

## Chapter 1

# *Gendering Moral Reform*

No! no! this work of Moral Reform never belonged to woman; she may be in it, as in the cause of Temperance, an efficient helper, but the principal work belongs to men, and when they come up and take the mighty labour off our hand, most gladly will we retire; but if they will not do it, we *cannot* be silent: we cannot behold in the midst of us a vast whirlpool of vice, annually swallowing up thousands, and hold our peace: we must speak out or do violence to our own consciences.

—*Advocate of Moral Reform*, 1835

Using a common nineteenth-century feminine trope, female moral reformers portray themselves as reluctant reformers. In the first issue of their periodical, the *Advocate of Moral Reform* (AMR), published in 1835, they claimed they were being drawn out of silence and into public action by their consciences, their religious convictions, and because men would not take up the cause. The women who organized the AFMRS knew well the hazards of pursuing moral reform. They had observed minimal success achieved by efforts to reclaim prostitutes in asylums and the enmity directed at those who sought to prevent immoral behavior through broad public awareness efforts. Undeterred, they forged ahead taking up the mantle of moral reform.

During the early nineteenth century, private citizens in New York City launched various rescue and moral reform initiatives aimed at prostitution and to uphold the seventh scriptural commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Interestingly, the two groups that persevered longest in their reclamation and reform efforts—the AFMRS and the New York Female Benevolent Society—were women’s groups. Antebellum moral reform efforts were both relegated and embraced as women’s work. Throughout this book I explore

rhetorical tactics the AFMRS used in its vehement moral reform campaign. However, the AFMRS's first initial rhetorical tactic was claiming ownership of the cause by gendering moral reform as work better suited for women.

With the formation of the AFMRS, which sought to prevent immoral behavior through awareness and education, women began to use their gender strategically to assert and defend their role as social reformers. Gender is a fluid, socially constructed, and imposed category subject to change when combined with race, class, ethnicity, region, religion, etc. Typically, gender prescriptions have resulted in the inequitable distribution of power between men and women. That said, women have embraced some perceived or prescribed gender representations, and rejected others. In that sense, Jessica Enoch explains, "the process of gendering is deeply rhetorical in that it relies on discursive, material, and embodied articulations and performances that create and disturb gendered distinctions, social categories, and asymmetrical power relationships."<sup>1</sup> For my examination of the AFMRS, I define *gendering* as women's strategic use of societal gender distinctions assigned to them to garner ethos and assume power.

In the last twenty-five years, scholars in rhetorical history have shown numerous ways that nineteenth-century women applied the fluid concept of gender as a rhetorical tactic to seize power and expand their boundaries of activity. Lindal Buchanan opens *Regendering Delivery: The Fifth Canon and Antebellum Women Rhetors* with a story of how Lucy Stone appeals to male chivalry and successfully "wields the rhetoric of gender to defuse" an angry mob.<sup>2</sup> In *Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth-Century Temperance Rhetoric*, Carol Mattingly shows how women "deftly made use of women's prescribed role both to establish their authority and to challenge traditional limits for women."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, using what Nan Johnson terms the "eloquent mother trope," both Johnson and Buchanan claim that nineteenth-century women rhetors expanded the realm of motherhood to public reform efforts to broaden their spheres of influence and activity.<sup>4</sup> Just as the church pulpit, political platform, and judicial benches were the province of men, the home, hearth, nurseries, and church pews were the province of women. Repeatedly, women claimed their reform efforts were merely an extension of their roles as mothers and Christian guardians who promote the spiritual and moral welfare of society for their children and other vulnerable persons. In that sense, gendering also has the potential to negate women's contributions by suggesting that—women just do what women do—rather than showing how women used and expanded the limited power and methods available to them to agitate for change.

To understand women's role in moral reform, this chapter first describes the history of prostitution in New York City, highlighting the factors that con-

tributed to New York's thriving sex trade. It also describes the distinct groups that arose to combat this immoral industry. Drawing from these two discussions, I argue that women gendered antebellum moral reform and highlight the reasons why women were more willing and motivated to pursue moral reform than men, and how they made the movement their own. Ultimately, this chapter describes the context from which this brave group of reforming women emerged.

### A CITY OF INFAMY

Antebellum New York City supported a thriving sex industry. After a visit in 1848, Norwegian traveler Ole Raeder described the city as a modern Sodom and Gomorrah. "I am sure it may well be compared with Paris when it comes to opportunities for the destruction of both body and soul," bemoaned Raeder.<sup>5</sup> Widely dispersed from the poorest slums to the most affluent neighborhoods, conservative estimates claimed that New York City had two hundred brothels in 1820; that is in addition to saloons, gambling halls, and rented rooms, which were also common locations for commercial sex. By the end of the Civil War the number of brothels had tripled.<sup>6</sup> Several factors, including New York City's rapid rise as an industrial and commercial center, ineffectual laws and law enforcement, and limited economic opportunities for women, combined to create a city of infamy, the primary symbol of which became the prostitute. Prostitutes were considered the major culprits in breaking the seventh commandment, so moral reform efforts initially targeted them.

#### Rapid Growth

One of the factors contributing to rampant prostitution was the city's rapid growth. Early in the nineteenth century, New York was already the largest city in the United States. Benefitting from goods flowing in and out of its harbor, and later the Erie Canal, New York was a beacon of trade—attracting manufacturers, commercial houses, and every manner of business enterprise. In 1836 New York held a 62 percent share of America's import business, and this harbor and canal traffic attracted throngs of people searching for jobs in factories, in shops, on ships, on docks, as well as positions as clerks in commercial houses. By 1835 twenty-five to thirty thousand people were crowded onto every square mile of Manhattan, and the city's population quadrupled over the next thirty years. With this rapid growth came demands for cheap housing, which resulted in several city slums, including the infamous Five Points. These crowded slums became hotbeds for drinking, gambling, robbery, and prostitution; however, brothels and purveyors of prostitution could be found

in every section of the city. While prostitution increased in most industrializing cities in the Northeast, New York's unparalleled growth exacerbated the problem.<sup>7</sup>

Prostitution, which was typically confined to a specific area, operated outside of public view. Yet, unlike large European cities where the commercial sex trade was concentrated in red-light districts, prostitution was widely dispersed throughout New York. In 1869 a concerned citizen writing under the pseudonym George Ellington asserted, "It would be more difficult to state where they [brothels] are not, than where they are."<sup>8</sup> In slums, scantily dressed prostitutes advertised their services from windows and doorways in addition to actively strolling streets. At night, prostitutes paraded along Broadway, and in finer neighborhoods brothel madams welcomed clientele into ornately decorated parlors where they could flirt, pay for sexual favors, or accompany one of the female residents to her bedroom.<sup>9</sup> Some brothels operated under the guise of boardinghouses or shops although neighbors observing a steady stream of male callers surely caught on.<sup>10</sup> During the day it was difficult to distinguish well-dressed, parlor-house prostitutes from respectable ladies. In an 1856 series of magazine columns titled "New York Dissected," Walt Whitman noted: "The experienced city observer may everywhere recognize, in full costume and with assured faces, even at this broad daylight time, one and another notorious courtezans taking a 'respectable' promenade. These horrible women, with quiet assurance, walk the street or sit at lunch in fashionable refreshment saloons, not recognizing their 'customers,' but not, to the unpracticed eye, in any wise distinguishable from the painted and haggard lady of fashion."<sup>11</sup> Notice that Whitman's reproach is directed at the prostitutes, not their customers. Despite such widespread condemnation of prostitutes, with rising rents and limited space, New Yorkers were seldom at liberty to choose their neighbors. Orderly urban development was decades away.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, as the demand for housing drove up rental prices, landlords, including some of the city's most respected businessmen, welcomed brothels as tenants because they were both willing and able to pay their exorbitant rent demands.

