Working Together

Nowhere on the other side were nuclear families or kin networks—whatever their importance—the only basis for collective action and cooperation. Instead, a family's status rested on the breadth, depth, and extent of its social connections. The men and women of the other side needed circles of assistance and mutual aid beyond the family economy and kin network, and they routinely built communities through personal ties to neighbors, kin, and co-workers. Americans, by contrast, often pursued mutual aid via voluntary associations—individuals joining together in formal organizations to pursue shared interests. Unlike communities, voluntary associations had formal membership (often with requirements), leadership positions (often elected), and clearly understood (often written) goals.

Voluntary association was known on the other side, too, but it was practiced unevenly—more by men than by women; more by wage-earners than by subsistence producers; and more by middle-class than by poorer people. Voluntarism marked some elements of religious practice among Protestants and Jews; it characterized as well the confraternalism of Catholics. Secular fraternality, developing in the face of political centralization in countries as diverse as China and Italy, spread especially rapidly among the men of the other side in the nineteenth century. Individual wage-earners also experimented with voluntary association in organizing strikes and labor unions.

As we might expect, the social contacts and interests of most immigrant women extended beyond the boundaries of their front doors and kin circles—reaching out to their neighbors, ethnic communities, and churches or synagogues. But of the individual immigrant women introduced earlier, only Beatrice Pollock attempted to solve problems by working with people much beyond her ethnic community. (Pollock, the young woman who migrated to live with a sister and work in a garment shop in Chicago, became a labor activist.) As this suggests, immigrants' desires for connection and the practical problems they faced in the United States did not immediately push them outward toward greater contact with native-born Americans and thus toward what Milton Gordon has termed "structural assimilation." Generational status and gender ideology deeply influenced the path of immigrant community-building, as it had family economies and kinship networks.

In the United States, immigrant women moved gradually toward voluntarism in building community life. Immigrant wives and mothers more often learned the lessons of voluntary association from men of their own backgrounds and from home-country traditions of fraternality, while their
daughters, the second generation, more often learned it from their immigrant peers and American sisters. In both cases, a clear division of labor by gender developed in immigrant efforts to build community through voluntary association. Gender divisions within ethnic communities guaranteed that the lives of immigrant women paralleled those of native-born American women in striking ways. Parallels, however, did not mean common ground: the two groups rarely worked together in the first generation.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTACT

Work and residence heavily influenced immigrant men and women’s opportunities to meet, socialize, and solve problems collectively. While immigrants’ settlement preferences often segregated married women among their own kind, wage-earning more frequently pushed men and unmarried women into ethnically mixed workplaces. Domestic servants grew to know intimately the habits, customs, and language of their native-born employers. Female industrial workers, by contrast, more commonly met other immigrant women. Today, many foreign-born women still work segregated from native-born workers if they are employed in agriculture, industries, and family businesses; sizeable minorities of service, professional, and clerical women, however, have extensive work contacts with native-born Americans—white and minority, women and men.

Immigrant communities in the United States often developed on shared territory. In the nineteenth century, immigrants went disproportionately to the Midwest, Far West, and Northeast, where they created neighborhoods identified as “Little Italy,” “Chinatown,” “Klein Deutschland,” “el Barrio,” and “the [Jewish] Ghetto.” Comparable rural clusters appeared in farming areas, where community-building could result either in opportunities for foreign-born and native-born to meet and socialize or in insular communities of Swedes, Norwegians, or Germans. Even a generation or more later, some rural townships were American communities with a decidedly ethnic flavor.

Clustered in the urban North and Far West, labor migrants from Europe and Asia demographically dominated American cities in the nineteenth century. Segregation of European immigrants by ethnic group and class, while visible and persistent, was voluntary, and it never approached the levels seen in Jewish ghettos in Europe or in African American ghettos in the twentieth century. The poorest immigrants shared their slum neighborhoods with immigrants of other backgrounds and with co-ethnics working in small businesses and the professions.

Urban immigrants in the nineteenth century encountered few middle-class natives. Only public schools and the welfare services provided, initially, by settlement houses brought immigrants and natives together. White, middle-class women dominated both institutions. In the nineteenth century, immigrants had few opportunities to meet the native-born minorities, who
still lived heavily segregated in the South and Southwest, typically in rural communities and in agricultural employment.

