Schoolgirls at a YWCA garden fete, Hamilton, ca. 1919. *Courtesy: Hamilton Public Library, Special Collections.*

"KEEPING OUR GOOD GIRLS GOOD:" THE YWCA AND THE 'GIRL PROBLEM,' 1870-1930*

Diana Pedersen

Entre 1870 et 1930, des branches régionales de l'Association des jeunes femmes chretiennes (YWCA) furent établies dans trente-neuf communautés canadiennes. Sous la direction de femmes de classe moyenne, pour l'usage exclusif des femmes, ces centres créerent un espace public pour les femmes et fournirent des occasions et des services pour lesquels il y avait un grand besoin. Dans cette période de temps, de plus en plus de jeunes femmes quittaient le foyer familial pour prendre avantage des nouvelles possibilités en éducation et dans l'emploi émergeant dans les villes. Craignant la perte des valeurs morales traditionellement attribuées à la vie en campagne ou dans les villages, l'Association fit du "problème des filles" sa cause. Diana Pedersen évalue l'impact positif et négatif sur les jeunes femmes travaillant dans la ville.

Operated by women for the exclusive use of women, Young Women's Christian Associations were among the earliest attempts to create a public space for women in the city, and provided many women with opportunities and services to which they did not otherwise have access. A turn-of-the-century YWCA in one of the larger Canadian cities typically featured a boarding house for young women, providing accommodation for as many as fifty permanent boarders, and temporary quarters for women travellers and domestic servants seeking a "situation." The public department, often located in a separate building, offered a wide variety of programs and services that were open to all young women "of good character" without reference to religious affiliation. These programs typically included a reading room or library, an employment bureau, a cafeteria, night classes in subjects such as bookkeeping or millinery, working women's clubs, gymnasium work featuring classes in physical drill and team sports, and swimming lessons. Also functioning as a type of "women's centre" in turn-of-the-century Canadian cities, YWCAs served as an information bureau both for new arrivals and women resident in the city, and as a central meeting palce for local clubwomen. Reflecting the increasing urbanization of Canadian society, branches of the YWCA were established in a total of thirty-nine Canadian communities between 1870 and 1930, appearing where the concentration of employment and educational opportunities in cities attracted large numbers of young single women.[1]

YWCA programs and facilities were not, however, established or run by the young women of the city whom they ostensibly served. Instead, they resulted from an initiative taken by a group of older middle-class volunteers, a committee of women drawn from the congregations of the local Protestant churches and from the families of the community's most prominent business and professional men. Like many other women of their class, they were attracted to membership in voluntary and charitable organizations that promised to expand their horizons beyond the confines of the home, to provide opportunities for fundraising, administration and other activities normally closed to married women, and to facilitate friendships and advantageous

social contacts with like-minded women.[2] The YWCA also provided deeply religiouswomen with an outlet for their desire to engage in Christian social service, particularly on behalf of other women, without necessarily becoming involved in more secular and controversial issues such as woman suffrage. As evangelical Protestants, YWCA women believed that salvation could be achieved only through the acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's personal saviour and that it was the duty of the saved to carry the message of salvation to others. Enthusiastic advocates of inter-denominational cooperation, they promised to strengthen the churches by providing active Christian women with both the resources to undertake projects too expensive for any one church and greater autonomy than they were generally permitted in church-controlled denominational organizations.

YWCAs were part of a broader attack by middle-class social reformers on the "problem" of the city, where the increasing visibility of poverty, overcrowding, disease and unemployment, and an apparent rise in atheism, crime, immorality and vice seemed to herald the demise of values traditionally associated with small town and rural life. This multi-faceted campaign to reform the city included crusades for temperance, Sabbatarianism, child welfare, public parks, public health measures, and the coordination of relief agencies. As YWCA women frequently pointed out, however, the young women of the city constituted a group that was invariably overlooked by religious and social reformers. The "girl problem" was to become the particular mandate of the YWCA.