New York attracted legions of aspiring young clerks who helped fuel a vibrant male sporting culture. During the day they kept ledgers, wrote business letters, and worked in shops, but at night they enjoyed all the amusements antebellum New York had to offer. Most lived in boardinghouses or rented rooms above businesses, so they were unaccountable to family, and the anonymity of a large impersonal city seemed to encourage vice with its gaming houses, saloons, dance halls, brothels, and theaters, which often devoted the third tier to prostitutes and their patrons. If any young man had difficulty finding the pleasure he sought, he could consult a brothel guide. One such

FIFTH EDITION--WITH MANY ADDITIONS.

**PROSTITUTION EXPOSED ;**  
OR, A  
**MORAL REFORM DIRECTORY,**  
LAYING BARE THE  
**Lives, Histories, Residences, Seductions, &c.**  
OF THE MOST CELEBRATED  
**COURTEZANS AND LADIES OF PLEASURE**  
OF THE CITY OF NEW-YORK,  
*Together with a Description of the Crime and its Effects,*  
AS ALSO, OF THE  
**Houses of Prostitution and their Keepers,**  
*HOUSES OF ASSIGNATION,*  
THEIR CHARGES AND CONVENIENCES,  
AND OTHER PARTICULARS INTERESTING TO THE PUBLIC.

**BY A BUIFENDER.**

NEW-YORK :  
PUBLISHED FOR PUBLIC CONVENIENCE,  
.....  
1839.

FIGURE 1. *Prostitution Exposed*, 1839. This brothel guide, which mocks moral reform efforts, highlights New York City's vibrant sex trade. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

guide, “published for public convenience” in 1839, even mocked moral reform efforts. Published under the nom de plume Butt Ender, the guide was dedicated to the Ladies’ Reform Association and carried the long title *Prostitution Exposed; or, a Moral Reform Directory, Laying Bare the Lives, Histories, Residences, Seductions, &c. of the Most Celebrated Courtezans and Ladies of Pleasure of the City of New-York*.<sup>13</sup> In such a city, Whitman, bemused, that mothers would “feel little hope and much painful fear” if they knew how many of their beloved sons frequent brothels and keep mistresses.<sup>14</sup>

However, the sporting life was not simply limited to young clerks and the laboring classes. In the middle of a sermon in 1857, Reverend William Berrian, the powerful and respected rector, who had occupied the pulpit of New York City’s prestigious Trinity Church for three decades, admitted that during his fifty years as a minister he had not “been in a house of ill-fame more than ten times.”<sup>15</sup> Berrian’s admission was certainly intended to shock his parishioners and draw attention to the city’s brothels. Yet, amid New York’s pervasive sex trade, the most surprising aspect of the confession may have been Berrian’s scant number of brothel visits. Bachelors and married men, young and old, rich and poor, routinely partook of the city’s sex industry. In addition to the city’s rapid growth, other factors fueling these lascivious lifestyles included New York’s transient male population, rigid courtship practices, economic pressures that forced men to delay or forgo marriage, and discontent with women’s power or “petticoat government” within marriages. Hence, there was more at play than sexual gratification—masculine identity and pride contributed to the city’s expansive sporting culture. Although few men like Berrian made public confessions, prostitution was implicitly approved of and flourished in New York City.<sup>16</sup>

### Ineffectual Laws and Law Enforcement

Ineffectual laws and lax law enforcement was another factor that contributed to prostitution in New York City. Unless it was associated with theft, violence, or public disturbance prostitution rarely garnered police attention. However, city officials and police officers did attempt to reduce the visibility of prostitution through vagrancy and disorderly conduct laws. Vagrancy laws primarily targeted lowly streetwalkers—the prostitutes most vulnerable to police harassment. However, any woman walking unattended after dark could be arrested on suspicion of being a prostitute by an overzealous or malevolent patrolman. Vagrancy was an elastic concept that morphed into another way to control women, particularly poor, working-class women. For example, Mrs. Matilda Wade, who while walking a few blocks from her home to her husband’s place of business in 1855, was arrested by a patrolman as a vagrant and



common prostitute. As a result, Wade was publicly paraded as a prostitute; subject to an invasive medical exam to determine if she had a venereal disease; convicted without trial, testimony, evidence, or counsel; and incarcerated for five days before her husband and lawyer could gain her release along with twenty-nine other women who had been arrested illegally. Without money or an outside advocate fighting on her behalf, Wade might have remained in jail for six months simply for walking on the street unaccompanied after dark.<sup>17</sup>

Officials occasionally pursued disorderly conduct charges against brothels, but these were difficult to prove, so disorderly conduct charges were primarily used to intimidate prostitutes and brothel madams. Police officers might also raid a brothel, but such raids were usually more of a public performance than serious law enforcement. Because saloons and brothels were a revenue source, and rich, influential businessmen often held the leases, politicians were reluctant to close them.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, some of the politicians who railed loudly against prostitution quietly availed themselves of prostitutes' services. Ultimately, most law enforcement efforts targeted female prostitutes and ignored the male customers who financially fueled the practice. Of course, these laws were made and enforced by men whom were elected by men. According to one critic, "prostitution is really the only crime in the penal law where two people are doing a thing mutually agreed upon and yet only one, the female partner, is subject to arrest."<sup>19</sup>

### Limited Economic Opportunities for Women

Combined with the masses coming to New York City, limited economic opportunities and low wages for women significantly contributed to prostitution. For some women prostitution was an economic necessity; for others, it was an attractive economic alternative. Indeed, part of the problem in gauging the extent of prostitution in New York was an oversimplified view of prostitutes. Nineteenth-century novels, moral reform literature, and even police accounts failed to acknowledge the wide array of women who entered prostitution, and the fact that it was an occasional or part-time occupation for many. Most of the data on antebellum prostitutes came from the lowest echelon of prostitutes—those who appeared on police registers or spent time in jail, city hospitals, almshouses, or asylums. However, women from every social class engaged in prostitution and ranged in age from girls as young as twelve to women old enough to be their grandmothers.