Today, immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean also tend to settle near their "own kind." Vietnamese and other southeast Asian refugees, consciously and systematically scattered throughout the U.S. by sponsorship programs, rapidly reasserted their own social needs by moving in large numbers to California and Texas. While some Koreans and other well-educated immigrants spread themselves widely through a city, the emergence of Asian suburbs in California and wealthy Cuban enclaves in Miami speak of immigrants' continued preference for life among people of their own background. As in the past, however, segregation of the foreign-born is more visible than all-encompassing. In cities, immigrants of several backgrounds share territory with each other and with native-born Mexican American, Asian American, Puerto Rican, and African American minorities. Like the immigrants of the past, too, today's immigrants encounter disproportionate numbers of native-born American women—white and black—as social workers, health care employees, and school teachers.

**IMMIGRANT MOTHERS AND THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS**

Neighborhoods had special importance as social arenas for married immigrant women. Few immigrants of any background or sex recognized firm lines separating family from community or household from neighborhood. In cities, immigrants left their doors open or unlatched, encouraging frequent and casual visiting. Family life spilled out of the apartment, down the corridor, onto the sidewalk, and into the street.

Middle-class Americans reacted with dismay to this easy blending of private and public: American standards demanded the separation of the home, women, and children from the public world. Immigrants in turn saw Americans as coldly indifferent to human needs beyond the material concerns of the nuclear family. Jewish eastern Europeans criticized peers aspiring to American standards as "all-rightniks." One man dismissed his all-rightnik children as "machines." Immigrants contrasted American ideals of the private individual to that of the sociable, humane "mensch."

One became a mensch only in a community. Immigrant men valued their street-corner camaraderie and their local places of entertainment, sociability, or worship, just as children of both sexes often ganged together to protect their turf from children of the next street or neighborhood. Even groups known for their conservative attitudes toward female mobility, most notably Mexicans and Italians, raised no objections to women moving through neighborhoods. Only Chinese merchant wives lived secluded lives, and only their wealth—and the employment of an indentured servant—made this seclusion possible.
A poor mother could not function as breadgiver without neighborhood social resources. The permeable line between home and neighborhood explains why many immigrant women remembered impoverished lives in overcrowded, poor housing as richly satisfying: sociability counterbalanced at least some of the difficulties of poverty. One immigrant described herself as "a people's person" who "blooms through sustaining others."  

Distance complicated socializing in rural areas: men, more than women, traveled to town or to neighboring farms. American neighbors seemed far off to some women immigrants. In Giants in the Earth, a novel reflecting widespread and very somber agrarian realities, the Norwegian woman Beret's sense of isolation on a prairie homestead brings her to the point of madness, even though other families live within sight. But such situations were far from universal. Unlike Beret, the Swedish Ann Oleson enjoyed much company; in her Iowa village, women met to do church work. German women homesteaders had social lives like their native-born neighbors, but suffered more homesickness. Fear of social isolation was one factor that discouraged individual immigrant women from homesteading.  

Both rural and urban women sought neighborly solutions for everyday problems. The poor did the most significant charity and welfare work in the nineteenth-century city, and most who gave or needed help were women. They handled predictable crises like childbirth, illness, and death; they shared cash when unemployment threatened rent, food, or clothing payments. Immigrants, like poor African American women, seemed firmly convinced that "what goes round, comes round": they gave in some measure because they expected help in return, sometimes across ethnic lines.  

Neighborhood could provide immigrant women with a loud public voice, too. When subtler means failed, women made their complaints known through mob action. Immigrant Jewish women in New York mounted the best-known protest when they rioted against high prices in kosher butcher shops. Italian and Polish housewives organized similar campaigns. Rent increases also spurred immigrant housewives and neighbors to action. In 1906, a mob of angry Jewish women attacked New York public schools, where—they had heard—"children's throats were being cut." Like immigrant families, then, immigrant neighborhoods were often places of violent yet intimate conflict.  

