Spheres of Influence:

The Role of Women at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the San Francisco Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915

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orld's fairs can be seen as vast rituals that reveal power relationships – both real and desired – among competing segments of society. Through pageantry, symbols, and official recognition, they mirror the relative status of social groups vying for political and economic advantage.¹

From this perspective, comparisons of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the San Francisco World's Fair of 1915 expose curious shifts in the relative power and prominence of women. During the Chicago fair, women officials strikingly expanded their influence far beyond the conventional domestic sphere and paraded their growing importance in America's industrial economy. In the San Francisco fair, however, four years after California women won the vote, women managers surprisingly retreated into a much more traditional role – demurely focusing on tasks, such as hospitality and moral protection, that fell almost exclusively within the realm of domestic duties. How and why did women's official status and responsibilities change so dramatically in the course of these two fairs? How did their altered roles reflect shifts in social, economic, and political conditions? How did they mirror women's changing – and occasionally conflicting – local and national concerns? It is possible to provide some answers by looking at official accounts of the expositions as well as contemporary reporting in newspapers and magazines.

The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was not the first American world's fair in which women played a conspicuous or an official role. The Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 featured exhibits of women's work in a Woman's Pavilion, organized by the Women's Centennial Committee and designed by a male architect.² No woman, however, was invited to speak at the fair's main event, a huge Independence Day celebration. Responding to women's exclusion, five representatives of the National Woman Suffrage Association interrupted the Fourth of July program by marching onstage and handing a copy of their Declaration of Rights for Women to the event chairman, Senator Thomas W. Ferry of Michigan.³ Six years later, the smaller 1884-85 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans gave minor recognition to women by also featuring a woman's building.⁴ Women's contributions to these expositions were, for the most part, unofficial or relatively unimportant. Even though women "were playing an even larger role in the life of the country," observes Eleanor Flexner in her book, Century of Struggle, "they were still not able to make their influence felt because they were not organized." It was not until the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 that women took an active leadership role in an American world's fair, a role sanctioned and funded by the Congress of the United States.

Celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was the fifteenth world's fair and the second major international exposition in the United States.⁶ It was by far the largest world's fair ever held, and for the nation it had special significance. It marked, in some ways, what Henry Steele Commager described as the watershed of American history:

On the one side lies an America predominantly agricultural; concerned with domestic problems; conforming, intellectually at least, to the political, economic, and moral principles inherited from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries... On the other side lies the modern America, predominantly urban and industrial; ... experiencing profound changes in population, social institutions, economy, and technology; and trying to accommodate its traditional institutions and habits of thought to conditions new and in part alien.⁷

For women, especially, the World's Columbian Exposition marked a signal event: official acknowledgment by the federal government of the importance of female labor. In April 1890, Congress had passed an act, approved by the President, providing for the exposition⁸ and formally authorizing the appointment of a Board of Lady Managers. Congress directed the board to represent the interests and concerns of women at the exposition⁹ and to "appoint one or more members of all committees authorized to award prizes for exhibits which may be produced in whole or in part by female labor." Congress funded the board through "extremely liberal" appropriations, in the view of its vice president, Virginia C. Meredith. This federal recognition symbolically gave the efforts of women new legitimacy and status. It "dignified the Board in public estimation," Meredith declared, "and directed toward its aims and efforts an unusual degree of interest." According to board president Mrs. Berthe Potter Palmer, no comparable organization had ever existed among women – "official, acting under government authority and sustained by government funds."

By authorizing and funding the Chicago fair's Board of Lady Managers, Congress was in fact recognizing the increasingly organized and influential role of women in American society. New technologies such as domestic plumbing, canning, commercial ice production, and the sewing machine had freed middle-class women from many household tasks, and more and more women were entering college and the professions. Many, including upper-class and professional women, were also joining social reform groups, and these women's organizations had, in turn, organized to increase their visibility and influence. The International Council of Women, headed originally by Frances Willard, was established in 1888, The General Federation of Women's Clubs was formed in 1889, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union, also led by Willard, was increasingly powerful. Woman suffrage, Flexner notes, boasted influential friends in Congress, and the annual conventions of the National Association in Washington were the occasion, not only of hearings before Congressional committees and lobbying on the hill, but of White House teas and receptions. In fact, Congressional authorization of the Chicago fair's Board of Lady Managers was in great part due to lobbying by increasingly influential representatives of the women's movement.