The "girl problem," as the YWCA defined it, was the result of major social and economic changes taking place in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Canada that were having an important impact on the life course of young women. During these decades it became increasingly acceptable for young women to leave the parental home to seek out new employment and educational opportunities in the interval between school-leaving at approximately age fourteen and marriage, generally occurring in the mid-twenties. Unprecedented numbers of young women were thus experiencing a significant period of relative economic and sexual independence, unknown to their mothers and grandmothers.[3] As one YWCA observer noted in 1900:

> *Whatever the cause, be it a growing spirit of independence, or a growing distaste for home duties, or merely the outcome of the fierce fever of unrest that is characteristic of the age; it is a living fact that large numbers of young women are outside the sacred influence of Christian homes with little or no time to develop what nature with infinite pains has given her* [sic] *a peculiar fitness for – the ability to be home-maker.*[4]

The "girls" who attracted the attention of the YWCA were young unmarried women, between the ages of approximately seventeen and twenty-five. Often they were new to the city and had no friends or family nearby. Many were farmers' daughters who were abandoning the dull routine of farm life and unpaid domestic work for employment in the cities as domestic servants or factory workers. Young women from countries overseas, particularly Britain, were arriving in Canadian cities hoping to better their prospects and perhaps find adventure. The factory system was expanding, creating a demand for female labour, and new occupations were opening up for women in the service sector, particularly as telephone operators, office workers and sales clerks. Other young women were also drawn to the cities to improve their positions through attendance at a university, normal school or business college.[5] Young women actually outnumbered men of their own age in many Canadian cities, and YWCA observers noted the "startling facts" revealed in the 1901 census, showing that in cities such as Toronto, Ottawa, Hamilton and Halifax, "more than one in every nine of the population is a wage-earning woman in office, factory, shop or in domestic service." For the women of the YWCA, such a state of affairs clearly called for a response, making it "necessary for those of practical bent to seek to meet the needs for preserving, in the midst of these conditions, a well-developed, all-round Christian womanhood."[6]

YWCA leaders, unlike some of their more conservative fellow evangelicals, never argued that women should not seek employment or higher education; nonetheless, they were deeply ambivalent about the changing role of women. They rejected any notion that women ought to derive their sense of purpose and identity from attracting, pleasing, and serving

Swimming class at the Toronto YWCA, ca. 1910. Photo by William James. Courtesy: City of Toronto Archives.

men, yet they feared that the experiences of employment, education, and living independently might result in a substitution of material values and "selfish" personal ambition for women's traditional close ties to home, family and church. Young women, they argued, as the mothers of the future generations, constituted the very foundation of society:

> *A nation's greatness depends upon social conditions, health and home life, all of which are absolutely in the hands of women. Women set the social standards throughout the world, and on the enlightenment and high ideals of the women the moral standards of the nation depend.* [7]

According to this reasoning, it was essential to solve the "girl problem" because that ultimately meant "the solution of the boy problem, the home problem and finally, that of the nation.[8] The YWCA defined its task as shepherding young women through a difficult and potentially dangerous period of their lives by providing a substitute for parental and religious influences through practical assistance in a wholesome Christian setting, or, in the offhanded but extremely apt characterization of one leader, as "keeping our good girls good."[9]

As evangelicals, YWCA women viewed solving the "girl problem" as part of a larger struggle to establish "Christ's Kingdom on earth." Taking a highly individualistic approach to effecting social change, they believed that as large numbers of Canadians were won for Christ, substantial social reforms would be accomplished, including the elimina-

Cooking class for domestic servants, Ottawa YWCA, 1894.
Credit: Photo by W.J. Topley. Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada.

tion of poverty, intemperance, prostitution and class conflict. Young women, they argued, had a key role to play in "the coming Kingdom" because they would determine the moral and religious standards of the community through their influence over the future generations:

> *The girl is the hope of the world. As we keep her pure, we protect the race of the future; as we keep her bright and keen for the better things of life, we raise the standard of our nation; as we draw her closer to the verities of life, we help to lift up the Christ so that our children's children may know Him, 'whom to know is life.'*[10]

It was thus essential that young women, as "God's own cornerstones," be won for the churches and for Christ.