The historian Larry Whiteaker describes a hierarchy of prostitution that existed by the 1830s and was well-known to both prostitutes and their patrons. At the top were parlor prostitutes, who earned between \$50 and \$100 a week. They worked in lavishly furnished, elegant parlor houses, which resem-

bled upscale residences. Parlor-house prostitutes were young and attractive. Most were well-educated and skilled musicians or artists who charmed and entertained their sophisticated patrons. Callers who could not afford a trip to an upstairs bedroom might spend part of the evening flirting and drinking in the downstairs parlor.<sup>20</sup>

Next in the hierarchy, and the largest group of prostitutes, were the genteel streetwalkers and theater prostitutes who usually resided in comfortable brothels near the theater district. Because of their fashionable dress, during the day these women often passed as respectable ladies. Yet at night, any unaccompanied woman in the theater district was assumed to be a prostitute. Theater prostitutes typically came from middle to lower socioeconomic classes. Some were former domestic servants, seamstress, or factory workers. Others, particularly streetwalkers, kept their day jobs and worked as part-time or occasional prostitutes to supplement their income.

At the bottom echelon of prostitutes were slum prostitutes. They usually worked in the city's poorest neighborhoods out of saloons, gambling halls, or ramshackle brothels. They typically catered to the lowest economic classes as well as sailors or other transients. Moral reformers often told the story of a prostitutes' fall down this hierarchy of prostitution—a path that turned beautiful young women into sickly hags, drunkards, and drug addicts. This cautionary tale was used to warn women and to generate sympathy; however, such downward spirals were exceptions rather than the rule. Most slum prostitutes came from impoverished circumstances. They were often found in hospitals and almshouses, and because they were more apt to be involved in drunken brawls and other forms of disorderly conduct, they were more likely to spend time in jail. Hence, slum prostitutes were the most visible group, and thus, became the primary target of moral reformers.<sup>21</sup>

One of the main sources of data on antebellum prostitutes is a study conducted in 1858 by Dr. William Sanger, the resident physician at the women's prison on Blackwell's Island. The study was based on a survey of two thousand prostitutes. Sanger developed the questionnaire and police officers administered it. Clearly, this method raises questions about the study's credibility. For instance, police officers may have coerced women's participation, some prostitutes may have provided the type of responses they believed the police officers wanted to hear, and the sample was drawn from the prostitutes that officers encountered—the lowest echelon of prostitutes, typically comprised of poor women and a high percentage of immigrants. Additionally, Sanger interpreted the survey results through a middle-class moralistic lens. Even with these caveats, Sanger's study disrupts stereotypes about the women who worked as prostitutes and the different motivations that drew them into the profession.<sup>22</sup>



The general profile of a New York City prostitute that emerged from Sanger's study was a young, single, white, foreign-born woman from a poor working-class family. Difficulty finding jobs and lodgings often forced immigrant women into prostitution, and with immigrants continually coming into the city, the proportion of nonnative-born prostitutes increased throughout the nineteenth century. Interestingly, black women, who were usually even lower than immigrants on the socioeconomic scale, comprised a small number of prostitutes. This was likely due to the small percentage of African Americans in the city's population as well as prejudice, which made prostitution an even more dangerous pursuit for black women.<sup>23</sup>

Sanger's study also shows some interesting variations from this general profile. For instance, of the 2,000 prostitutes interviewed, 490, or almost 25 percent, claimed to be married. For some women, prostitution may have offered a way out of bad marriages; many acknowledged that their husbands had abused them, deserted them, drank excessively, refused to support them, or had taken up with other women. Yet, 71 of the 490 prostitutes who were married said they still lived with their husbands.<sup>24</sup> Outraged by this fact, Sanger condemned their husbands as accessories to the crime, concluding that "such cohabitation implies a knowledge of the wife's degradation, and a participation in the wages of her shame."<sup>25</sup> This comment discloses Sanger's moral bias. In nineteenth-century New York, morals became a luxury many families could not afford. While there were cases where men maliciously prostituted their wives and daughters, there were also instances where women chose prostitution as a way to support sick, disabled, or unemployed husbands or to supplement a husband's insufficient income. Additionally, 320 of the prostitutes in Sanger's survey indicated that they were supporting children.<sup>26</sup>

In the nineteenth century, social safety nets did not exist, thus any woman, no matter her social class, might turn to prostitution to pay rent, buy food, or procure coal for heat. While concerned citizens established and contributed to benevolent organizations, these efforts were no match for the massive needs in New York and other large cities. Even in wealthy or middle-class families, the death of a father could result in a "complete reversal of circumstances," and in working-class families wives and daughters often needed to supplement the household's income.<sup>27</sup> In fact, 25 percent of the prostitutes in Sanger's study listed destitution as their reason for turning to prostitution. Vice paid far better than virtue; seventy-five of the prostitutes Sanger interviewed had previously worked—primarily in domestic service, sewing trades, factories, or as piecemeal laborers, which barely paid women subsistence wages. Nevertheless, Sanger's study showed that just as many women chose prostitution out of *inclination* (513) as those who resorted to prostitution out of *destitution* (525).

Many young women probably hoped prostitution would enable them to live in better places, work fewer hours, accumulate savings, or afford nice clothes and other luxuries out of the reach of most working women. Indeed, 124 prostitutes in Sanger's study said they became prostitutes because they perceived it as an easier life. In this sense, some of these motivations can also be interpreted as agency—a woman's desire for financial independence; freedom from the control of a father, husband, or employer; or just a different life. While a prostitute earned a living by selling her body, in many cases, she was also an independent woman who lived unattached or restrained. It was the mid-nineteenth century before pimps began to seize control of prostitutes when they turned to these middlemen for protection. Up to that point, prostitutes were by far the best paid female workers in nineteenth-century New York. In one night, a prostitute could earn what it would take a domestic servant or seamstress weeks to earn. While payment varied widely, the average income ranged somewhere between ten and fifty dollars, and less than one dollar was considered low for a New York prostitute's services.<sup>28</sup>

As one prostitute told her aunt, "Every young girl is sitting on her fortune if she only knew it."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, some women did accumulate fortunes in the sex trades. According to tax records, at least twenty-four known prostitutes amassed five thousand dollars or more in real estate and personal property in antebellum New York. Some prostitutes ascended to the role of brothel madams. Whereas men managed gambling halls and saloons, women managed brothels, which were lucrative businesses in antebellum New York.<sup>30</sup>

For most women, however, prostitution was a part-time or temporary profession that lasted four to seven years. When they quit, some women married or pursued another occupation. If they managed to save money, some set up businesses or migrated to another part of the country where they could hide their former profession. Moral reform literature depicted the grim deaths of prostitutes racked with disease or addiction. Sanger also believed that most prostitutes died prematurely after about four years in the profession, but he provided no evidence to support this claim.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, prostitution could be a dangerous profession. In addition to the degrading nature of the work, prostitutes dealt with undesirable clientele, violence, arrest, alcohol and drug addiction, and sexually transmitted diseases. Many prostitutes died during childbirth, like numerous women of the era.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, many women took these risks to support themselves or their families, to live easier lives, or to achieve some measure of independence. While their motives varied, they all underscore the limited economic opportunities available to most nineteenth-century women.

