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“Social Purity,” Susan B. Anthony 1895

Though women, as a class, are much less addicted to drunkenness and licentiousness than men, it is universally conceded that they are by far the greater sufferers from these evils. Compelled by their position in society to depend on men for subsistence, for food, clothes, shelter, for every chance even to earn a dollar, they have no way of escape from the besotted victims of appetite and passion with whom their lot is cast. They must endure, if not endorse, these twin vices, embodied, as they so often are, in the person of father, brother, husband, son, employer. No one can doubt that the sufferings of the sober, virtuous woman, in legal subjection to the mastership of a drunken, immoral husband and father over herself and children, not only from physical abuse, but from spiritual shame and humiliation, must be such as the man himself can not possibly comprehend.

It is not my purpose to harrow your feelings by attempt at depicting the horrible agonies of mind and body that grow out of these monster social evils. They are already but too well known. Scarce a family throughout our broad land but has had its peace and happiness marred by one or the other, or both. That these evils exist, we all know; that something must be done, we as well know; that the old methods have failed, that man, alone, has proved himself incompetent to eradicate, or even regulate them, is equally evident. It shall be my endeavor, therefore, to prove to you that we must now adopt new measures and bring to our aid new forces to accomplish the desired end.

Forty years' effort by men alone to suppress the evil of intemperance give us the following appalling figures: 600,000 common drunkards! Which, reckoning our population to be 40,000,000 gives us one drunkard to every seventeen moderate drinking and total-abstinence men. Granting to each of these 600,000 drunkards a wife and four children, we have 3,000,000 of the women and children of this nation helplessly, hopelessly bound to this vast army of irresponsible victims of appetite.

The roots of the giant evil, intemperance, are not merely moral and social; they extend deep and wide into the financial and political structure of the government; and whenever women, or men, shall intelligently and seriously set themselves about the work of uprooting the liquor traffic, they will find something more than tears and prayers needful to the task. Financial and political power must be combined with moral and social influence, all bound together in one earnest, energetic, persistent force.

The prosecutions on our courts for breach of promise, divorce, adultery, bigamy, seduction, rape; the newspaper reports every day of every year of scandals and outrages, of wife murders and paramour shooting, of abortions and infanticides, are perpetual reminders of men's incapacity to cope successfully with this monster evil of society.

The statistics of New York show the murder of professional prostitutes in that city to be over twenty thousand. Add to these the thousands and tens of thousands of Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, New Orleans, St. Louis, Chicago, San Francisco, and all our cities, great and small, from ocean to ocean, and

what a holocaust of the womanhood of this nation is sacrificed to the insatiate Moloch of lust. And yet more: those myriads of wretched women, publicly known as prostitutes, constitute but a small portion of the numbers who actually tread the paths of vice and crime. For, as the oftbroken ranks of the vast army of common drunkards are steadily filled by the boasted moderate drinkers, so are the ranks of professional prostitution continually replenished by discouraged, seduced deserted unfortunates, who can no longer hide the terrible secret of their lives.

The Albany Law Journal, of December 1876, says: "The laws of infanticide must be a dead letter in the District of Columbia. According to the reports of the local officials, the dead bodies of infants, still-born and murdered, which have been found during the past year, scattered over parks and vacant lots in the city of Washington, are to be numbered by hundreds."

In 1869 the Catholics established a Foundling Hospital in New York City. At the close of the first six months Sister Irene reported thirteen hundred little waifs laid in the basket at her door. That meant thirteen hundred of the daughters of New York, with trembling hands and breaking hearts, trying to bury their sorrow and their shame from the world's cruel gaze. That meant thirteen hundred mothers' hopes blighted and blasted. Thirteen hundred Rachels weeping for their children because they were not!

Nor is it womanhood alone that is thus fearfully sacrificed. For every betrayed woman, there is always the betrayer, man. For every abandoned woman, there is always one abandoned man and oftener many more. It is estimated that there are 50,000 professional in London, and Dr. Ryan calculates that there are 400,000 men in that city directly or indirectly connected with them, and that this vice causes the city an annual expenditure of \$40,000,000.

All attempts to describe the loathsome and contagious disease, which it engenders, defy human language. The Rev. Wm. G. Eliot, of St. Louis, says of it: "Few know of the terrible nature of the disease in question and its fearful ravages, not only among the guilty, but the innocent. Since its first recognized appearance in Europe in the fifteenth century, it has been a desolation and a scourge. In its worst forms it is so subtle, that its course can with difficulty be traced. It poisons the constitution, and may be imparted to others by those who have no outward or distinguishable marks of it themselves. It may be propagated months and years after it seems to have been cured. The purity of womanhood and the helplessness of infancy afford no certainty of escape."