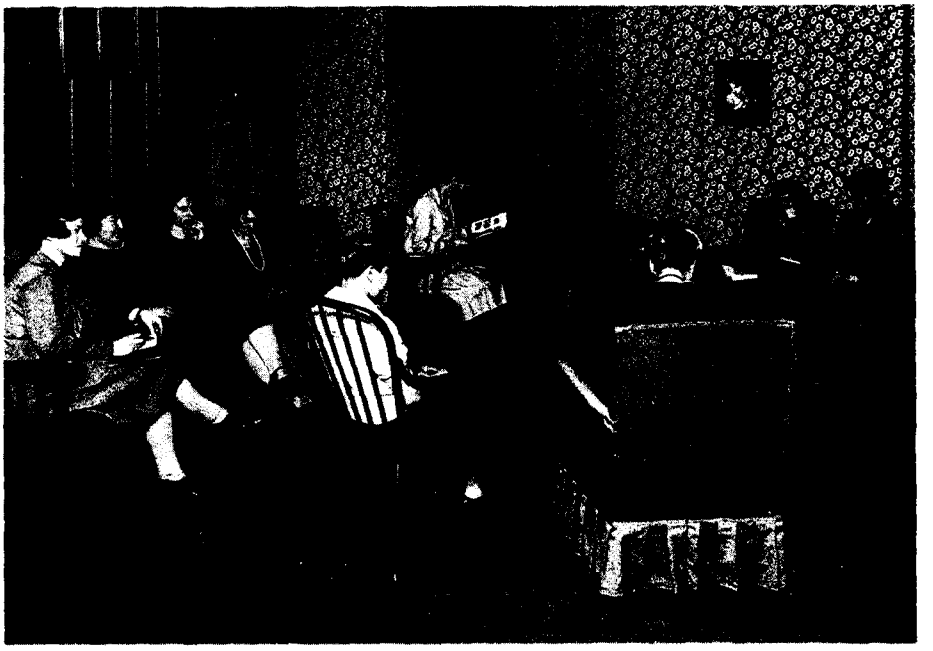
What YWCA leaders offered in an attempt to resolve the "girl problem" was "protection" from the many dangers that, in their view, awaited the unsuspecting young woman on her arrival in the city. YWCA women were deeply ambivalent about the city, recognizing that for many young women, as for young men, if offered real opportunities to "make good", to improve their situation in the world, and to find adventure and new friends; yet the urban environment, they feared, was inhospitable to young women and threatening to their welfare. Most of all they feared that the vulnerable new arrival from the country districts or from overseas might be drawn into prostitution as a result of seduction and abandonment, destitution, loneliness and despair, or outright physical coercion. YWCA women shared a conviction prevalent among middle-class social reformers that the ports and railway stations of Canadian cities were frequented by agents of the notorious "white slave trade," an organized international network that reputedly kidnapped unsuspecting young women for the purposes of prostitution. They also feared that, given the shortage of respectable housing available to young women on low incomes and a widespread practice of discrimination against women tenants, young women left alone to choose a boarding house could conceivably find themselves resident in one of the red-light districts that flourished in turn-of-the-century Canadian cities.[11] The workplace too, particularly where it brought women into close proximity with men, appeared to threaten the moral standards of young women, and long hard hours seemed to threaten the health of future mothers. YWCA women worried that young working women, particularly those who lived away from home, had no time or opportunity to acquire the domestic skills they would need later in life, and that without supervision, they might make unsuitable friends, keep late hours,or drift out of the habit of regular church attendance. While sympathetic to the young woman's need for some excitement in her leisure hours and relief from the monotony of her job, they were particularly apprehensive about the possible consequences should she be drawn by the new commercialized recreations. "Ought you to be mild," asked one YWCA leader, "when you know that in order to satisfy the desire of the girl for a good time, and for relaxation after hours of labour, many girls go to picture shows which poison their minds, or to dance halls which are worse to them than death is to your boy?"[12]

In turn-of-the-century Canadian cities, YWCAs did not reflect priorities defined by the young women who used their services, but were intended to provide the "protection" that their leaders believed was in the best interests of working women. Implicit in the YWCA's critique of the urban environment was an attack on uncontrolled and irresponsible male sexuality and on the masculine culture of Canadian cities that failed to provide women with needed services and recreational opportunities and that threatened women's physical and moral well-being. To counter this threat to young women, YWCAs offered a woman-controlled public space from which men were excluded and in which women were free to socialize in the company of other women "of good character." The YWCA offered women opportunities that were often unavailable to them elsewhere in the city, such as night classes or the use of a gymnasium or swimming pool, and provided needed services such as cafeterias providing low-cost nutritious meals for downtown office workers. It offered young women friendship and maternal supervision, both of which, YWCA leaders believed, provided a restraining and stabilizing influence – particularly during the difficult first year in the city which was a young woman's "testing time." "Perhaps at no time in her life," they argued, "is she so much in need of advice and sympathy and the comforts of a home."[13]