Women's neighborhood protests may in some ways have reflected a female consciousness originating in breadgiving. In other respects, they resembled peasant riots in Europe and Asia or the spontaneous protests of unskilled male gang laborers. In any case, women's mob action generated no formal organizations and no women leaders. When male Jewish socialists attempted to build a long-term campaign on the issues raised by rioting housewives, the women themselves withdrew. Over time, women's collective action, like men's, increasingly originated in the workplace, not the neighborhood. And it was more and more apt to be based on voluntary association rather than informal neighborly solidarity or the kin network.
KINSHIP AND VOLUNTARISM

Ethnic communities originated simultaneously in ties of kinship, neighborliness, and voluntarism. While men initially dominated the latter, women's community activism bridged all three. In fact, by viewing men and women together, one sees that "informal" ties of community and "formal" voluntarism were not conflicting foundations for cooperation. Neither were they exclusively male or female strategies. While sharp, the gender divisions in community-building were also complex. Kinship influenced immigrant men as community builders, while immigrant women also organized voluntary associations.

Chinese bachelor society in the nineteenth century provides an excellent example of kinship's continued importance for men. Men had always performed more kinship work in China than in many Western societies. In the United States, family and regional companies of Chinese immigrants organized men of particular kin networks and lineages or with the same home towns. Successful Chinese merchants founded these societies, along with secret societies called tongs, and used both to dominate community life. Large numbers of male sojourners—"men without women"—joined these companies. (Under different circumstances, Jewish and Italian family or cousin clubs showed the influence of kinship on European immigrants' voluntarism.)

Among southern and eastern Europeans, too, it was middle-class immigrant businessmen who founded the earliest community institutions. Like Chinese merchants, these were men with families, running saloons, boarding-houses, banks, employment agencies, and grocery stores as family businesses. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, however, male sojourners from Europe rarely joined middle-class-led voluntary associations until they had married or called over wives and children. For European men, the women's presence—and their kinship work—seemed a precondition for male participation in community institutions.

Regardless of background, immigrant men in the United States—like migrants to industrializing cities everywhere in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—organized a very similar range of institutions, notably secular fraternals (including their radical variants) and religious institutions. Fraternals provided insurance and self-help (savings clubs, education) for male wage-earners. Their radical counterparts expanded to function as unions. Religious institutions—ethnic churches, temples, and synagogues—reproduced elements of familiar homeland religious practice. Over time, all of these groups expanded to provide family sociability and entertainment—dances, sports, singing, theatrical events, banquets, and picnics. They also experimented with providing welfare services to immigrant communities—notably hospitals, employment bureaus, and charity. Some in turn assumed responsibility for the reproduction of the ethnic group itself by organizing schools or social clubs to teach home-country language, history, and social customs.
to their children. With many immigrant institutions offering similar services, community among immigrants became multiple and shifting rather than unified and monolithic.\textsuperscript{31}

Fraternalism by its very definition excluded women.\textsuperscript{32} In contrast, religious institutions always provided for female participation. The relative openness of religious institutions to women may help explain why these organizations successfully challenged and defeated secular and/or radical fraternals for dominance of some immigrant communities. Certainly this occurred among Italians, Germans, and eastern European Jews, where the waning of anticlericalism, free-thinking and socialism left religious faith to define ethnicity.\textsuperscript{33} In any case, immigrant women did not long accept their exclusion. Instead, they sought to replace fraternalism with an inclusive voluntarism, in community organizations organized by women.

WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Like native-born whites and blacks, immigrant women often found their first entry into voluntary activism through religious faith. In Jewish and Protestant immigrant communities, married women pioneered female activism. Among Catholics, by contrast, unmarried women defined activism within religious sisterhoods.

On the other side, Judaism had assigned prayer and study in shul and synagogue to men, while women carried out domestic rituals. In the United States, a new division of labor by gender emerged. Beginning in the 1830s and 1840s, men and women organized male and female Hebrew benevolent societies within synagogues to provide self-help and charity. Men's benevolent societies governed synagogues, but women's benevolent societies financed and supported them: women's earliest efforts aimed to pay off building costs. They then remained synagogue fundraisers, often through the preparation and sale of meals or festivals offering entertainment for the whole community. Organized separately as women, immigrants in Jewish female societies nevertheless drew all members of the religious community into their activities.\textsuperscript{34}

As the second generation came of age, female benevolent societies reorganized as synagogue sisterhoods. The change in name and organization reflected an understanding of women's community life that seemed more American, since it focused on women's special responsibilities for the welfare of the entire community.\textsuperscript{35} At the same time, second-generation Jewish women began organizing women's clubs independent of synagogues, although still to further women's religious education; these federated in 1893 as the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW).\textsuperscript{36} Sisterhoods, too, federated in the early twentieth century. The NCJW helped connect Jewish female welfare institutions to comparable American women's groups.\textsuperscript{37} In the twentieth century, by contrast, the newly formed Hadassah extended
Jewish women’s efforts into Zionist activism. Because Jewish women’s organizations shared a common focus on the ethnic community and its needs, theirs was no linear history of progress toward individualism or cross-cultural sisterhood.

