

Social Order and Social Welfare: Working  
Women's Visibility in Early Twentieth Century Atlanta

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Abstract

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This paper analyzes the shifting visibility of working women in Atlanta in a period of rapid change between 1905 and 1937. During this time Atlanta was characterized by extensive economic, geographical, and demographic growth. Working-class women, both Black and White, were integral in shaping the development of this urban center through their labor, family, and community ties. In particular, this paper focuses on working women's relationship with the emerging social welfare structures of the city. It was here, in the charity and public health organizations, that working women received the most attention from reformers, health care workers, and municipal agencies.

Using the papers of the most influential social welfare agencies in the city, the Associated Charities and Atlanta Anti-Tuberculosis Association, this paper traces the rise and subsequent decline of the visibility of working women. While this heightened visibility was evident in politics, amusements, labor activism, education, etc., the debates and activities of the social welfare community demonstrate both how the elite of the city understood the poorer women of the city and how these women could use this attention to their own advantage. In the early twentieth century and coinciding with the booming population of working-class women, these organizations were founded specifically to deal with anxieties surrounding working women in the city. Race played an important role in how these anxieties of the social order were represented on the bodies of women. White women were constructed in the local papers and dealings of the bodies of women. White women were constructed in the local papers and dealings of the organizations as mothers, while Black women were constructed as workers who must be saved so that they would not contaminate the white households for which they

worked.

This attention of the city on the lives and bodies of working women allowed these women, at least in the area of social welfare, to act as an entree into working-class communities. Visiting nurses and social workers specifically sought out women as clients and patients and relief resources were given directly to the women of destitute families which meant the reformers could place demands on the women of destitute families which meant the reformers could place demands on the women's behavior. But also for these reasons, working women sought relief from welfare agencies and were able to advance, at times, their won demands for the kinds of resources and relationship they would have with the reformer community of the city.

This terrain of women's visibility starts to shift in the 1920s, however. With the growing acceptance of working women were rendered effectively invisible in the political and cultural debates of the city as anxieties over social order became better represented by other groups. Social work, as the city in general, turned its efforts towards children, as future citizens, and the growing legion of unemployed, and thus dangerous, men. Working class women, both Black and white, thus lost both the political leverage they had gained as the focus of attention in debates over the city's development, as well as the restrictions imposed by this heightened visibility.