

## Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935

*Robyn Muncy*

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**Robyn Muncy : Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Janet M. KellyGreat information!0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. An Interesting Bridge Between Social Reform of the 1890s and the New DealBy RDDIn "Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935", Robyn Muncy argues, within the network of female reform organizations, female professionals and their followers preserved for the New Deal the reform values and strategies of the Progressive era (pg. xii). Further, this understanding of professionalism had profound implications for the continuation of reform in the early twentieth century (pg. xiv). She believes that the female professions created during the Progressive era contained as part of their professional creeds many of the commitments of the progressive reformers who gave them birth (pg. xiv).Muncy begins with settlement organizations, such as Jane Addams Hull House, arguing that they laid the groundwork for later Progressive institutions. Muncy writes of the organizations, which used personal relationships as the basis of their social structure, In the 1890s, women were thus creating a professional culture different from that of the older, male professions. One reason for the difference was that women entered the professional world most successfully when they carved out wholly new areas of expertise in which they did not compete with men for jobs or training (pg. 20). Women worked within a system that expected them to focus on selflessness and sacrifice for the community. Muncy writes, Only by justifying an occupation in terms of service to the dispossessed could professional women solicit such support (pg. 22). A lack of reliable private patronage led women

to focus their attention toward getting government sponsorship, counting them in Muncys opinion as Americas first progressives (pg. 27). The creation of the Childrens Bureau in 1912 offered women the opportunity to work on a national level. According to Muncy, As these women moved their reforming strategies to the national government, their inclination to combine investigation and promotion encouraged them to advocate a more activist government than some of their male counterparts (pg. 45). Discussing the development of social science, Muncy writes, The peculiarities of the female search for professional opportunities begin to explain the continuity of progressivism among middle-class women (pg. 73). Educated women, limited in their career prospects by the gendered dimension of the workforce, followed the paths others tread before them. According to Muncy, During the implementation of the Maternity and Infancy Act, the Childrens Bureau and its subordinate organizations achieved their greatest power (pg. 93). Women were able to weave together the causes of child welfare reform and professional opportunity for women (pg. 105). They used the auspices of the federal government for social engineering, though with a classist and racist bent. Muncy writes, The professional arrogance and cultural chauvinism inherent in accusations of superstition [practiced by immigrants] also manifested themselves in campaigns to discipline midwives (pg. 115). Muncy writes, The implementation of the Sheppard-Towner Act revealed some of the class, race, and ethnic identities that divided American women in the 1920s (pg. 123). Muncy concludes, Apparently the leadership within the dominion was so intent on keeping alive the values of the founders that it could not hear the new concerns of women that were surfacing in the 1920s and that would have required innovations in their program of child welfare policy (pg. 162). Muncys work draws upon the techniques of gender history, unpacking the roles of women and men and how societal expectations circumscribed or opened new opportunities for them. She demonstrates, similarly to Michael McGerr in "A Fierce Discontent", that the goals of Progressivism were to socially engineer society for what middle-class whites considered best using the power of the government. The techniques developed in Hill House offered a framework for women professionals when they entered government service.<sup>4</sup> of 4 people found the following review helpful. A Unique Look at Progressive Era Reform to the New Deal By mwreview In "Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform," Robyn Muncy described a "continuity of reform activities among America's middle-class, [Protestant] women" between the Progressive era and the New Deal. Muncy explained that, by reconciling traditional female roles with professionalization, these women reformers were able to create a "female dominion" in the field of child welfare. Interestingly, this "dominion" was dismantled after the child welfare movement achieved its far-reaching success in New Deal legislation. Muncy presented an innovative and fair account of female participation in the Progressive movement. Unlike many historians who concluded the Progressive era with the end of the First World War, Muncy traced the activities of women reformers to the New Deal. Muncy also recognized the existence of class, ethnic, and racial tensions between reformers and the women they attempted to assist. Muncy, however, failed to cite any conflicts between the demands of the female patrons and the goals of the professional social workers. The laywomen who funded the work of the "female dominion" must have had significant influence over the activities of the reformers. Muncy expressed disappointment that the reformers did not open doors to other women, particularly to women who were mothers. Muncy, however, may be analyzing the social worker's Victorian ideas regarding motherhood and child-rearing from a post-World War II perspective. The "working mother" concept is a fairly recent phenomenon which, most likely, was not considered during the Progressive period. Finally, Muncy's account of the female reform movement may be too narrow. She followed the careers of a specific coterie of women while possibly ignoring female reform movements which operated outside the realm of Muncy's model of female Progressives. Otherwise, Muncy's work offered a convincing argument that continuity between the Progressive era and the New Deal existed through the "female dominion" in child welfare.

In this book, Muncy explains the continuity of white, middle-class, American female reform activity between the Progressive era and the New Deal. She argues that during the Progressive era, female reformers built an interlocking set of organizations that attempted to control child welfare policy. Within this policymaking body, female progressives professionalized their values, bureaucratized their methods, and institutionalized their reforming networks. To refer to the organizational structure embodying these processes, the book develops the original concept of a female dominion in the otherwise male empire of policymaking. At the head of this dominion stood the Children's Bureau in the federal Department of Labor. Muncy investigates the development of the dominion and its particular characteristics, such as its monopoly over child welfare and its commitment to public welfare, and shows how it was dependent on a peculiarly female professionalism. By exploring that process, this book illuminates the relationship between professionalization and reform, the origins and meaning of Progressive reform, and the role of gender in creating the American welfare state.

"A finely crafted study....Muncy's book is a fine example of recent works that critically document women's political activism and their influence on the making of the welfare system."--The Nation "An important contribution to the literature on Progressivism, feminism, and reform."--American Historical "Offers a powerful and provocative synthesis of women's reform activities and demonstrates conclusively their key role in building the welfare state."--

History of Education Quarterly "In the burgeoning literature on women and welfare in the first three decades of the century, Muncy's study of the female dominion opens new territory. It is a must read."--Journal of American History "The argument is original and illuminating. Women's inventions in and contributions to the formation of social welfare policy in the U.S. have never been described more concisely and effectively than in this book."--Nancy Cott, Yale University "A masterful recounting of the intergenerational relations of a group of social reformers/professionals embedded in a strikingly original concept of a dominion of women. Gender and reform, professionalization, public policy, are marvelous additions to our comprehension of the first third of the twentieth century, and put women where they belong, at the center of the development of the welfare state."--Nancy Weiss, University of Hawaii at Manoa "This is a very good work--interesting, well and concisely written, and relevant to major questions about 20th-century women, politics, and the state. I especially like the way Muncy has perceived and presented the structure of the "dominion," moving across voluntary associations, education and reform institutions, and government. This is impressive, and I think could serve as a model for other studies."--Suzanne Lebsack, Rutgers University "This is not just another study of female reform. Muncy's treatment of the professionalization of reform and the creation of new bailiwicks for women within the federal bureaucracy is a significant contribution to early twentieth-century social history. The author uncovers important connections, not only among the first generation of female progressive reformers, but between them and the younger women they brought through the ranks. She fleshes out much of what we have only suspected regarding goals, strategies, and accomplishments, placing her findings in the broader context of the women's movement, as well as changes in government and the professions."--Regina Morantz-Sanchez, University of California, Los Angeles "A superb book."--Mary O. Turner, University of California at Santa Barbara

From the Back Cover In this book, Muncy explains the continuity of white, middle-class, American female reform activity between the Progressive era and the New Deal.

About the Author Robyn Muncy is at University of Maryland.