Protestant women’s religious activism paralleled Jewish women’s. Among Norwegians, for example, women had already begun organizing sewing circles in the old country to support foreign missions. In a typical U.S. Norwegian community, the pastor’s wife would found a “Ladies Aid” that further expanded women’s fundraising tasks. In Europe, state taxes had supported churches; in the United States, women would. More precisely, the Ladies Aid would finance and pay for construction of a church, while men’s groups arranged to pay the salary of the minister, whom the men also chose. Lutheran fundraisers—suppers, bazaars, and community entertainments—closely resembled synagogue fundraisers, as well as fundraisers in Protestant American churches, black and white alike. Like synagogue sisterhoods, Ladies Aids attained a degree of autonomy from home congregations when they federated at the state and national levels. Within federations, women developed unpaid careers as church volunteers, acquiring considerable organizational expertise and financial know-how.

The Syrian Ladies Aid of Boston, like others, did not create a separate female world within a church or ethnic community. Although faced with initial male opposition to its existence, its separate headquarters, and its welfare work, Syrian men quickly began to participate in the events sponsored by the Ladies Aid. Women encouraged them to join and to attend meetings, but excluded men from holding major offices. Thus Syrian women, too, organized separately to encourage cooperation between men and women.

Among immigrant Catholics (the vast majority of all American Catholics in the nineteenth century), religious orders of celibate sisters, rather than married lay women, first became community activists. In Europe, most sisterhoods had sought wealthy women whose dowries financed lives of cloistered contemplation. In the United States, Catholic parish priests requested practical help from European and French-Canadian sisterhoods. Parishes offered sisterhoods financial support in exchange for their services in parochial schools. This opened sisterhoods to poorer women, who saw a life of service as upward mobility. Sisterhoods also demanded devotion to the poor, however. Nuns’ labors created Catholic welfare programs so extensive that they challenged the government welfare programs originally pioneered by native-born women.

Irish sisterhoods grew enormously during the mass migrations of the nineteenth century, as ambitious girls with no prospects for marriage or self-support “took the veil.” New and old sisterhoods sent women all over the world. Austrian, Belgian, Dutch, French, and German orders all sent women to begin work in the United States. Immigrant women also formed their own orders. Within them, capable young novices could aspire to become mother superiors through competent social service, administration, and fundraising.
Like the first generation of college-educated American women, they chose celibacy, education, and the helping professions over “the family claim.” Like the American welfare reformers, too, Catholic sisterhoods especially supported the education and organization of girls and women. Their welfare services—nurseries, orphanages, hospitals—often focused on the special problems of immigrant women, girls, and children. Like the Jewish and Protestant sisters in organizing Catholic laywomen’s organizations. Called sodalities, these voluntary associations quickly assumed responsibility for parish fundraising. Others cared for altars or cultivated particular (and distinctively female) religious devotions.

Immigrant women’s challenge to secular fraternalism followed some of the same paths, as women acquired responsibility for welfare work within ethnic communities and for reproduction of the ethnic group. Within ten to twenty years of a fraternal’s foundation, immigrant men would abandon exclusionary practices to welcome women as auxiliary members. It is true that their move may have been simply an effort to bolster declining memberships. In organizing female auxiliaries, at any rate, male leaders often recruited women from their own families as members.

Auxiliaries organized family-oriented leisure-time community activities, some of which functioned as fundraisers. Female auxiliaries organized schools to teach language, folk arts, folk customs, or homeland history. Women helped transform fraternals from groups that supported male sociability and breadwinning into organizations dedicated to the creation and reproduction of ethnicity. In opening their fraternals to women, men offered women the opportunity to institutionalize their kinship work and extend it to the entire community. A Finnish IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) hall made this dimension of the female auxiliary explicit: children called all the women of the group “auntie.”