Man's legislative attempts to setback this fearful tide of social corruption have proved even more futile and disastrous than have those for the suppression of intemperance—as witness the Contagious Diseases Acts of England and the St. Louis experiment. And yet efforts to establish similar laws are constantly made in our large cities, New York and Washington barely escaping last winter.

To license certain persons to keep brothels and saloons is but to throw around them and their traffic the shield of law, and thereby to blunt the edge of all moral and social efforts against them. Nevertheless, in every large city, brothels are virtually licensed. When "Maggie Smith" is made to appear before the police court at the close of each quarter, to pay her fine of \$10, \$25 or \$100, as an inmate or a keeper of a brothel, and allowed to continue her vocation, so long as she pays her fine, that is license. When a

grand jury fails to find cause for indictment against a well-known keeper of a house of ill-fame, that too, is permission for her and all her class to follow their trade, against the statute laws of the State, and with impunity.

The work of woman is not to lessen the severity or the certainty of the penalty for the violation of the moral law, but to prevent this violation by the removal of the causes, which lead to it. These causes are said to be wholly different with the sexes. The acknowledged incentive to this vice on the part of man is his own abnormal passion; while on the part of woman, in the great majority of causes, it is conceded to be destitution—absolute want of the necessaries of life. Lecky, the famous historian of European morals, says: “The statistics of prostitution show that a great proportion of those women who have fallen into it have been impelled by the most extreme poverty, in many instances verging on starvation.” All other conscientious students of this terrible problem, on both continents, agree with Mr. Lecky. Hence, there is no escape from the conclusion that, while woman’s want of bread induces her to pursue this vice, man’s love of the vice itself leads him into it and holds him there. While statistics show no lessening of the passional demand on the part of man, they reveal a most frightful increase of the temptations, the necessities, on the part of woman.

In the olden times, when the daughters of the family, as well as the wife, were occupied with useful and profitable work in the household, getting the meals and washing the dishes three times in every day of every year, doing the baking, the brewing, the washing and the ironing, the whitewashing, the butter and cheese and soap making, the mending and the making of clothes for the entire family, the carding, spinning and weaving of the cloth—when everything to eat, to drink and to wear was manufactured in the home, almost no young women “went out to work.” But now, when nearly all these handicrafts are turned over to men and to machinery, tens of thousands, nay, millions, of the women of both hemispheres are thrust into the world’s outer market of work to earn their own subsistence. Society, ever slow to change its conditions, presents to these millions but few and meager chances. Only the barest necessaries, and oftentimes not even those, can be purchased with the proceeds of the most excessive and exhausting labor.

Hence, the reward of virtue for the homeless, friendless, penniless woman is ever a scanty larder, a pinched, patched, faded wardrobe, a dank basement or rickety garret, with the colder, shabbier scorn and neglect of the more fortunate of her sex. Nightly, as weary and worn from her day’s toil she wends her way through the dark alleys toward her still darker abode, where only cold and hunger await her, she sees on every side and at every turn the gilded hand of vice and crime outstretched, beckoning her to food and clothing and shelter; hears the whisper in softest accents, “Come with me and I will give you all comforts, pleasures and luxuries that love and wealth can bestow.” Since the vast multitudes of human being, women like men, are not born to the courage or conscience of the martyr, can we wonder that so many poor girls fall, that so many accept material ease and comfort at the expense of spiritual purity and peace? Should we not wonder, rather, that so many escape the sad fate?

Clearly, then, the first step forward solving this problem is to this vast army of poverty-stricken women who now crowd our cities, above the temptation, the necessity, to sell themselves, in marriage or out, for bread and shelter. To do that, girls, like boys, must be educated to some lucrative employment;

women, like men, must have equal chances to earn a living. If the plea that poverty is the cause of woman's prostitution be not true, perfect equality of chances to earn honest bread will demonstrate the falsehood by removing that pretext and placing her on the same plane with man. Then, if she is found in the ranks of vice and crime, she will be there for the same reason that man is and, from an object of pity, she, like him, will become a fit subject of contempt. From being the party sinned against, she will become an equal sinner, if not the greater of the two. Women, like men, must not only have "fair play" in the world of work and self-support, but, like men, must be eligible to all the honors and emoluments of society and government. Marriage, to women as to men, must be a luxury, not a necessity; an incident of life, not all of it. And the only possible way to accomplish this great change is to accord to women equal power in the making, shaping and controlling of the circumstances of life. That equality of rights and privileges is vested in the ballot, the symbol of power in a republic. Hence, our first and most urgent demand—that women shall be protected in the exercise of their inherent, personal, citizen's right to a voice in the government, municipal, state, national.

