner, *The Status of Women Under International Human Rights Law and the 1995 UN World Conference on Women, Beijing, China*, 84 KY. L.J. 1249 (1995-96).

¹⁷ For coverage of these topics, see *Social Purity*, REPORT OF THE ICW, *supra* note 8, at 246.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at 252.

²⁰ *Id.* at 249-50.

was soundly defeated. God forecasted humanity's dim future, Saxon argued, when he told Adam, "I will put enmity between thy seed and her seed. It shall bruise thy head, but thou shalt bruise his heel.'"²¹ Interpreting this passage, Saxon offered: "Has not his heel, his physical body, been bruised by this serpent in the taint that is shown in scrofula, cancer, consumption, and every hideous disease from thousands of centuries of unbridled transmissions of syphilitic poisons?"²² The Bible revealed to women the social tragedy that evolved when "the divine powers of procreation [are] perverted to unbridled license," but the Bible also offered women an alternative, "'continnence, chastity, and spiritual truth and life.'"²³

Policing morality within their communities was not an abstract goal. Women reformers waged a legislative battle against state regulation of prostitution, or in their words, against state-sanctioned, "legalized lust."²⁴ The case in England set the standard for other western nations, including the United States. The passage of the Contagious Diseases Act ("CDA") in 1864-69 authorized British police to seize any woman they suspected of prostitution and to submit her to a medical exam. The alleged purpose of the legislation was to control prostitution and to curb the spread of venereal disease. But the effectiveness of the legislation relied on the gynecological "inspection" of suspected prostitutes, a practice that middle-class women reformers considered to be a form of rape. Josephine Butler, the leading opponent of the CDA in Britain, warned ICW delegates to take seriously this particular offense, claiming it was:

the physical treatment, forcibly imposed, the personal outrage of women, which lies at the root of the practical working of the whole system of the state regulation of vice. You have happily not had in America the practical experience which we, in the Old World, have had of the degrading effects of this outrage. It is the final and most complete expression of the foul idea of woman as a chattel, a slave, an instrument, a mere vassal, officially dedicated to the vilest uses.²⁵

Women were particularly vexed that the CDA gave men the power to determine a woman's status and subject her to the "personal outrage"

²¹ *Id.* at 250.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.* at 255.

²⁵ *Id.* at 261.

of the speculum. Social Purity literature was rife with melodramatic tales of mistaken identity and the ICW served as one platform for bringing those stories to international attention. A Scottish delegate, Laura Ormiston Chant, who spent an evening during the Council on the streets of Washington seeking to rescue prostitutes, shared a cautionary tale with her sister reformers. A young woman from Dover, only fifteen years old, worked as a charwoman to support her elderly father. Nevertheless, the young woman was approached on the street by "two stalwart men" who "had the power" to lock her up and charge her with prostitution. "[W]hen the hunted girl had found that there was no refuge for her in human justice," she attempted suicide by drowning, was ultimately rescued and forced to stand charges of suicide and prostitution. Social Purity reformers intervened at the eleventh hour and hired her a London attorney who was able to prove "that she had not outraged her own purity" but rather, was earning eighteen pence a day as a servant.²⁶

Such tales of mistaken identity haunted women reformers because of the arbitrary way they could threaten the reputation of any respectable woman. This fear, coupled with the revelations of London's underground sex economy aired in the *Paul Mall Gazette*, created a climate of high pressure to force Parliament in 1885 to raise the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, a legislative victory for British women.²⁷ Reformers from England now turned their attention to the United States where the age of consent was set by state statute. Of particular concern was the state of Delaware where the age of consent was just seven; however, in many states, the age was only twelve.

The Social Purity movement of the nineteenth century bears some striking similarity to contemporary human rights battles aimed at the trafficking of women and girls, particularly in the ways that social class and gender converged to put poor women at risk of indentured sexual servitude. In nineteenth-century Britain, prostitutes were recruited from the ranks of the working poor. Poor parents sent off young daughters to urban centers, presumably to serve as domestic servants, only later to discover that the "situation" advertised was in reality a brothel. Similarly, in the provinces of contemporary India, poor parents of girl children are compensated approximately twenty dollars a month to send their

²⁶ *Id.* at 264-65.