Chicago Fair in October 1893, Berthe Palmer summed up the importance of federal recognition: "Even more important than the discovery of Columbus, which we are gathered together to celebrate, is the fact the General Government has just discovered women." 18

The Board's principal work was the creation of a Woman's Building – an edifice three times the size of the Woman's Pavilion at the Philadelphia World's Fair. ¹⁹ This time, the building itself was designed by a female architect selected through a national competition. The commission was awarded to Sophia Hayden of Boston, ²⁰ an architecture graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology²¹ and one of only three known women architects in the country. ²² The building would exhibit "all the industries woman has created, shared in, or monopolized" and at the same time serve as an administrative headquarters for women at the exposition. ²⁴ Although exhibits of women's labor were not restricted to the Woman's Building, ²⁵ they were considerably limited in other pavilions by "the hesitance of manufacturers to indicate...the degree to which their products were produced by women... combined with the inability of many women to finance their own exhibitions in the main buildings." ²⁶

Not everyone approved of the Woman's Building. Many considered its Italian Renaissance architecture undistinguished.²⁷ A conservative critic dismissed it as a "mortifying and humiliating display" that showed hypocrisy by stressing both woman's equality and her separateness.²⁸ Another complained that it featured primarily domestic arts: "The needlework, imported from around the world, was exquisite," the reviewer noted, "but who needs more evidence that women excelled at embroidery."²⁹ In truth, however, the Woman's Building included far more than household crafts within its scope, including galleries of works by women artists, a 7,000-volume library³⁰ "devoted to the literary work of women of all ages and countries,"³¹ an assembly hall to be used "for instructive talks about exhibits and subjects of interest to women… by distinguished women of all nations,"³² and headquarters for women's organizations representing "the most advanced thought in education, the noblest endeavor in philanthropy and the loveliest work in charity."³³ As historian David Burg argues,

Everything about the Woman's Building was noteworthy, whether excellent or mediocre, because never before at any exposition had woman received such salient recognition. Women artists, architects, writers – women of all sorts – had been honored, or at least acknowledged, by the creation of the Board of Lady Managers and the Woman's Building and by the director general's grant in March 1893 that the Woman's Department should be equal in status, scope, and features to all other departments.³⁴

The greatest mission of the Board of Lady Managers, however, was not the creation of the Woman's Building but a much more challenging and abstract goal, as defined by Mrs. Palmer: "the formation of a public sentiment which will favor women's industrial equality, and her receiving just compensation for services rendered." By the very act of authorizing and funding the board, Meredith noted, Congress had set the theme, recognizing that "women have acquired a considerable place in industrial production and need to be sustained and protected in their industrial rights and privileges." Therefore, without involving itself in "politics, suffrage

or other irrelevant issues," Mrs. Potter promised, "this unique organization of women for women will address itself to the promotion of their industrial interests... It will try to secure for [woman's] work the consideration and respect which it deserves, and establish her importance as an economic factor."

This overriding goal was in response to the increasing numbers of women who were entering the work force. The nation's industrial economy had been expanding rapidly since the 1870s. Millions of women were supporting themselves in manufacturing and office jobs, at the lowest wages,37 and frequently living and working in deplorable conditions.38 depressions, including one that began in the summer of the Chicago Exposition, 39 made the plight of working women even more perilous.⁴⁰ Settlement leaders, especially those in Chicago, found themselves addressing41 the basic problem faced by a working woman: how to "earn a living wage under conditions which would make it possible for her to escape illness and prostitution." Women in many charitable and social reform groups also responded by advocating state and federal legislation to improve working conditions. A number of these advocates were members of the Chicago Fair's Board of Lady Managers.⁴² Chicago, in fact, was a center of women's labor reform in 1893. As historian Frances K. Pohl points out, "It was largely the efforts of the Illinois Women's Alliance, a coalition of working-, middle-, and upper-class women, and the women at Hull House in Chicago... that led to the passage, on July 1, 1893, of the Illinois State Factory Inspection Bill [which] controlled sweatshops and limited the working hours of women and children, as well as the age at which the latter could enter the labour force."43 As "wealthy women with social consciences, women who could not 'selfishly enjoy the ease of their own lives without giving a thought to their helpless and wretched sisters," many board members were "sincere in their attempts to improve the conditions in which their less fortunate sisters lived and worked."44 The Woman's Building and its exhibits, Burg adds, "however beautiful or interesting, were really adjunct to the furtherance of woman's status."45