The boarding house was crucial to the YWCA's strategy of protecting the working woman. The Halifax YWCA, in cooperating with the Local Council of Women and a group of businessmen to open a home for young factory workers in 1914, suggested that "if these girls lived in clean and healthful surroundings, under good moral influences, in a home where they could spend their evenings together in harmless enjoyment, they would be

elevated socially, morally and physically."[14] Most important of all, many YWCA leaders believed, was the opportunity that their organization offered for working women to benefit from contacts with Christian women such as themselves. The teachings of Jesus Christ, they believed, offered young women "love, joy and peace, patience towards others, kindness and benevolence, good faith, meekness and self-restraint,"and were capable of resolving "every girl problem" – "the problem of the hardest business woman as readily as that of the most undisciplined flapper, and that of the most restless college student no less surely than that of the most discontented society girl."[15] They also believed that common religious beliefs offered women a basis on which to unite and overcome the barriers of social class. YWCA women hoped ultimately to win working women as their allies in their struggle to remake Canadian society in the image of Christ's Kingdom.

Canadian working women, of course, had reasons of their own for accepting the "protection" of the YWCA. While many refused to have anything to do with what they regarded as an organization of "goody-goodies" and others remained completely indifferent, large numbers of working women – hundreds in some larger cities – were fully prepared to take advantage of the services the YWCA offered. Often disoriented on their arrival in the city, many travellers and immigrants were grateful for the assistance of the YWCA's "Travellers' Aid" who met them at the major ports and railroad stations. Owing to the chronic housing shortage in Canadian cities, YWCA boarding homes were frequently forced to turn away applicants for accommodation. At a time when many cities lacked free public libraries and night classes for adults, many working women took advantage of YWCA reading rooms and classes where they could upgrade their job qualifications or learn to sew their own clothes and thereby stretch their meagre wages. Cafeterias, gymnasia and swimming pools proved enormously popular with working women, as did YWCA summer camps, which provided an opportunity for a low-cost vacation in the country. At a time when the loss of a woman's reputation could result in damage to marital or employment prospects, particularly in the case of the new white-blouse occupations, many working women appreciated the opportunities the YWCA provided for "respectable" recreation. The opportunity to enjoy the company of other women was also highly valued by working women who did not, during these decades, regard their friendships with women as a poor substitute for mixed company. Working women's clubs, however, were not as successful as the more popular gymnasium and swimming classes, and YWCA leaders were consistently disappointed by the low turnout for the Bible study classes offered in the hopes that working women might be encouraged to become full members of a church of their choice.



Working women's club, Senior Employed Department, Toronto YWCA, ca. 1928. Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada.

The consequences of the YWCA's policy of "protecting" working women were highly ambivalent. Through its boarding houses and Travellers Aid programs, the YWCA undoubtedly opened up opportunities for working and studying in the city to many young women who would otherwise have been denied those opportunities by their anxious families. YWCAs offered women what the turn-of-the-century Canadian city did not otherwise provide them – opportunities for recreation and self-improvement in a safe, respectable environment in the company of other women. Yet at the same time, YWCA policies and programs denied young women's autonomy and right to determine their own needs and priorities. While the young woman in the city undoubtedly had problems to contend with, including low wages, inadequate housing and an unfamiliar environment that was frequently dangerous for women, the YWCA defined the young woman herself as the "problem," one that was ultimately to be resolved by others who best understood her real needs:

> *Does not the whole problem of the modern girl then resolve itself into a challenge to the older women . . . to those of us who have had a little more experience because we happen to have lived a little longer, and who because of this should be able to make allowances for those who are weaker because less experienced? Is our love to Him not strong enough to make us willing to spend ourselves in bringing the modern girl back to her home, the Church, and to her old-time religion, while at the same time proving to her that all her tremendous energy and up-to-date training are quite indispensable to our welfare, and that just as her splendid physique is essential to the very production of the next generation, so there is abundant play for all her vision, and scope for her most magnificent ability in consecrated motherhood and sanctified womanhood.*[16]

In trying to win public support for working women by presenting them as future mothers, YWCAs actually helped to reinforce the view that women were only temporary workers who deserved to be paid less than more permanent and committed male workers. Although male sexuality was defined as the principal

YWCA basketball team, Vancouver and District League, 1924. Courtesy: Vancouver YWCA.