²⁷ Two excellent studies chronicle and interpret the Contagious Diseases Acts in England. See SUSAN K. KENT, *SEX AND SUFFRAGE IN BRITAIN, 1860-1914* (1987); JUDITH R. WALKOWITZ, *CITY OF DREADFUL DELIGHT: NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL DANGER IN LATE-VICTORIAN LONDON* 81-134 (1992).

daughters to Bombay under the guise of domestic service. Young girls quickly become absorbed in the Bombay sex market where girl prostitutes, a population numbering around 20,000, are in high demand.²⁸

Like Social Purity advocates who feared the epidemic spread of syphilis, contemporary public health advocates and human rights activists are also concerned about the life chances of girl prostitutes because of the rapid spread of AIDS in third world countries with large sex markets. In India, for example, an estimated five million people are HIV-positive.²⁹ Moreover, according to Human Rights Watch, over half of the prostitutes in Bombay alone are infected with HIV.³⁰ In such a climate, the demand for virginal girls by the brothel clientele has increased dramatically.³¹

Despite the similar concerns linking nineteenth-century Social Purity and contemporary human rights campaigns, the reform launched by earlier feminists was a movement particular to and reflective of Victorian ideas about sex and genetics. Simply put, sexual activity within marriage was deemed appropriate only for the purposes of procreation. Furthermore, Victorians believed that a fetus was imprinted with both a moral and a biological inheritance that would determine the character of the unborn child. Not only was the fetus conceived in a moral milieu, it remained vulnerable to moral and physical corruption for the duration of gestation. Moreover, the corruption of the individual fetus had broad social implications. Having "sowed the wind in ignorance," Elizabeth Saxon cautioned her sisters at the ICW: "[W]e are reaping the whirlwind in divorces, rape, murder, entailed upon children conceived in lust and gestated with its poison in every vein."³² Consequently, Social Purity advocates urged pregnant women to guard against sexual activity that would forever contaminate their unborn children. One such advisor, Dr. Caroline B. Winslow of Washington, D.C., addressed the convention with this specific medical advice:

You hold the power to cast each new conception in angelic mould as nearly as self-culture and self-discipline can make yourselves angelic. Children thus born are only blessings. In after-life they wrestle

²⁸ Robert I. Friedman, *India's Shame: Sexual Slavery and Political Corruption are Leading to an AIDS Catastrophe*, THE NATION, Apr. 8, 1996, at 11, 12.

²⁹ *Id.* at 12.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² REPORT OF THE ICW, *supra* note 8, at 250.

successfully with temptations. They do not anticipate insanity or suicide, nor curse their existence or the memory of their parents. So it becomes of the first importance, that you strive to make the “starting point” of each child’s life harmonious and beautiful — beginning its education and discipline while you have complete control of its existence — endowing it with physical and mental strength — preparing it to be well born.³³

The import of these discreet acts of the body transcended the individual and even a larger social institution, the family. Rather, a woman had within her power the ability to shape an entire society: its health, stability, and morality.

Nothing short of a major overhaul of the institution of marriage would begin to salvage humanity’s future. According to S. Magelssen Groth, a delegate from Norway, the continued success of prostitution in her country was attributed to the social custom and economic reality of delayed marriages.³⁴ Bohemians in Norway suggested that young people in love be encouraged to cohabit at an early stage in life, so that young men who had not yet established the economic security required for middle-class matrimony might not have to resort to prostitution as a sexual outlet.³⁵ This approach would never satisfy most Social Purity reformers, however, because it condoned the practice of “prostitution” within the home. One reformer, in fact, argued that the marital home was the precise origin of the social problem: “[H]undreds go forth from these homes to swell the ranks of recognized prostitution, while thousands more go forth into the ranks of legalized prostitution under the perfectly respectable mantle of marriage.”³⁶

No matter their stance on other social and political issues, women of the first ICW seemed to concur that women’s collective progress depended upon the success of the Social Purity campaign. Or, in the words of Lucinda Chandler, only when the wife is “free to maintain her self-respect and to determine the exercise of her function of maternity,” will the law truly serve her.³⁷ More importantly, women needed to take charge of this issue, Chandler warned: “Man is no more qualified to teach woman, in regard to the requirements of her being, as the mother of the

³³ *Id.* at 274. In contrast to contemporary usage, “after-life” in nineteenth-century parlance refers to the period following birth and preceding death.

³⁴ *Id.* at 282.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.* at 283.

³⁷ *Id.* at 285.

race, as race builder, than he is to fulfill the functions of maternity.”³⁸ In reality, of course, the sexual choices — as well as the meanings assigned to those choices — among women in the late nineteenth century varied dramatically. This was not the perception, however. Middle-class women reformers perceived Social Purity and its opposite, sexual license, as a universal theme that united all women across race, class, and nation. The threat of sexual violence, at the hands of a conqueror, an employer, a policeman, a medical doctor, or a husband, all constituted the same offense against a woman’s purity, in essence, an offense against the purity of womanhood itself. The threat of rape, the reality of prostitution, and the abuse of the marriage covenant, united women reformers more than any other single issue, including the right to vote. Ironically, it was a belief in woman’s essential “sameness” across culture that first allowed women to organize internationally. Today, of course, such a belief would be suspect. Attention to the differences of resources, race, culture, and nation, among others, renders international organizing around gender issues a tall order.