Women eagerly took up the task of community service autonomously, too, creating a female public sphere of women’s voluntary associations. Many women’s groups focused on the maintenance of the ethnic community and strengthening ties to the homeland. Sometimes, women’s activism financed homeland nationalist movements: both Methodist Korean women and Polish women in the Women’s National Alliance raised funds for advocates of independence and to advance social and political change on the other side, a kind of “patriotic feminism.” Other women worked to solve problems nearer at hand. German women in Chicago organized and operated their own home for the elderly. They followed a distinctly American model in doing so; in Germany the government and state-financed churches provided such services. Autonomous female action led some immigrant women to differentiate their interests from those of men, and to develop a community perspective American women today would recognize as feminist. In New York City in the 1870s and 1880s, for example, a German women’s socialist group at first functioned as a support organization for male socialists. But while men continued to emphasize women’s responsibilities...
for creating "one big socialist family" through their community work and remained ambivalent to female wage-earning. German women came to see the organizing of women workers and the pursuit of suffrage as equally important tasks for socialists.  

Male fraternalism also provided a model for women helping themselves toward economic independence. Organizations of single working women often focused on mutual aid. Like many male fraternals, the Lithuanian Woman's Alliance provided health insurance for its members. Korean, Japanese, and Afro-Caribbean women banded together to create rotating credit associations which underwrote small female businesses or other female initiatives. Other "female fraternals" engaged in a game of catch-up, offering women services denied them by men's organizations. For example, German Jewish women quickly organized a Young Women's Hebrew Association to duplicate for women the programs of the Young Men's Hebrew Association.

Immigrant women's community activism aimed both to support women and to guarantee the survival of ethnic communities and ethnic loyalties. For immigrant women, the ethnic community probably remained a private space, shared with men, while the public world began in English-speaking and multiethnic arenas outside their communities—in workplaces and in institutions dominated by Americans or immigrants of other backgrounds. Women who arrived in the United States as married adults rarely crossed that boundary into the English-speaking public world. But single immigrants, and immigrant daughters born in the U.S., could rarely avoid doing so. For Americans accustomed to defining women's entrance into the public sphere as emancipation or individualism, immigrant daughters' steps toward structural assimilation appear as first steps toward their liberation as women. However, their mothers' activism was an equally new and significant experiment in the assumption of responsibility and—within limits—of power closer to home.

**BEYOND THE ETHNIC COMMUNITY**

American workplaces drew grown men and children of both sexes beyond families, kin networks, neighborhoods, and community organizations into a multiethnic world. Not surprisingly, immigrant daughters explored mutual-help possibilities outside their communities more readily than their mothers. They learned to cooperate with fellow workers, many of them other immigrant women. They helped convince activist brethren and American women alike that "girl workers" could organize. These immigrant women built cross-gender alliances with multiethnic but male-dominated workers' organizations and cross-class alliances with American women reformers interested in labor's problems.

Immigrant women participated in some of the largest and most militant strikes in U.S. history, in the garment and textile industries. While Irish, British, and German women helped create permanent labor organizations in
these industries, Jewish and Italian women joined them later. Even the supposedly passive and submissive Mexican women of the Southwest had carved out a notable record of labor activism in canneries and garment factories by the middle of the twentieth century. And even domestic servants sometimes organized to improve job options and hours of work.

The example of family members and work colleagues encouraged immigrant girls to experiment with workplace voluntarism. Like their mothers in their neighborhoods, wage-earning daughters created female networks of friendship at work, a powerful source of solidarity in times of labor conflict. Just as Irish, Jewish, and German men gained a reputation for labor activism in the nineteenth century, Irish and Jewish women also quickly moved into activism and labor leadership. And as Italian men increasingly joined unions in the twentieth century, so did Italian women.

Family identities may have undermined some women’s identification with wage-earning, weakening their commitment to challenge workplace problems, but family economies supported young women workers who actually struck. Immigrant women gained a reputation as particularly determined strikers because family income pooling supported their persistence. For some single immigrant women, too, the financial difficulties of surviving on female wages provoked labor action: independent female foreigners stood out among labor activists. Older, widowed women—especially Irish women in the collar industry—also figured prominently in labor conflicts.

The generally exclusionary craft unions of the American Federation of Labor expressed hostility and indifference to immigrant women’s problems and initiatives, even though immigrant men and their sons led the organizations. Male labor leaders often regarded female and foreign-born workers as unorganizable. The AF of L’s general hostility to unskilled wage-workers and its support for a male family wage prevented many trade unionists from supporting female unionism.