Even though this book focuses on female moral reformers, I believe prostitution and moral reform represent two sides of the same coin. On one side,

female prostitutes made an embodied argument turning sex into a commercial act to survive a patriarchal economy that afforded women few economic opportunities. On the other side, female moral reformers fought inequitable social and legal systems that harshly punished women adulterers while ignoring their male companions.

These factors—New York’s emergence as an industrial and economic center, the rapid influx of individuals from rural American and Europe, ineffective laws and law enforcement, and limited economic opportunities for women—combined to create conditions in which prostitution flourished. In response, several groups organized to combat the problem during the first half of the nineteenth century. Because they were facing entrenched economic, institutional, and social systems these efforts failed to eliminate or even significantly reduce prostitution, and most were short-lived. Examining these groups highlight the two main approaches to moral reform (reclamation and prevention), the challenges inherent in moral reform efforts, and the rhetorical tactics commonly used. Moreover, the two groups that persisted, the New York Female Benevolent Society and the AFMRS, highlight how moral reform efforts became gendered.

#### EZRA STILES ELY AND THE MAGDALEN SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

Most complaints about prostitution in the early nineteenth century arose on the grounds that prostitution was a public nuisance, not a problem of immorality. If prostitutes operated quietly and peacefully, residents and authorities usually ignored them.<sup>33</sup> However, ministers, city missionaries, and church volunteers who encountered prostitutes during their outreach endeavors were often moved to try to help these women. The first organized effort, the Magdalen Society of New York, was inspired by the work and writing of the Presbyterian minister Ezra Stiles Ely. While working as chaplain for the New York City Hospital and Almshouse, Ely ministered to many prostitutes and later included several sympathetic depictions in his book *Visits of Mercy* (1811). In one entry Ely writes: “Early this morning, the woman of ill fame who yesterday requested me to pray with her, resigned her mortal life. She was rational to the last moment, and often said, after I left her, that she knew she was an exceedingly vile sinner, but could not help entertaining some feeble hope that God would pardon her sins through Jesus Christ. Her present state is known to God alone but possibly she may have entered the kingdom of heaven, while such as trust in themselves that they are righteous, shall be forever excluded.”<sup>34</sup> As in this instance, Ely often used the accounts of the sick and destitute

people he encountered to instruct the so-called righteous, but his sympathy and especially his use of a prostitute's humble plea for salvation is significant. Nineteenth-century society deemed prostitutes the lowest of sinners; while they might be welcomed by God in heaven, they were not welcomed anywhere by respectable individuals. Even conversation about prostitution was deemed inappropriate.

Nonetheless, Ely repeatedly used sympathetic portrayals to change perceptions of prostitutes and move Christians in New York to help reclaim these women from their lives of sin. Telling the story of a fifteen-year-old girl who was lured into prostitution by her sister, Ely lamented that if the girl returns to health and wishes to lead a moral life, there is no place for her to go. She cannot remain in the hospital, so she must return to her former life. Thus, Ely implores:

It is the duty of Christians to seek the wanderer and, if possible, reclaim the most abandoned. If proper means are not used to reform those who have departed from the paths of peace, the pious ought not complain that the wicked continue in iniquity; and that persons once polluted return to their wallowing in sensuality. What has been done to restore the fallen females of this city? To which of them has any benevolent society proffered protection? What female has sought to convince one of the miserable of her own sex, that the door of mercy is unfolded.<sup>35</sup>

Through this series of rhetorical questions, Ely not only called on Christians to help the city's fallen females, he particularly called on women, assuming they would want to help those of their own sex. The assumption, that women would want to help other women, was later borne out by women's reclamation and moral reform efforts. Moreover, this is one reason why moral reform became gendered. In fact, after reading Ely's plea about the fifteen-year-old prostitute, two women volunteered to help this girl, who was illiterate and motherless.<sup>36</sup>

In another entry, Ely shared the tragic story of a widow with many children who entrusted her eldest daughter to a woman whom the widow mistook to be a "fine lady." The woman promised the mother that she would employ her daughter as a chambermaid in the city. But the woman brought the girl to the city, turned her into a prostitute, and kept her hidden from the mother who came to the city twice in search of her daughter. Four years later, Ely encountered the girl in the hospital near death, alone in the world, and inconsolable. "Such copious weeping I never saw before, in any single instance," laments Ely.<sup>37</sup> He also describes how a former brothel madam residing in the same hospital ward had been greatly affected by the girl. The former madam claimed, "I thank God that I never stole away and ruined such an innocent child as that. That's all my consolation!"<sup>38</sup> Ely's sympathetic accounts helped

draw distinctions between prostitutes, which made it difficult for Christians to condemn the entire class. Later moral reformers similarly uphold stories of penitent prostitutes and employ pathetic and ethical appeals to Christian duty to attain support for their efforts.

Ely's *Visits of Mercy* also depicted the tenuous plight of many women with moving stories of husbands deserting wives, young girls enticed to the city and ruined, tales of seduction, and the gruesome maladies suffered by women who had made their living as prostitutes. Stories such as these would later become common narratives in moral reform literature intended to both warn women and induce sympathy and support for the cause. Indeed, Ely frequently paired these stories with appeals for Christians to open a Magdalen asylum where prostitutes could be redeemed.<sup>39</sup> In one instance he writes, "Almost every day, I exclaim, 'Oh! For a Magdalen Hospital!'"<sup>40</sup> Ely's inspiration for an asylum came from London and Philadelphia. In London reformers established a Magdalen hospital (which was not a hospital in the traditional sense) in 1758. By 1811 they claimed that they had admitted more than four thousand penitent prostitutes and that more than half of these women had been reformed and reconciled with family and friends or placed in respectable occupations. Inspired by London's success, the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia was formed in 1800 and eventually opened an asylum in 1808. It was the first organized effort to rescue prostitutes in the United States.<sup>41</sup>

Ely's pleas and sympathetic portrayals of prostitutes proved effective. Shortly after the publication of *Visits of Mercy*, the Magdalen Society of New York was established in 1812. The group's twenty-one-member board was led by physician Dr. Peter Wilson and other prominent New Yorkers active in benevolent endeavors. This group set out to establish an asylum that would afford penitent prostitutes a place of protection and support and provide them with the religious, moral, and practical training intended to bring about their complete reformation. Like the Magdalen hospital in London, the society envisioned that women leaving the asylum would either be reunited with family and friends or secure respectable employment.<sup>42</sup>