In certain ways, the first ICW seems more cautious in tone and strategy than either the Seneca Falls convention which preceded it, or the Beijing conference which followed over a century later. Certainly, by 1888, the climate for women’s reform had chilled from forty years of chipping away at the icy bastion of male politics. In this atmosphere, the call for Social Purity marks a courageous stance for women hamstrung by both social convention and law from openly discussing the sexual exploitation they witnessed daily.³⁹ Then too, for many women reformers, the question of Social Purity penetrated the heart of the inequality of

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ The flap over the Dilke affair demonstrates the sensitivity most women reformers had to being publicly associated with sex or sex scandal. *See supra* notes 12-14 and accompanying text. Furthermore, opponents of the women’s movement marshaled social pressure and new legislation to further limit women’s public discursive domain. The Comstock Act was debated in the U.S. Congress in December of 1872 and passed into law in March, 1873. Theoretically, the legislation was intended to curb the sale and distribution of obscene material, a cause supported by many suffragists and social purity advocates. In actuality, the law was used to prosecute women’s rights leaders who spoke openly of adultery and sexual exploitation. Perhaps the most famous (and notorious) application of Comstock was its use as the legal basis for the repeated arrest and prosecution of birth control advocate Margaret Sanger. For a discussion of the passage of the Comstock Act, see JANET FARRELL BRODIE, *CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION IN 19TH-CENTURY AMERICA* 263-66 (1994).

the sexes. As Laura Chant argued, “[A]ll our religion, all our science is in vain, while underneath us there is this corroding cancer of unequal standards for men and women.”⁴⁰

Forty years had passed since the *Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments* first aroused the nation’s attention to women’s collective power; yet, little had changed. In 1848 women and men at the first woman’s rights convention had demanded social purity and more. In addition to the call for women’s access to education, property, economic opportunity, religious liberty and an end to the “double standard,” the *Seneca Falls Declaration* took a step further, calling for women’s “sacred right to the elective franchise,” the right by which all others would be established and protected.⁴¹ Four decades later, women reformers did not reiterate this historic call. Woman’s right to vote, a revolutionary idea in 1848 that had cost the Seneca Falls reformers more than a few potential converts, was still too controversial to unite women internationally in a common quest.

Support for woman suffrage continued to divide the ICW for years. Ultimately, the inclusion of women *anti*-suffragists within the ranks of the ICW caused a splinter group to form the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in 1904.⁴² Nevertheless, suffragists at the first ICW won a symbolic victory. One afternoon President Grover Cleveland and the First Lady received the ICW and its visitors, a delegation which numbered fifteen hundred. For that occasion, ICW participants, whose area of reform had been distinguished by color-coded badges, unanimously agreed to wear a yellow ribbon — the symbol of woman suffrage — to the Executive Mansion.⁴³

Despite its failure to advocate women’s ballot, the ICW accelerated women’s collective progress by laying the groundwork for future coalitions of women in reform and professional work. Many of the women who would collaborate with Elizabeth Cady Stanton on her controversial *Woman’s Bible*, for example, were drawn from the ranks of the ICW. Women attorneys in attendance found one another and instituted the Woman’s International Bar Association. National Councils of Women formed within the ICW. And amid all this organizing, women’s reform energies coalesced around the issue of Social Purity, a critique of the

⁴⁰ REPORT OF THE ICW, *supra* note 8, at 268.

⁴¹ *Report of the Woman’s Rights Convention Held at Seneca Falls July 19th and 20th 1848*, in PAPERS, *supra* note 2.

⁴² Rupp, *supra* note 1, at 1574-75.

⁴³ REPORT OF THE ICW, *supra* note 8, at 457.

“double standard” that rendered women vulnerable in “in the State, in the Church and in the Home.”⁴⁴ The underlying point of their argument — that as long some women were expected to maintain “purity” while other women’s bodies were commodified and sold, true equality would be impossible — still fuels feminist activism today.

While the ICW was far from truly global, these initial efforts should be considered an extraordinary achievement of its day. At a time when race relations in America were in decline, the ICW transcended racial barriers. At a time when nationalism was on the rise, the ICW overcame national hostilities. At a time when differences among women were accentuated, women of the ICW embraced a common theme of Social Purity. Measured by the yardstick of legislative achievements, the movement for international feminism of the late nineteenth century appears a long way from victory. Yet the ICW survived as one of the movement’s invaluable legacies for women of the future.

⁴⁴ See *supra* note 2.