Alexander Hamilton said one hundred years ago, "Give to a man the right over my subsistence, and he has power over my whole moral being." No one doubts the truth of this assertion as between man and man; while, as between man and woman, not does almost no one believe it, but the masses of people deny it. Any yet it is the fact of man's possession of this right over woman's subsistence which gives to him the power to dictate to her a moral code vastly higher and purer than the one he chooses for himself. Not less true is it, that the fact of woman's dependence on man for her subsistence renders her utterly powerless to exact from him the same high moral code she chooses for herself.

Of the 8,000,000 women over twenty-one years of age in the United States, 800,000, one out of every ten, are unmarried, and fully one-half of the entire number, or 4,000,000, support themselves wholly or in part by the industry of their own hands and brains. All of these married or single have to ask man, as a individual, a corporation, or a government, to grant to them even the privilege of hard work and small pay. The ten of thousands of poor but respectable young girls soliciting copying, clerkships, shop work, teaching, must ask of men, and not seldom receive in response, "Why work for a living? There are a the ways!"

Whoever controls work and wages, controls morals. Therefore, we must have women employers, superintendents, legislators; wherever girls go to seek the means of subsistence, there must be some woman. Nay, more; we must have women preachers, lawyers, doctors—that wherever women go to seek counsel—spiritual, legal, physical—there, too, they will be sure to find the best and noblest of their own sex to minister to them.

Independence is happiness. "No man should depend upon another; not even upon his own father. By depend I mean, obey without examination—yield to the will of any one whosoever." This is the conclusion to which Pierre, the hero of Madame Sand's "Monsieur Sylvestre," arrives, after running away from the uncle who had determined to marry him to a woman he did not choose to wed. In freedom he discovers that. Though deprived of all the luxuries to which he had been accustomed, he is happy, and writes his friend that "without having realized it, he had been unhappy all his life; had suffered from his dependent condition; that nothing in his life, his pleasures, his occupations, had been

of his own choice." And is not this the precise condition of what men call the "better half" of the human family?

In one of our western cities I once met a beautiful young woman, a successful teacher in its public schools, an only daughter who had left her New England home and all its comforts and luxuries and culture. Her father was a member of Congress and could bring to her all the attractions of Washington society. That young girl said to me, "The happiest moment of my life was when I received into my hand my first month's salary for teaching." Not long after, I met her father in Washington, spoke to him of his noble daughter, and he said: "Yes, you woman's rights people have robbed me of my only child and left the home of my old age sad and desolate. Would to God that the notion of supporting herself had never entered her head!" Had that same lovely, cultured, energetic young girl left the love, the luxury, the protection of that New England home for marriage, instead of self-support; had she gone out to be the light and joy of a husband's life, instead of her own; had she but chosen another man, instead of her father, to decide for her all her pleasures and occupations; had she but taken another position of dependence, instead of one of independence, neither her father nor the world would have felt change one to be condemned.

Fathers should be most particular about the men who visit their daughters, and, to further this reform, pure women not only must refuse to meet intimately and to marry impure men, but, finding themselves deceived in their husbands, they must refuse to continue in the marriage relation with them. We have had quite enough of the sickly sentimentalism which counts the woman a heroine and a saint for remaining the wife of a drunken, immoral husband, incurring the risk of her own health and poisoning the life-blood of the young beings that result from this unholy alliance. Such company as ye keep, such ye are! must be the maxim of married, as well as unmarried, women.

So long as the wife is held innocent in continuing to live with a libertine, and every girl whom he inveiglers and betrays becomes and outcast whom no other wife will tolerate in her house, there is, there can be, no hope of solving the problem of prostitution. As long experience has shown, these poor, homeless girls of the world can not be relied on, as a police force, to hold all husbands true to their marriage vows. Here and there, they will fail and, where they do, wives must make not they girl alone, but their husbands also suffer for their infidelity, as husbands never fail to do when their wives weakly or wickedly yield to the blandishments of other men.

In a western city the wives conspired to burn down a house of ill-fame in which their husbands had placed a half-dozen of the demi-monde. Would it not have shown much more womanly wisdom and virtue for those legal vengeance on the heads of those wretched women? But how could they without finding themselves, as a result, penniless and homeless? The person, the services, the children, the subsistence, of each and every one of those women belonged by law, not to herself, but to her unfaithful husband.