Details about the society's asylum and its management highlight challenges that early reclamation efforts faced. The society appointed a Standing Committee of men responsible for visiting the asylum and overseeing its operation. The board also appointed a Committee of Ladies who, along with a matron, was given responsibility for the general rehabilitation of the Magdalens, including their employment, diet, and dress.<sup>43</sup> The Committee of Ladies included wives of society board members as well as the powerful mother-daughter duo Isabella Graham and Joanna Graham Bethune.<sup>44</sup> Representatives from the Committee of Ladies and the men's Standing Committee were responsi-

ble for visiting the asylum twice a week to provide religious instruction, lead prayers, and sing hymns.<sup>45</sup>

By the *Second Annual Report*, members of the Standing Committee reduced their visits to once a week, and shifted most of their attention to fundraising and finances for the society. In essence, the men ceded oversight of day-to-day operations of the asylum to the Committee of Ladies.<sup>46</sup> This shift in responsibility is evident in the *Third Annual Report*: “The whole Board of Ladies meet monthly. They direct the internal arrangements of the Asylum; prescribe regulations from time to time for its management; correct whatever appears amiss; recommend to the Managers what *they deem necessary for the improvement of internal economy, or for the better accommodation of the Magdalens*; admonish, reprove, and instruct them; strengthen the hands, and confirm the authority of the Managers; and by examining into such matters as are exclusively the province of females, perform services essentially necessary to the well-being of the Institution.”<sup>47</sup> In relegating control of the asylum and its charges to the Ladies Committee and in denoting such matters as “exclusively the province of females,” the Magdalen Society of New York shows men’s tendency to address moral reform from a distance. This points to another reason why moral reform eventually becomes gendered.

The Magdalen Society’s asylum adhered to a strict regime aimed at instilling order and moral control. Magdalens were required to rise at six and go to bed at ten. They were required to work; the society considered idleness “a great inlet to vice.”<sup>48</sup> The sewing and tailoring work the Magdalens performed was also intended to teach the women an honest livelihood.<sup>49</sup> Magdalens were also required to obey the matron and abide by a strict set of rules. While these rules were intended to protect the Magdalens from negative past influences and instill proper decorum and industrious habits, life in the asylum probably felt more like punishment than rescue to the women. Indeed, *inmate* was a term frequently used to refer to individuals residing in asylums and refuges, but these women probably felt more like inmates in its contemporary connotation. This may explain the asylum’s difficulty in attracting repentant prostitutes.

Generally, an optimistic “if we build it, they will come” mentality surrounded the asylum. Whereas the society’s annual reports expend much ink on bylaws, oversight, operating procedures, and rules for the asylum, there appears little thought as to how they might draw prostitutes to the asylum. Ely’s appeals had intimated that there were multitudes of desperate women in need of assistance. In one entry Ely even estimated there were seven thousand prostitutes in the city and that an asylum could “save at least a few from what they deem the necessity of prostituting themselves for a piece of bread.”<sup>50</sup> Yet



the Magdalen Society of New York failed to acknowledge the complex motivations that led women to take up prostitution. The society simply viewed prostitution as a terrible sin and naively assumed women would seek salvation if given the opportunity. The society also gave little if any thought as to the difficult transition of moving from unrestricted street life to the asylum's rigid strictures.

During its first three years of operation, it proved far easier to attract donors than "penitent prostitutes."<sup>51</sup> Of the small number of prostitutes who entered the asylum, many ran away or were dismissed; few women were successfully reclaimed. Eventually, society members lost patience and interest. With Ely's appointment to pastor the Pine Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in 1813 and the death of Isabella Graham in 1814, the society lost two of its strongest champions. In 1818 the society closed the asylum and ceased operations. Following its closure, different missions, ministries, and benevolent organizations assisted prostitutes. For instance, a House of Refuge, established by the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents, took in teenage prostitutes, the majority of whom were orphaned or abandoned.<sup>52</sup> But none of these groups focused on prostitution, and it was not until 1830 that private citizens again took up the banner of moral reform.

While later reformers were likely aware of Ely's *Visits of Mercy*, they appear unaware of the Magdalen Society of New York and the asylum it operated. Ignorant of previous efforts to address societal problems, societies in the nineteenth century rarely learned from other groups' efforts, and frequently repeated previous mistakes.<sup>53</sup> And even though members of this former society were alive in the 1830s, none of them appear to have joined these later efforts. Nonetheless, this first attempt at moral reform foreshadows rhetorical tactics, challenges, and tendencies in later moral reform efforts.

### FEMALE ASYLUM SOCIETY

Prostitution did not diminish in the city. If anything, it grew more widespread and more visible in the years following the Magdalen Society of New York's initial reclamation efforts. Between 1830 and 1834, five different groups emerged in New York City with the object of stemming the tide of prostitution. Prompted by the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening and evangelical revivalists such as Charles Grandison Finney, who charged Christians with the responsibility of eradicating sin to save their communities and country, Christians in New York traveled to saloons, almshouses, slums, and prisons to evangelize and hand out Bibles and tracts. The dramatic social changes occurring in America were magnified in New York. Some worried

that the shift from local agrarian communities to impersonal urban cities was shaking the foundation of American society.<sup>54</sup> Many evangelicals believed if you could save New York City, you could save the country.

One group of women established a Sunday school at Bellevue's female penitentiary. There they discovered that many of the penitentiary's occupants were prostitutes of all ages who had been arrested for vagrancy or drunken and disorderly conduct.<sup>55</sup> From their encounters with the inmates, the Christian women became convinced that some of the women could be rescued if they could provide them with a place of refuge after their release from the penitentiary. Consequently, the women established a Female Asylum Society in early 1830, and Elijah Pierson, a successful merchant, who had also worked as a prison visitor, rented a house to serve as an asylum. The Female Asylum Society struggled to attract sufficient financial support, so the effort remained small until John McDowall rallied support from some of the city's most prominent men.<sup>56</sup>

Like Ezra Ely twenty years before, McDowall was a young enthusiastic minister. A twenty-nine-year-old graduate of Amherst College and a ministerial student at Princeton University, he ventured to New York City to work as a missionary for the American Tract Society in the summer of 1830. While there, he held prayer meetings, went door-to-door handing out tracts and reading scriptures, and helped a group of women organize a Sunday school in Five Points. In his work, McDowall became acquainted with Arthur Tappan, John Wheelwright, and Abijah Smith, merchants and powerful men who supported the efforts in Five Points and occasionally accompanied McDowall on his visits to neighborhood residents.<sup>57</sup> Like Ely, McDowall was particularly struck by the plight of prostitutes and the difficulty they faced in altering their course. He shared his concerns with Tappan, who told him about Elijah Pierson's asylum house, which currently only had two penitent prostitutes in residence. McDowall encouraged ten additional prostitutes to enter the refuge. This success, combined with Tappan's support, resulted in the creation of the New York Magdalen Society in 1830, which replaced the struggling Female Asylum Society.