As a result of these social and economic concerns, the question of women's status was repeatedly taken up by speakers who addressed Chicago fairgoers. During the exposition's Congress of Women, organized by the fair's Department of Women's Progress, nearly 200 prominent women - including Julia Ward Howe, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Jane Addams - spoke on subjects ranging from women's rights and agriculture to the industrial revolution and the role of women as financiers. 46 The Congress of Social Settlements, organized by Jane Addams and other leading social reformers, featured speakers such as Florence Kelley, Ellen G. Starr, and Henry Demarest Lloyd.47 Feminists even addressed the exposition's Parliament of Religions on the issues of marriage, temperance, equal suffrage, and social reform.48 Moreover, by winning female membership on world's fair boards in many states, territories, and foreign governments,49 the Board of Lady Managers to a certain extent raised the profile of women's concerns worldwide. At the close of the Congress of Women, Berthe Palmer expressed her hope that these and other educational efforts at the exposition would help to improve the lot of working women. "The work of women in the exposition must have its influence," she said. "That we have been successful in creating an organization throughout the world, and in interesting the governments of the world in the condition and position of their women, is of incalculable benefit."50

Despite these ventures outside the traditional woman's sphere, domestic concerns were also given their due by the Board of Lady Managers. The board raised all the funds⁵¹ for the construction of a Children's Building, next to the Woman's Building, ⁵² that served as a nursery for 100 children⁵³ and featured educational child-raising exhibits.⁵⁴ Mrs. Palmer also stressed woman's preeminent domestic role. "We advocate... the thorough education and training of woman to fit her to meet whatever fate may bring; not only to prepare her for the factory and workshop, for the profession and arts, but more important than all else, to prepare her for presiding over the home. It is for this, the highest field of woman's effort, that the broadest training and greatest preparation are required."⁵⁵

The Chicago World's Fair was so successful in increasing the legitimacy of women as workers and organizers that one observer, Alice Freeman Palmer, saw no reason why women would need separate buildings or organizations in future expositions. "The era of selfconsciousness would end," she predicted, and "special treatment of women would be rendered needless as a result of the World's Columbian Exposition."56 Some twenty years later, as plans for the San Francisco Panama Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) were underway, the California fair's director-in-chief Dr. Frederick Skiff⁵⁷ echoed this view when he warned his fellow fair organizers: "You do not want a Woman's Building. Women want to come in on an equality with men."58 As it turned out, the organizers partly followed Skiff's advice. There was no Woman's Building at the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair. Neither, however, was there equality of women in other, more mainstream exhibitions. In fact, Frances A. Groff, a writer for Sunset magazine, found "pitifully small" official evidence of women's contributions anywhere at the San Francisco fair. "Dr Skiff," she wrote, "had battled sex segregation in exhibits, holding women entitled to equal treatment with men. But the women exhibitors - where were they? Nothing in Mines... Nothing in Transportation... Nothing in Agriculture... Manufactures? Nothing."59

Unlike the Chicago fair 22 years earlier – which had increased women's visibility and trumpeted their work beyond the traditional sphere of domestic life – the San Francisco fair rendered women practically invisible and limited their official duties to roles that were, in effect, mere extensions of their domestic tasks. Frances Groff was relieved that she finally did find women at the San Francisco Panama Pacific Exposition – but she found them behind the scenes, greeting guests, pouring tea, and serving as cheerful helpmates of the fair's male organizers. Woman "came with her sacred dear domestic virtues," Groff wrote,

to be hostess in the state buildings of the South and East... She took possession of the Palace of Education to advise, instruct, uplift... She helped her husband in the exhibit booth... She brought her young boys to Machinery Hall and *understood* the technical explanations. Her countenance of wholesale hospitality beamed in the Y.W.C.A... She presided at the telephone switchboard. She waited in the cafés... She gyrated in the hula-hula... Every day, in the shifting kaleidoscope of the Exposition, Lovely Woman appears in some new and startling phase... the attractive bit of color, decorating and adorning life.⁶⁰

In a little over two decades, woman's role had changed from an energetic fair participant, proudly exhibiting her labor in many non-domestic spheres, to an "attractive bit of color," not working actively for economic and social change but merely "decorating and adorning life." Why had this transformation taken place – at a time when political equality had at last become a reality for many women, especially in the West? Having secured the right to vote 1911, women in San Francisco in 1915 were, on one level, more powerful and influential than ever. On another level, however – as evidenced by their role in the Panama Pacific Exposition – many of these women seem to have retreated into much more traditional and less threatening visions of women's talents and responsibilities.