But conflict among women workers could prove equally troublesome. “Old immigrants” feared “new” in meat packing and garment production; these “new” female immigrants in turn looked askance when Afro-Caribbean, Puerto Rican, and African American women joined them on the job. Ethnic locals of men and women unionists became almost as common as ethnic parishes. In predominantly female ethnic locals, furthermore, men monopolized leadership positions well into the twentieth century.

Unskilled, ethnic, and female strikers sometimes turned to the IWW for assistance and leadership in the years prior to World War I. Most were not revolutionary syndicalists, but all could recognize an organization that valued solidarity across gender, ethnic, and racial lines. Mass strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Paterson, New Jersey, and Little Falls, New York, drew on communal protest traditions of the Old World and on urban female neighborhood networks. Women participated both as strikers and as “neighborhood women” who attacked strikebreakers closer to home. Strikers protested wage or hour cuts; neighborhood women sought instead to hu-
militate opponents in community eyes. They might remove the pants from a policeman before dumping him unceremoniously in the river, strip clothes off scabs, dirty them, cut their hair, or loudly harass their families.75

Native-born and middle-class American women reformers in the social welfare movement became aware of the special problems of young female wage-earners in industrial neighborhoods. Recognizing the hostility of male leaders to young women wage-earners, well-educated American reformers saw work with girl strikers as a way to support and to uplift "downtrodden sisters," while at the same time encouraging reform of industrial workplaces and cities. The Women’s Trade Union League, founded in 1903 and surviving until 1950, facilitated a cross-class alliance of immigrant workers and middle-class reformers.76

The WTUL enjoyed impressive successes. Women’s membership in the ILGWU in New York multiplied several times over; the proportion of organized women in New York reached a level unmatched today. Similarly, many women labor leaders in the early to mid-twentieth century got their start as immigrant activists in the WTUL. Labor activist Rose Schneiderman, for example, carried early WTUL experiments with worker education into the ILGWU.

Still, ethnic and class tensions shook the WTUL. Jewish and Irish immigrant girls believed in class struggle, organization, and action in the workplace. Middle-class allies instead hoped to introduce young workers to American gentility and the advantages of American democracy. As citizens, suffragists, and members of the native-born elite, they believed protective legislation could solve workers’ problems. Some allies’ open, and probably racist, dislike of Jewish immigrant women also marred the early years of New York’s WTUL.77

The WTUL nonetheless succeeded as “a united front of women”78 where the American suffrage movement failed. The U.S. women’s suffrage movement peaked during the mass migrations of the early twentieth century. Abroad, educated women knew of the movement; several Norwegian feminists even migrated to the United States hoping to participate.79 Immigrant men, however, varied widely in their attitudes toward the suffrage movement: Irish, Germans, and Italians seemed generally hostile, while Jews, Scandinavians, and Finns more often supported women’s rights.80

Some immigrant WTUL activists joined the suffrage movement, but in organizations of their own—wage-earners’ suffrage leagues organized on an English model and introduced by Harriet Stanton Blatch. These leagues argued that suffrage would help end female poverty, ignoring the arguments of middle-class suffragists who stressed that women’s votes would counterbalance the votes of ignorant foreign-born and minority men.81

Immigrant supporters of women’s rights seemed more interested in challenging the prejudices of men of their own backgrounds than in changing U.S. law.82 Feminist ideas developing in revolutionary struggles in Mexico or Russia, or from the enfranchisement of Finnish women in 1906, worked a
greater influence in immigrant communities than did the U.S. suffrage movement.83 For those without citizenship, the vote seemed less relevant than female emancipation (as anarchist Emma Goldman defined it), women’s rights in the labor movement,84 or workers’ power in industry (the goal of Irish activist “Mother” Mary Harris Jones). Immigrant women had their own feminist issues: they showed considerable interest in Margaret Sanger’s early agitation for birth control, for example, but their concerns about sexuality and poverty did not build easy bridges to the suffrage movement.

Even after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, immigrant women played in politics a “part somewhat, but not much, more important than that played by snakes in the zoology of Ireland.”85 This was true, also, of American women generally; no women’s voting bloc emerged in the 1920s, and American women generally failed to make much progress in mainstream politics as a result. But second-generation women like Shirley Chisholm and Belle Moskowitz did attain modest success as Democratic Party activists during and after the 1920s.86

Only in radical politics did immigrant women leave more of a mark. Jewish women shared with Jewish men a particular prominence as radicals.87 Anarchism, with its emancipatory promises, also strongly attracted the foreign-born.88 Within the Socialist Party, support for women’s suffrage after 1907 forged a coalition of foreign-born German and American women.89 By the 1930s, both foreign-born and second-generation women were also well represented in the leadership of the Communist Party.90 West Indian women preferred radical activism, too, supporting Marcus Garvey, not the Republican Party.