### JOHN MCDOWALL AND THE NEW YORK MAGDALEN SOCIETY

McDowall agreed to stay in New York and serve as the society's chaplain. Tappan served as president and Wheelwright and Smith served on the executive committee. Additionally, the society's first annual report listed twenty-five members, all male, and included wealthy merchants, physicians, attorneys,

and bankers, many of whom were active in other benevolent organizations and crusades against intemperance, gambling, and breaking the Sabbath. No details about the society's reclamation program remain, but it likely pursued a course similar to the previous Magdalen Asylum in New York, which combined occupational training and religious teachings. Moreover, the asylum was likely run by women.<sup>58</sup>

Like earlier attempts, the number of successful reclamations was small. Only seventeen women "graduated" and either reunited with families and friends or entered service positions with families deemed pious. These successes were overshadowed by the twenty-eight women who left, were expelled, or sent away.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, the society's executive committee members, who came from different religious denominations, argued over the kind of religious instruction the asylum should provide.<sup>60</sup> But what ultimately led to its demise was the uproar that surrounded the publication of its first annual report, infamously known as the *Magdalen Report*.

The *Magdalen Report*, primarily written by McDowall, did not simply describe the society's mission, actions, and results, but presented a passionate case for moral reform. The *Magdalen Report* pointed a bright spotlight on New York City's vibrant sex trade, scandalously charging in all caps that there were TEN THOUSAND prostitutes in New York City.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the report claimed that there was evidence that hundreds of domestics, seamstresses, and nurses in the most respectable families worked as harlots in "houses of assignation every night."<sup>62</sup> The report also alleged that the city's prostitutes had many wealthy patrons, and estimated the staggering sums men spent on prostitutes. McDowall believed he was making an urgent and persuasive appeal for moral reform in New York City, but he misjudged his audience. The report drew outrage rather than support; William Cullen Bryant bemoaned the fact that a report detailing such widespread whoredom was read in a meeting where the audience was primarily comprised of respectable ladies.<sup>63</sup> Former New York City mayor Philip Hone characterized the report as a "disgraceful document."<sup>64</sup> In response to the report's claims, public meetings were held in Tammany Hall and outraged city officials ordered their own survey of prostitution. Not surprisingly, the city's survey arrived at a much smaller number—less than fifteen hundred prostitutes—a sum that city newspapers derided as far too low.<sup>65</sup> Estimated numbers of prostitutes in the city were usually *too hot or too cold*; whereas moral reformers inflated numbers to try to raise concerns, city officials and police deflated numbers to lower concerns. Although the true number is elusive, today, considering the number of women who worked as part-time or occasional prostitutes to supplement their income or stave off destitution, the historian Timothy Gilfoyle estimates that 5–10 percent of all

women between the ages of fifteen and thirty in nineteenth-century New York prostituted themselves, a calculation that lends credence to McDowall's initial claims.<sup>66</sup>

By publicly acknowledging New York's sex trade, McDowall had opened Pandora's box. The historian Marilyn Hill explains, "McDowall found himself in the middle of a controversy between reformers roused by a problem of seemingly near-plague proportions and respectable New Yorkers outraged by statistics they considered preposterous about a subject they viewed as obscene."<sup>67</sup> McDowall was not the first to make bold claims in hopes of attracting support,<sup>68</sup> but McDowall's assertion was made at a public gathering and appeared in an annual report to which many prominent men in the city had attached their names.

McDowall had hoped to "awaken compassion and zeal in the heart of every individual who fears God and loves his neighbor!"<sup>69</sup> Instead, he ignited outrage. His claims of widespread sexual immorality had crossed the line in a society that eschewed public discussion of sexual matters. Tappan and Dr. David Reese received threats after the *Magdalen Report's* publication. Other society members withdrew their support, demonstrating that many influential men in the city were unwilling to endorse moral reform once it became controversial. Supporting an asylum to reform penitent prostitutes was one thing, but claiming a widespread prostitution problem existed or mounting an anti-prostitution campaign was something else altogether. Some of these prominent businessmen may have been complicit in the sex trade either through personal behavior or property holdings. McDowall resigned in September, and in November members voted to suspend all activities.<sup>70</sup>

With the *Magdalen Report*, McDowall played the role of whistle-blower—loudly condemning the city's vibrant sex trade that had long been silently accepted. The *Magdalen Report's* publication also signaled a shift in moral reform tactics. The few prostitutes reclaimed in asylums had convinced McDowall and others that prevention through awareness and changing public attitudes about sexual immorality would prove a more effective course of action than rescue. Undeterred by the reaction to the *Magdalen Report*, in 1832 McDowall published *Magdalen Facts*—a collection of moral reform sermons, reports, letters, and prostitute case histories. Convinced that moral reform required the exposure of prostitution and other immoral behaviors, McDowall took on the social precept that deemed all discussion of sexual matters improper and taboo. Moreover, he outlined several measures that would become central tenets of prevention, including educating children about moral principles, preaching the seventh commandment from church pulpits, staying away from dances and theaters, refraining from pernicious reading, and avoiding

bad company.<sup>71</sup> McDowall returned to his missionary work at Five Points, and rented a lecture hall to deliver a series of lectures. However, his efforts garnered little support. He was about to give up when he was approached by the Female Benevolent Society of the City of New York (FBS).<sup>72</sup>

### THE FEMALE BENEVOLENT SOCIETY

With the founding of the FBS in December 1832, women began to take over the cause of moral reform. Women had always actively supported moral reform efforts—helping oversee Magdalen asylums, visiting prostitutes in prisons, establishing Sunday schools, handing out Bibles and tracts in Five Points and other centers of prostitution. With this new society, however, women took the lead. Yet having witnessed the public uproar leading to the Magdalen Society's collapse, they proceeded cautiously. Their stated aim was “the promotion of *moral purity* in the city of New-York, in a way both corrective and preventive.”<sup>73</sup> To avoid denominational conflict, the FBS initially limited membership to Presbyterians, but later welcomed members from other denominations.<sup>74</sup>

The women decided to pursue both reclamation and prevention by opening an asylum to rescue prostitutes and by employing McDowall to oversee both the inmates' religious instruction and to educate the public about the need for moral reform. The women's decision to remain backstage and combat prostitution from a safe distance likely reflects their fear of public retribution. At first, they struggled to gain support for an asylum and achieved the same disappointing results as previous asylums—thirteen of the twenty-seven prostitutes admitted to their temporary asylum soon returned to prostitution. Moreover, McDowall seemed convinced that prevention was a better course of action than rescue, but the society was reluctant to wage a public campaign even though prevention was one of its stated objectives. In 1833 McDowall began publishing *McDowall's Journal*, which he used to continue to make a bold case for moral reform. He left his role as agent a few months later. McDowall's departure was contentious and led to a public feud that showed a growing rift between moral reformers who wanted to continue reclamation efforts and those who wanted to pursue broader prevention through public education and awareness.<sup>75</sup>

McDowall's departure actually ignited the FBS by forcing members to become more involved. Their active participation forged a stronger commitment, which helped the women attract support and secure funding for a permanent Magdalen asylum. Ultimately, the asylum fared better than previous reclamation efforts.<sup>76</sup> By its thirty-eighth anniversary, the women reported

that their asylum had received two thousand women, six hundred of whom were placed in families as domestic servants, while four hundred were reunited with relatives.<sup>77</sup> In other words, the FBS successfully reclaimed or extricated from prostitution half of the women who entered the asylum. Averaged over thirty-eight years, this was roughly twenty-six women a year. Withdrawing from prostitution would have been difficult without the asylum's help. Without funds to relocate, there was nowhere for a former prostitute to go, and domestic service positions with respectable families required references so it would be tough for a former prostitute to acquire one of these positions without the asylum's assistance.