Now, why is it that man can hold woman to this high code of morals, like Caesar's wife—not only pure but above suspicion—and so surely and severely punish her for every departure, while she is so helpless, so powerless to check him in his license, or to extricate herself from his presence and control? His power

grows out of his right over her subsistence. Her lack of power grows out of her dependence on him for her food, her clothes, and her shelter.

Marriage never will cease to be a wholly unequal partnership until the law recognizes the equal ownership in the joint earnings and possessions. The true relation of the sexes never can be attained until woman is free and equal with man. Neither in the making nor executing of the laws regulating these relations has woman's had the slightest voice. The statutes for marriage and divorce, for adultery, breach of promise, seduction, rape, bigamy, abortion, infanticide—all were made by men. They, alone, decide who are guilty of violating these laws and what shall be their punishment, with judge, jury and advocate all men, with nowoman's voice heard in our courts, save as accused or witness, and in many cases the married woman is denied the poor privilege of testifying as to her own guilt or innocence of the crime charged against her.

Since the days of Moses and the prophets, men and ministers have preached the law of "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generations." But with absolute power over woman and all the conditions of life for the whole 6,000 years, man has proved his utter inability either to put away his own iniquities, or to cease to hand them down from generation to generation; hence, the only hope of reform is in sharing this absolute power with some other than himself, and that other must be woman. When no longer a subject, but an equal—a free and independent sovereign, believing herself created primarily for her own individual happiness and development and secondarily for man's, precisely as man believes himself created first for his own enjoyment and second for that of woman—she will constitute herself sole umpire in the sacred domain of motherhood. Then, instead of feeling it her Christian duty to live with a drunken, profligate husband, handing down to her children his depraved appetites and passions, she will know that God's curse will be upon her and her children if she flee not from him as from a pestilence.

It is worse than folly, it is madness, for woman to delude themselves with the idea that their children will escape the terrible penalty of the law. The taint of their birth will surely follow them. For pure women to continue to devote themselves to their man-appointed mission of visiting the dark purlieus of society and struggling to reclaim the myriads of badly-born human beings swarming there, is as hopeless as would be an attempt to ladle the ocean with a teaspoon; as unphilosophical as was the undertaking of the old American Colonization Society, which, with great labor and pains and money, redeemed from slavery and transported to Liberia annually 400 negroes; or the Fugitive Slave Societies, which succeeded in running off to Canada, on their "under-ground railroads," some 40,000 in a whole quarter of a century. While those good men were thus toiling to rescue the 400 or the 40,000 individual victims of slavery, each day saw hundreds and each year thousands of human beings born into the terrible condition of chattelism. All see and admit now what none but the Abolitionists saw then, that the only effectual work was the entire overthrow of the system of slavery; the abrogation of the law which sanctioned the right of property in man.

In answer to my proposal to speak in one of the cities of Iowa, an earnest woman replied, "It is impossible to get you an audience; all of our best women are at present engaged in an effort to establish a 'Home for the Friendless.' All the churches are calling for the entire time of their members to get up

fairs, dinners, concerts, etc., to raise money. In fact, even our woman suffragists are losing themselves in devotion to some institution.”

Thus, wherever you go, you find the best women, in and out of the churches, all absorbed in establishing or maintaining benevolent or reform institutions; charitable societies, soup-houses, ragged schools, industrial schools, mite societies, mission schools—at home and abroad—homes and hospitals for the sick, the aged, the friendless, the foundling, the fallen; asylums for the orphans, the blind, the deaf and dumb, the insane, the inebriate, the idiot. The women of this century are neither idle nor indifferent. They are working with might and main to mitigate the evils which stare them in the face on every side, but much their work is without knowledge. It is aimed at the effects, not the cause; it is plucking the spoiled fruit; it is lopping off the poisonous branches of the deadly upas tree, which but makes the root more vigorous in sending out new shoots in every direction. A right understanding of physiological law teaches us that the cause must be removed; the tree must be girdled; the tap-root must be severed.

The tap-root of our social upas ties deep down at the very foundations of society. It is woman’s dependence. It is woman’s subjection. Hence, the first and only efficient work must be to emancipate woman from her enslavement. The wife must no longer echo the poet Milton’s ideal Eve, when she adoringly said to Adam, “God, thy law; thou, mine!” She must feel herself accountable to God alone for every act, fearing and obeying no man, save where his will is in line with her own highest idea of divine law.