threat from which young women had to be protected, "protection" in practice often resulted in the increased supervision of women rather than men and controls on female rather than male sexuality. YWCA leaders often observed that young women were hampered, in comparison with young men, by a combination of low wages and a code of respectability to which young men did not necessarily have to conform. Nonetheless, by concentrating its efforts on offering assistance to young women who wished to remain "respectable," the YWCA failed to challenge both the low wages and the division of women into categories of "good" and "bad" that underlay so many of the very problems its programs attempted to address. And by adopting working women as their "daughters," YWCAs attempted, and failed, to unite women in a relationship that was hierarchical and class-based, reproducing many of the oppressive as well as the positive features of the mother-daughter relationship.[17]

[1]On the history of the YWCA in Canada, see Josephine Perfect Harshaw, When Women Work Together: A History of the Young Women's Christian Association in Canada (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1966); Mary Quayle Innis, *Unfold the Years: A History of the Young Women's Christian Association in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1949); Wendy Mitchinson, "The YWCA and Reform in the Nineteenth Century," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, XII, No. 24 (1979), 368-384; Diana Pedersen, "Keeping Our Good Girls Good': The Young Women's Christian Association of Canada, 1870-1920" (M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1981), and "Building Today for the Womanhood of Tomorrow:" Businessmen, Boosters and the YWCA, 1890-1930," forthcoming in *Urban History Review*.

[2]Linda Kealey, ed. *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979).

[3]Ellen Gee, "Marriage in Nineteenth-century Canada," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 19, No. 3 (1982), 311-325; Jeanne L'Esperance, *The Widening Sphere: Women in Canada, 1870-1940* (Ottawa: Public Archives Canada/ National Library of Canada, 1982); Beth Light and Joy Parr, eds. *Canadian Women on the Move, 1867-1920* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press and The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1983), Chapter 2; Joy Parr, ed. *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982).

[4]Public Archives of Canada, YWCA of Canada Records, MG 28 I 198, v. 46, *Young Women's Gazette*, February 1900, 6.

[5]Marilyn Barber, "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domestics for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930," *Ontario History* 72, No. 3 (1980), 148-172; Alan A. Brookes and Catharine A. Wilson, "'Working Away' from the Farm: the Young Women of North Huron, 1910-1930," *Ontario History* 77, No. 4 (1985), 281-300; Graham S. Lowe, "Women, Work and the Office: The Feminization of Clerical Occupations in Canada, 1901-1931," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 5, No. 4 (1980), 361-381; Paul Phillips and Erin Phillips, *Women and Work: Inequality in the Labour Market* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1983); John G. Reid, "The Education of Women at Mount Allison, 1854-1914," *Acadiensis* 12, No. 2 (1983), 3-33.

[6]Hamilton YWCA Records, Clippings, "The Young Women's Christian Association," 1902.

[7]YWCA of Canada Records, v.40, Youth – Girl's Work 1918-1921, "A Girls' Value to Her Country," c.1919.

[8]Ibid., 46, *Association Outlook*, (January 1917), 7.

[9]Ibid., (January 1918), 10.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Judy Bedford, "Prostitution in Calgary, 1905-1914," *Alberta History*, 29, No. 2 (1981), 1-11; James H. Gray, *Red Lights on the Prairies* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1971); Deborah Nilsen, "The Social Evil:' Prostitution in Vancouver, 1900-1920," in Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess, eds. *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980), 205-228; Lori Rotenberg, "The Wayward Worker: Toronto's Prostitute at the Turn of the Century," in Janice Acton, et al, *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974), 33-69. For contemporary accounts of the white slave traffic in Canadian cities, see Ernest E. Bell, ed., *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls* (Chicago: Illinois Vigilance Association, 1910; reprinted, *War on the White Slave Trade* (Toronto: Coles Publishing Company, 1980).

[12]YWCA of Canada Records, v. 46, *Association Outlook* (January 1918), 10.

[13]Ibid., v.44, Scrapbooks 1912-16, "The Work of the Y.W.C.A.," *The Globe* (August 7, 1915).

[14]Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax YWCA Records, Clippings, "Boarding House for Working Girls," 1914.

[15]YWCA of Canada Records, v.46, *Association Outlook* (May 1918), 93.

[16]Ibid., 93-4.

[17]The YWCA was not unique in drawing on the mother-daughter relationship as a model for relations between women of different social classes. For an analysis of the dynamic of maternalism in Canada's first women's prison, see Carolyn Strange, "The Velvet Glove: Maternalistic Reform at the Andrew Mercer Ontario Reformatory for Females, 1874-1927" (M.A. thesis, University of Ottawa, 1983).

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