Nevertheless, if the number of prostitutes in New York City ranged somewhere between the higher estimates of fifteen hundred and ten thousand, then this small number of reclamations was doing little to stem the prostitution problem in the city. At the same time, it is important to note that women's efforts to reclaim prostitutes through Christian benevolence were readily accepted. The FBS continued to provide refuge for prostitutes for decades without encountering strong opposition. At different junctures, the society even received funding from the city. The FBS was cautious in its printed communications, which were primarily annual reports and occasional fundraising appeals. It upheld the view that sex was not a topic to be discussed publicly. While the FBS sought to reform prostitutes through rescue and reclamation, the only public attitude it tried to change was that view that prostitutes were irredeemable social outcasts.<sup>78</sup>

The FBS's efforts highlight an important distinction between women's approaches to moral reform and women's organizations in general. Anne Boylan delineates three categories of antebellum women's organizations: benevolent, reform, and feminist. Whereas the FBS operated more like a benevolent society, the AFMRS, which emerged from a split with the FBS, operated as a reform organization. Boylan notes that there seemed to be little overlap between these two functions. While women often joined multiple organizations, a woman "was either a benevolent lady or a reformer, seldom both."<sup>79</sup> Consequently, rescue and reclamation efforts became benevolent endeavors as the FBS focused on fundraising and directly assisting small groups of former prostitutes.<sup>80</sup> While these delineations help denote an organization's central mission, members' primary motivation, and views about women's proper roles, we should remember that women's organizations were fluid—adapting to the exigencies they encountered. For instance, in addition to promoting reform, the AFMRS performed several benevolent functions such as assisting families meet basic needs. The AFMRS also advocated more employment opportunities for women, generally categorized as a feminist objective.



## JOHN MCDOWALL'S CRUSADE

McDowall left his position as agent for the FBS convinced that asylums were futile.<sup>81</sup> He resumed his prevention efforts, boldly condemning immoral behavior and ignoring the taboo against publicly discussing sexual matters. McDowall and later reformers considered silence an accessory to licentious behavior and exposure the most effective weapon. Proponents of prevention wanted to attract attention. They pursued moral reform in the same manner as temperance reformers. Instead of reforming drunkards, the temperance crusade sought to persuade the public about the evils of alcohol and attack purveyors including saloons and dram shops. Through *McDowall's Journal*, McDowall condemned brothels, assignation houses, theaters, and patrons of prostitutes.<sup>82</sup>

As his journal gained a following, McDowall remained a lightning rod for controversy.<sup>83</sup> His rift with the FBS continued, and he added fuel to the fire by publishing the quarrel in his journal. Likely instigated by his critics, in March 1834 a grand jury charged that *McDowall's Journal* was "offensive to taste, injurious to morals, and degrading to the character of [the] city."<sup>84</sup> While these findings carried no actionable consequences, they drew more attention to McDowall. In June, his critics brought charges before the Third Presbytery, the body that licensed McDowall to preach. While the Third Presbytery encouraged McDowall to continue pursuing moral reform, it advised him to cease publication of his controversial periodical. In response, McDowall gave his press and subscription list to a group of women who would later become the AFMRS. These women had recently split with the FBS over the McDowall controversy and their belief that prevention was a better course for moral reform.

McDowall continued his public feud, and his enemies brought more charges against him to the Presbytery, which finally decided to suspend him from preaching. He appealed the decision, but by this time the bitter public argument, along with McDowall's zealous pursuit of moral reform, had taken a heavy toll on his health. McDowall died on December 13, 1836, at the age of thirty-five. The AFMRS, which had hired McDowall to serve as a city missionary, honored him as a martyr to the cause of moral reform. Indeed, AFMRS auxiliaries sent money to his widow and purchased and circulated his memoir, aptly titled *Memoir and Select Remains of the late Rev. John R. M'Dowall, The Martyr of the Seventh Commandment, in the Nineteenth Century*.

## THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT SOCIETY

McDowall had also inspired a group of evangelical clergymen and laymen who distributed *McDowall's Journal* to families in church wards throughout

the city. In October 1833 they established the American Society for Promoting the Observance of the Seventh Commandment, more commonly referred to as the Seventh Commandment Society. This group envisioned a national reform crusade that would combat the combined evils of sexual immorality, drinking, and slavery—all in an effort to purify the nation. The Seventh Commandment Society disseminated its proposed constitution to several hundred like-minded men across the country and sought to increase awareness and elevate moral reform to a level similar to that of temperance. As part of the group's envisioned moral purification campaign, it would urge parents to educate their children, clergymen to preach the seventh commandment from the pulpit, and members of respectable society to exclude all licentious individuals. However, the Seventh Commandment Society, whose leaders were also involved in abolition, soon relinquished the job of moral reform to the newly formed AFMRS, which had become an auxiliary to the Seventh Commandment Society.<sup>85</sup>

#### THE AFMRS AND THE GENDERING OF MORAL REFORM

Reluctant at first, women claimed moral reform as a women's movement. Upset by the ongoing dispute between the FBS and McDowall, several FBS officers, including Mrs. Charles W. Hawkins, Mrs. A. M. Roberts, Mrs. William Green Jr., and Mrs. D.C. Lansing resigned, and established the New York Female Moral Reform Society, later renamed the AFMRS. These women became officers for the AFMRS joining Lydia Finney, wife of revivalist Charles Finney, who was named first directress.<sup>86</sup> The women who established the AFMRS were also convinced that prevention was a more effective strategy to combat prostitution than reclamation.<sup>87</sup>

Attempts at prevention were more ambitious and controversial, focusing on places (brothels, saloons, theaters) and behaviors (drinking, dancing, reading romance novels) that moral reformers believed propagated licentiousness.<sup>88</sup> Pursuing their own prevention efforts required women to take center stage in a public and fiery moral reform campaign. "By challenging the benevolent ladies' assumptions about what women could and ought to attempt in the public sphere," Boylan declares, "reform-oriented women moved beyond benevolence and into active efforts to change basic social relationships."<sup>89</sup> In taking over the mantle for moral reform, AFMRS members helped forge broad social reform as a proper role for women.