The president of the Howard Mission School, New York, said, “Miss Anthony, it is a marvel to me that, with so much brain and common sense, you should always devote yourself to mere abstractions. Why is it that you never set yourself about some practical work?”

“Like the Howard Mission?” said I. “How many less children have you now than ten years ago?”

“Oh, no less, but many, many more.”

“Would it not be a practical work, then, to make it possible for every mother to support her children? That is my and my work; while yours is simply to pick up the poor children, leaving every girl-child to the mother’s heritage of helpless poverty and vice. My aim is to change the condition of women to self-help; yours, simply to ameliorate the ills that must inevitably grow out of dependence. My work is to lessen the numbers of the poor; yours, merely to lessen the sufferings of their tenfold increase.”

If the divine law visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, equally so does it transmit to them their virtues. Therefore, if it is through woman’s ignorant subjection to the tyranny of man’s appetites and passions that the life-current of the race is corrupted, then must it be through her intelligent emancipation that the race shall be redeemed from the curse, and her children and children’s children rise up to call her blessed. When the mother of Christ shall be made the true model of womanhood and motherhood, when the office of maternity shall be held sacred and the mother shall consecrate herself, as did Mary, to the one idea of bringing forth the Christ-child, then, and not till then, will this earth see a new order of men and women, prone to good rather evil.

I am full and firm in the revelation that it is through woman that the race is to be redeemed. And it is because of this faith that I ask for her immediate and unconditional emancipation from all political, industrial, social, and religious subjection.

“What is most needed to ensure the future greatness of the empire?” inquired Madame Campan of the great Napoleon. “Mothers!” was the terse and suggestive reply. Ralph Waldo Emerson says, “Men are what their mothers made them.” But I say, to hold mothers responsible for the character of their sons while you deny them any control over the surroundings of their lives, is worse than mockery, it is cruelty! Responsibilities grow out of right and powers. Therefore, before mothers can be held responsible for the vices and crimes, the wholesale demoralization of men, they must possess all possible rights and powers to control the conditions and circumstances of their own and their children’s lives.

A minister of Chicago sums up the infamies of that great metropolis of the West as follows: 3,000 licensed dram-shops and myriad patrons; 300 gambling houses and countless frequenters, many of them young men from the best families of the city; 79 obscene theaters, with their thousands of degraded men and boys nightly in attendance; 500 brothels, with their thousands poor girls, bodies and souls sacrificed to the 20,000 or 30,000 depraved men—young and old, married and single—who visit them. While all the participants in all these forms of iniquity, victims and victimizers alike—the women expected—may go to the polls on every election day and vote for the mayor and members of the common council, who will either continue to license these places, or fail to enforce the laws which would practically close them—not a single woman in that city may record her vote against those wretched blots on civilization. The profane, tobacco-chewing, whiskey-drinking, gambling libertines may vote, but not their virtuous, intelligent, sober, law-abiding wives and mothers!

You remember the petition of 18,000 of the best women of Chicago, a year ago, asking the common council not to repeal the Sunday Liquor Law? Why were they treated with ridicule and contempt? Why was their prayer unheeded? Was it because the honorable gentlemen had no respect for those women or their demand? No; on the contrary, many of them, doubtless, were men possessed of high regard for women, who would have been glad to aid them in their noble efforts; but the power that placed those men in office, the representatives of the saloons, brothels obscene shows, crowded the council chamber and its corridors, threatening political death to the man who should dare give his voice or his voice for the maintenance of that law. Could those 18,000 women, with the tens of thousands whom they represented, have gone to the ballot-box at the next election and voted to re-elect the men who championed their petition, and defeat those who opposed it, does any one doubt that it would have been heeded by the common council?

As the fountain can rise no higher than the spring that feeds it, so a legislative body will enact or enforce no law above the average sentiment of the people who created it. Any and every reform work is sure to lead women to the ballot-box. It is idle for them to hope to battle successfully against the monster evils of society until they shall be armed with weapons equal to those of the enemy—votes and money. Archimedes said, “Give to me a fulcrum on which to plant my lever, and I will move the world.” And I say, give to woman the ballot, the political fulcrum, on which to plant her moral lever, and she will lift the world into a nobler purer atmosphere.

Two great necessities forced this nation to extend justice and equality to the negro: First, Military necessity, which compelled the abolition of the crime and curse of slavery, before the rebellion could be overcome. Second, Political necessity, which required the enfranchisement of the newly-freed men, before the work of reconstruction could begin. The third is now pressing, Moral necessity—to emancipate woman, before Social Purity, the nation's safeguard, ever can be established.