The female reformers of the social welfare movement, many of whom were suffragists, had little better luck working with immigrant women. Many of the earliest social services and welfare organizations developed by female social reformers aimed to provide services to immigrant women and their children. But most of these “social housekeepers” were earnest Protestants. They were never able to abandon a missionary approach to welfare work. Pitifully small numbers of adult immigrant women used settlement services; Jewish and Catholic women preferred services offered within their own communities.91

Immigrant women did sometimes turn to social reformers in search of allies for their own causes, however. Donaldina Cameron’s mission to rescue Chinese women from prostitution, for example, aimed to introduce immigrant women to “higher” American standards of morality and domesticity, by teaching prostitutes domestic service or garment making.92 Chinese women used missions for their own ends—to escape an abusive husband, or one they did not love; to marry men met while working as a prostitute; to escape indenture.93

In similar fashion, immigrant women, children, and neighbors appealed to settlement workers or the Gerry Society (Children’s Aid Society) when a violent husband, son, brother, father, or mother violated community norms.
of discipline or fair treatment. They did this even though they knew of, and resented, Gerry Society agents who "stole" children from parents who failed to meet American standards. In searching for allies, immigrants discovered that American welfare activists gladly intervened on behalf of children but hesitated when faced with wife-beating. Just as American suffragists were often frustrated in their search for foreign-born collaborators, immigrant women tended to find in native-born welfare activists exasperatingly selective sources of support.

HOW DIFFERENT TODAY?

Today, too, immigrant women's community lives remain invisible. Immigrant women entering the U.S. today may bring with them religious faiths—from Islam to Buddhism—little known or understood by Americans. Catholic practitioners of *vodou* and other forms of Afro-Caribbean religious syncretism such as *Santería* have attracted more—and more negative—attention. Many *vodou* practitioners in Haitian communities in New York are women who specialize in domestic rituals while leaving to men the larger, louder, and more controversial ceremonies. The Haitian Mama Lola, for example, combines faith healing with general advice-giving through spirit possession. But she hides her altars and her spirit birthday celebrations from skeptical Brooklyn neighbors.

Immigrant women from Portugal, Mexico, and other parts of Latin America often become labor activists in the same industries—garments, canning, textiles—where immigrant women earned a reputation for militancy in the early twentieth century. Like immigrant daughters ninety years ago, today's married women workers "bring the family to work" by introducing family-style celebrations of birthdays, engagements, and retirements into the workplace. Their friendship networks also facilitate labor solidarity. The fact that few Chinese men work in unionized jobs while many Mexican and Mexican American men do may explain the striking difference in activism in these two groups, but so may homeland traditions of labor radicalism. Collaborating with their male co-workers, female farmworkers from Mexico demonstrated considerable energy and skill in the organizing drives of the 1960s. Some UFW women participated as wives and daughters rather than wage-earners; they organized a nationwide boycott of grapes, lettuce, and Gallo wine. This boycott became a successful cross-class "united front" of poor women and middle-class housewives.

The expansion of the welfare state in the twentieth century has also changed the lives of immigrant women as community activists. Whether from Mexico or Vietnam, immigrant women manage their family's contacts with government bureaucracies—the INS, the school, the health clinic. This is a far from easy task. Undocumented women, of course, avoid contacts with public services for fear of discovery, but even women with secure legal status often hesitate to visit clinics or to apply for welfare or counseling.
refugee resettlement programs, government offices, schools, clinics, and welfare agencies, foreign-born women still find themselves enmeshed in deeply hierarchical helping relationships with native-born women.103

The most recent wave of immigrants began arriving in the United States just as native-born minorities demanded governmental support for their community-based initiatives. Asian and Spanish-speaking immigrants' community groups could now claim government services and funding as racial minorities. When they did, they found themselves working alongside native-born and sometimes middle-class activists of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Chinese, Japanese, and African descent. Tensions easily developed between immigrant women concerned primarily with change in the homeland, minority (often female) professionals employed by welfare agencies, and ethnic activists, both male and female, who defined ethnicity in ways recently arrived immigrants did not understand.104