While women numerically dominated most antebellum evangelical and benevolent endeavors, "moral reform was the first *reform* movement to become almost exclusively the cause of women."<sup>90</sup> The historian Daniel Wright

argues, “unlike the other leading reform movements of the time—antislavery and temperance—moral reform quickly became a thoroughly feminized movement, not only in membership, but in leadership and agenda.”<sup>91</sup> The history of early moral reform efforts in New York highlights the failure of several male-led initiatives; it also shows women’s willingness to take charge of this cause. Drawing from both the factors contributing to New York’s vibrant sex trade and the several failed efforts to combat it, which I have outlined, I want to suggest four reasons why moral reform was relegated to women’s work, why women embraced it, and how AFMRS volunteers gendered the movement—transforming it from a male-led to a female-led reform effort. These include women drawing on their religious identities for ethos and armor, stressing the movement’s commitment to women helping women, exerting pent-up frustration over gendered double standards, and using rhetorical tactics that were available and comfortable for women.

First, AFMRS women gendered moral reform by using their religious identities and perceived moral superiority as a source of authority and protection. The stigma attached to prostitutes was deeply entrenched in antebellum American society—so was the taboo against discussing sexual matters in polite company. Individuals were often implicated just by speaking about sexual immorality. While men were willing to donate money to establish asylums, and basically outsource the problem of prostitution to matrons and ladies’ committees, most avoided any hands-on involvement and bristled at any type of broad societal reform. When John McDowall’s *Magdalen Report* was met with public indignation, reputable merchants and other male business leaders made a hasty retreat. Indeed, opposition to moral reform brought together strange bedfellows. Not only did opponents include brothel madams, prostitutes, and their patrons who wanted to avoid exposure, but also wealthy landlords and business owners who profited from the city’s sex trade and despised the intrusion on their livelihood. Conservative church leaders also believed that public discussions of licentious behavior encouraged it, and in some cases believed that female moral reformers had stepped beyond their proper sphere. Additionally, city officials were embarrassed by the city’s lascivious industry and wary of riling their male constituents. Whatever the motivation, all opposition faced the same quandary—arguing in favor of prostitution was an untenable position. So, most opponents fervently claimed that publicly discussing sex was improper and even harmful. Others made fun of moral reformers, and some even absurdly condemned moral reformers as the group responsible for spreading licentiousness.

By pursuing an awareness campaign that exposed and publicly condemned prostitution and male licentious behavior, moral reformers often

encountered personal scorn and harsh backlash. The women comprising the AFMRS, however, were more difficult to attack. Unlike men, they were not as vulnerable to claims that they were sexually interested in the women they were helping. Additionally, most were not worried about commercial enterprises or business reputations—or, in McDowall's case, a preaching license. And as far as maintaining respectability, which was vitally important in the nineteenth century, women were both motivated and protected by their belief that moral reform was their Christian duty. Women's elevation as models of piety in the nineteenth century and the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening lent them ethos and emboldened women to defy certain social mores. Whereas women had previously been viewed as individuals who needed to be protected, the "evolving evangelical ideology of gender" made women's perceived moral superiority a strength and armament in the pursuit of moral reform. These religious identities enabled women "to rely on an authority beyond the world of men and provided a crucial support to those who stepped beyond accepted bounds," especially reformers. They acted under the conviction that God ordained their work. With this "spiritual armor," respectable middle-class women traveled to sections of the city previously off-limits and broached taboo sexual subjects, all in pursuit of moral reform.<sup>92</sup>

Second, AFMRS members gendered moral reform by emphasizing that they were helping other women. Women tended to take more personal interest than men in social outreach efforts, and they were especially drawn to causes that helped other women.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, women were the principal victims of licentiousness, so men did not relate to the issue in the same way women did. Women understood their sex's vulnerability in nineteenth-century society. Young women were admonished to remain innocent, even naïve, about sexual matters. Through education and awareness, AFMRS members believed they were protecting women. They warned them about behaviors that would put them at risk, alerted them to known libertines and seduction tactics, opened employment offices to help women find respectable positions, and lobbied lawmakers to pass anti-seduction and abduction laws. Railing against theaters, brothels, and gaming houses, female moral reformers also believed they were acting on behalf of mothers whose sons moved to the city for jobs and were easily lured into these dens of vice.

Third, AFMRS members also used their anger and frustration to gender moral reform. Women were outraged by a society that severely punished women for extramarital sex while ignoring men's indiscretions, by laws that targeted female prostitutes while disregarding their male customers, and by economic opportunities that made it nearly impossible for women to support themselves. AFMRS members' anger and frustration about these double stan-

dards is readily apparent in their periodical, *The Advocate of Moral Reform*. When the AFMRS began publishing these frustrations, they discovered a receptive and like-minded audience among women throughout the Northeast and Midwest, who were ready to break the silence on sexual double standards. Thus, this deep-seeded anger united women and roused them to take charge of moral reform.

Lastly, the rhetorical tactics the AFMRS used to pursue moral reform—publishing periodicals, circulating petitions, using their physical presence, forming auxiliaries, and establishing institutions—were also gendered, and offer a harbinger of rhetorical tactics female reformers would use throughout the nineteenth century. These were rhetorical means that were accessible to women; more importantly, women gravitated to these means because they were comfortable using them. While antebellum women had few avenues to pursue legal and economic reform, they used the rhetorical tactics that were available to them to shame men and to educate, organize, embolden, and protect women. In pursuing moral reform, women's ethos, motivation, and level of participation differed from that of men, and for several years female moral reformers endured the harsh backlash that accompanied their public prevention campaign. Instead of deterring them, opposition initially steeled their resolve by convincing them that the cause of moral reform was better suited for women.

The AFMRS persevered in their moral reform efforts far longer than any men's organizations. *McDowall's Journal* lasted just about a year, while the *Advocate of Moral Reform* was published for more than a century. Eventually, the AFMRS realigned its objectives and methods. Recognizing that limited economic opportunities was the root cause of many women's problems, the AFMRS opened a home for young, vulnerable women and orphaned and neglected children in 1847 and eventually changed its name to the American Female Guardian Society. With its home and its institutional rhetoric, which I discuss in chapter 5, the AFMRS placed women in employment situations and children in foster and adoptive homes. This home remained open for 128 years, shifting focus as needs changed. It eventually merged with several other organizations in 1974. Ultimately, the AFMRS's long history suggests that the women who pursued the controversial cause of moral reform not only embraced it as women's work, but were also more resilient and pragmatic than male moral reformers. Initially, however, women approached moral reform out of a sense of righteous anger, which I discuss in the next chapter.