Part of the answer, perhaps, may be found in the local nature of the 1915 San Francisco fair, compared to the national scope of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. Unlike the 1893 Chicago fair, the San Francisco exposition received no federal funding. Instead, it was financed by the wealthiest and most powerful men in California. Conceived as a celebration of the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914, as well as San Francisco's recovery from the 1906 earthquake and fire, the fair was seen by San Francisco business interests as an opportunity to "draw the attention of the world to San Francisco" and promote it as a "playground of America" for tourists. Winning federal approval for an exposition in the still-remote Far West was not a simple task, however. Most members of Congress wanted to hold the world's fair in New Orleans, which was competing vigorously with San Francisco for the honor. To secure the votes it needed, the San Francisco delegation came up with a winning strategy – agreeing to give up federal funding if it received Congress's approval.

As a result of this arrangement, there was a "peculiar relationship of the Exposition to the nation," one that was also reflected in the financing and scope of the Woman's Board. Unlike the Board of Lady Managers in Chicago, the PPIE Woman's Board received no federal support. This released it, many felt, from any responsibility to be national or international in scope. As Frank Todd, the fair's official chronicler, explained:

The boards of lady managers of other expositions have been appointed from every part of the Union because the expositions have received the financial aid of the whole country. There was no obligation on the part of this Exposition to make or accept such appointments, and so, when an organization of the women of San Francisco and nearby counties grew up spontaneously and offered its cooperation of the work, the offer was seized upon.⁶⁶

Comprised mainly of San Francisco society matrons, the PPIE Woman's Board defined its responsibilities narrowly. Unlike the Chicago board, which sought to recognize, legitimize, and improve the conditions of women's labor, San Francisco board women merely served as official hostesses, recommended women to be appointed as assistants to division directors and department chiefs, organized a statewide auxiliary, and promoted the fair through brochures distributed to school children. The board also erected a sentimental monument to the Pioneer Mothers, and it recruited the Travelers' Aid Society⁶⁷ to "organize the work of moral protection," particularly of young women traveling alone to San Francisco.

All of these duties – hospitality, assistance, education, and moral protection – fell comfortably within the traditional realms of domesticity and the woman's sphere. Perhaps because fair officials were aware that these tasks might look like a retreat from women's gains, they took some pains to describe the role of women at the fair in progressive terms. There was no Woman's Building at San Francisco, they explained – rather untruthfully – because it would have been "inconsistent with the fine spirit of equality that characterized the Exposition... women's achievements were not put in a separate museum like curiosities, but took their places in the exhibit palaces..." At the same time, however, officials made a point of proudly distinguishing the docile San Francisco Woman's Board from its more activist predecessors. In San Francisco, they declared,

There was never a hint of policy on the part of the Woman's Board that might tend to embarrass the Exposition management or any of the Exposition officials. Spontaneous cooperation throughout marked all the activities of this body, and not for a moment did it appear to have a thought of promoting its own interests aside from those of the Exposition as a whole. The contrast with women's organizations of some other expositions was marked and welcome.⁶⁹

It may be that the traditional focus of the PPIE Woman's Board was due to the fact that its members came largely from San Francisco's conservative upper class. The city's business elite – relatives and social acquaintances of many board members – were largely anti-reform⁷⁰ and anti-suffrage as a group. When California voted on the suffrage question in 1911, it was resoundingly defeated in San Francisco,⁷¹ although it passed statewide. The greatest percentage of "no" votes in the city came from the upper-class districts.⁷² Interestingly, though, once San Francisco's wealthy women had secured the vote, they did not hesitate to use it. In the city's mayoral election of 1915, "women of the better residence districts registered and voted...heavily," *Harper's Weekly* reported, "...and are to a definite extent responsible for the reelection of Mayor Rolph."⁷³

Despite the vigorous voting habits of their social class, however, members of the Women's Board were in general reluctant to step outside a woman's traditional and separate sphere – perhaps reflecting the conservative nature of their circle. The board's duties were almost traditionally wifelike: "The Woman's Board had an absolutely separate existence" from the Exposition's male executives, although it was an "intimate, cooperative and harmonious helpmate," wrote Anna Simpson Pratt in the board's official report. The board's role, she continued, was one of "general assistance, the women standing ever ready to supplement the heroic work being done by men." Ironically – perhaps in deference to the sensibilities of her more feminist readers – she described the board's undemanding "general helpfulness" as "the first fruits of woman's emancipation in a state newly made politically free, a practical thank-offering of woman's pride and woman's patriotism."