Immigrant women professionals also now work directly for government agencies to fund and provide services—employment, schools, care for the aged, children's recreation—pioneered as much by ethnic fraternal and women's organizations as by native-born reformers. While such immigrant professionals struggle hard to remain advocates for the communities, they also become bound by bureaucratic rules which have little to do with their clients' needs.105 In New York's Chinatown, resentful immigrants deride the efforts of these "Chuppies"—Chinese Yuppies.106

Today's immigrant women, along with working-class and minority women, generally avoid American feminism.107 Issues of abortion rights, sexual orientation, and sexual emancipation have not sparked alliances between foreign-born and native-born women. Immigrant women have been concerned instead with unwieldy immigration bureaucracies, low wages in industry and service jobs, poor schools, discrimination, street violence, and crime—not issues central to American feminists of recent decades.108

Immigrant women instead resemble African American women in organizing their own feminist organizations. They do so, typically, when they experience difficulties working with men of their own backgrounds. Although primarily a movement of Mexican Americans, the history of women in el movimiento (the Chicano movement) illustrates a number of contemporary versions of gender conflicts in ethnic voluntarism. Chicanas resembled their counterparts in the civil rights, student left, and black nationalist movements in gradually recognizing and then objecting to the sexual discrimination they experienced among male comrades. Reluctant to threaten ethnic solidarity, they initially announced that Mexican women "did not want to be liberated."109 When Chicanas did begin organizing autonomously, male comrades accused them of selling out to white, middle-class feminists. Over time, Chicana activists developed a critique of both Anglo feminism and of Chicano sexism.110 Like the immigrant feminists of the past, they focused on changing the position and status of women within their own communities. These fe-
male activists, too, used women's organizations to improve their options for joining men in a common struggle for community empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Both in the past and in the present, generation and class, more than ethnic background, have determined the kinds of cooperation immigrant women sought with men and with women outside their own communities. In the past, immigrant women turned mainly to the men of their own groups and to other immigrant women as allies; they worked cautiously with middle-class and native-born women, and they had almost no contacts with the racial minorities of this country. Immigrant men and women lived, not in unified or homogenous communities, but rather among competing networks of ethnic solidarity, based on kinship, neighborhood, and voluntary associations of many kinds. To the extent that we understand the community lives of today's immigrants, many of these patterns seem to hold true for the present, too. One difference stands out, however: immigrant community activists now work together with middle-class African Americans, Chicanas, and Puerto Ricans in government-funded welfare programs for minority communities.

We have almost no evidence that earlier immigrant women consciously imitated American women's collective action, though the similarities between the two groups are striking. Still, no matter how similar the social lives of Irish, Jewish, Norwegian, American white, or American black women, each remained by and large isolated within parallel community lives. Informal community activism almost never linked women across ethnic lines. But voluntarism sometimes did: immigrant daughters, as labor activists, created a multiethnic working-class sisterhood; they experimented with cross-class sisterliness as well.

Collective action among immigrant women encouraged a kind of female agency that African American women have called "lifting as we climb." Women did not become community activists in order to create a separate female world, nor did men perceive their activism as creating one. Immigrant women moved beyond the family and kin group to preserve or to strengthen the families and communities they had built alongside of and in conflict with men.

As in the case of native-born women, however, class dynamics shaped their efforts at cooperation. Historians have long known that the voluntarism of immigrant daughters defined what is commonly labelled working-class activism—the female labor movement—in the United States. Voluntarism within ethnic communities can also be viewed as a class-specific phenomenon; as we will see in the next chapter, immigrant women demonstrated their middle-class status when they built volunteer careers in an ethnic women's public sphere. In American eyes, of course, they became social housekeepers, not egalitarian feminists.
Native-born elite social housekeepers—the female pioneers of welfare services—dedicated themselves to cleaning up the “houses” of working-class, immigrant, and minority communities. There, they found themselves in sharp conflict with capable women—from nuns to the NCJW—determined to offer services in their own way, to their “own kind.” For immigrant social housekeepers, class status, female activism, and mutual aid were one. They used their “brooms” simultaneously to sweep away native-born competitors, to guarantee their own status, and to promote ethnic group survival. Today’s alliances of immigrant and native-born (often minority) welfare professionals build on a different model. But whether this present-day united front of women will be as successful as yesterday’s cross-class, multiethnic WTUL remains to be seen.