Despite the local makeup and domestic aspirations of the San Francisco Woman's Board, feminist national women's organizations were also represented at the fair – although in a role that might perhaps be described as a sideshow. Exposition managers mocked the suffrage

movement by erecting a 90-foot-tall drum-beating, banner-waving⁷⁸ statue of a police-like⁷⁹ suffragist at the entrance to the fair's Toyland amusement zone. Originally named "Panama Pankaline Imogene Equalrights,"⁸⁰ the statue was redubbed "Little Eva" after the National Woman Suffrage Association protested.⁸¹ At the same time that it insultingly caricatured the suffrage movement, however, the PPIE also boasted that it was the first exposition at which woman suffragists officially exhibited. The Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, in fact, had a booth decorated with flags, a portrait of Susan B. Anthony, and a banner bearing the words of the Susan B. Anthony amendment.⁸² Suffrage conferences were also held throughout the year on exposition grounds. In April, suffragists including Mrs. Charles Beard, a member of the Congressional Union's executive committee, addressed a rally at the fair's Y.W.C.A. building,⁸³ and in July, the Federal Suffrage Association of the United States held a convention at the San Francisco fair.⁸⁴

The exposition's most significant pro-suffrage gathering, however, was the first Women Voter's Convention, held in San Francisco in September. The meeting concluded dramatically as two suffragist envoys set off on a cross-country automobile trip, symbolizing the offer of enfranchisement from women in the West to women in the East. The envoys carried with them an 18,000-foot petition, signed by more than half a million visitors to the PPIE's Congressional Union booth, asking Congress to pass the Susan B. Anthony Amendment. The women planned to add names to the petition as they drove east across the country, then present it to President Woodrow Wilson and Congress at the opening of the 1915-16 legislative session. By the time they arrived in Washington, D.C., the petition's list of names was four miles long. Three years later, the President threw his support behind the amendment, and in 1920, it was finally ratified by all the states.

The Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the San Francisco World's Fair of 1915 were, in a sense, both milestones in the American women's movement, but in inverse ways. The importance of the Chicago exposition, for women, lay in the official recognition and activities of its Board of Lady Managers. The board's authorization and funding by Congress gave women's contributions unprecedented stature. Federal government recognition also led the board to organize nationally and internationally. The board then used its enhanced power and visibility to work to improve the social and economic status of working women. Moreover, according to Burg, "woman's role in the World's Columbian Exposition... provided impetus to the feminist movement in more tangible ways... It is quite likely that the organizational network and mutual endeavor created by the Board of Lady Managers [strengthened]... the feminist movement through the 'leadership of women with independent incomes or professional prestige." The Chicago exposition, he adds, gave women "an official recognition of their civic standing and professional achievements, and an object lesson in effective methods of national and even international organization." More than anything else, note Columbian Exposition chroniclers Norman Bolotin and Christine Laing, "the fair helped position women as a force to be reckoned with in *all* arenas as the world crossed into the twentieth century." 88

By contrast, the San Francisco Panama Pacific International Exposition probably had its greatest influence on American women through its unofficial activities. The fair's Woman's Board was local, not national or international, in character, and it restricted its activities to the

woman's traditional sphere instead of using its leverage to expand the role of women. As a result, the board itself probably had very little impact on the women's movement in the early twentieth century. The unofficial, dramatic gatherings of suffragists at the San Francisco exposition, however, likely increased national pressure to expand suffrage beyond the western states. There must, in fact, have been some tension between the ladylike exposition hostesses and the increasingly flamboyant and confrontational suffragists – whose peers in England were slashing paintings in the National Gallery and threatening to blow up the United Free Church in Leicester. There may have been, in San Francisco, a clashing of the two spheres that George Santayana said defined Americans, and that, in 1915, also defined the extreme choices facing American women: "The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition."

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¹³ Burg, 37.

¹⁴ Pohl, 291.

¹⁵ Burg, 127.

¹⁶ Flexner, 209.

¹⁷ Pohl, 306.

¹⁸ Burg, 104.

¹⁹ Benedict, 40.

²⁰ Meredith, 418.

²¹ Hutton, 323.

²² Burg, 143.

²³ Hutton, 323.

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<sup>25</sup> Benedict, 40.
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<sup>30</sup> Burg, 174.
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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 418-419.
<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 419.
34 Burg, 163.
<sup>35</sup> Meredith, 417-418.
<sup>36</sup> Memorial Volume, 153.
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38 Pohl, 291.
<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 291.
<sup>40</sup> Flexner, 198.
<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 202.
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