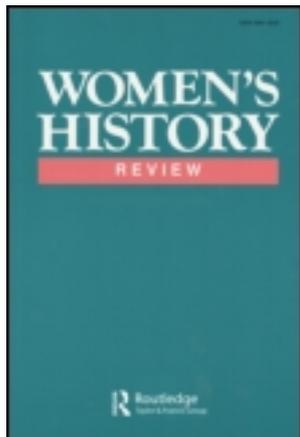


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Lucy Bland ^a

^a University of North London, United Kingdom

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'Purifying' the Public World: feminist vigilantes in late Victorian England

LUCY BLAND

University of North London, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT In late nineteenth-century England, a number of feminists confronted prostitution through the closing of brothels and the expulsion of prostitutes from places of entertainment. Feminist historians have either understood this behaviour as reflective of feminists' powerlessness within the largely non-feminist movement for social purity, or they have neglected the behaviour and concentrated on the aspects of these women's work that appear more positive to feminists today. Neither approach attempts to understand *why* women took this more repressive stance *and* thought of it as feminist. To understand the actions of these women, it is necessary to recognise that their vision of a 'purified' public and private world was often informed by religious beliefs and adherence to temperance. Concern with the morality of public space also related to women's desire for safety in public places. And their 'repressive' and statist actions related in part to feminist philanthropists' changing attitude toward local government.

In 1894, two American male guests of social purity feminist Mrs Laura Ormiston Chant complained to her that on their recent visit to the Empire Theatre of Varieties, a large and famous music hall in Leicester Square, they "were continuously accosted and solicited by women and ... very much shocked by the want of clothing in the ballet". In autumn of that year, along with Mrs Amelia Hicks, national organiser for the British Women's Temperance Association, Mrs Chant set off for the Empire music hall to establish the veracity of their claim. Bonneted and in smart but 'discreet' evening dress, she was determined not to stand out as an outsider, a 'prying prude'; in an earlier visit, her 'day' dress betrayed her as other than a regular patron of the music hall - "I was a marked woman". Her disguise did not stretch to the wearing of décolletage, however; "No one has carried

on a more consistent campaign against the normal style of evening dress than I have. Ever since I was 21 I have adjured bare neck and arms".[1]

Laura Chant – prominent speaker for women’s suffrage, temperance, purity and Liberal politics – had visited music halls before. From June 1888 until April 1889 *The Vigilance Record* ran a series entitled ‘Amused London’, chronicling the sallying forth of Mrs Chant and a woman companion to various music halls in both the West and East Ends. What she found there may have amused London, but it certainly did not amuse Mrs Chant. She was no more amused by the Empire theatre in her visit in 1894. Not only were some of the performers revealing too much flesh, but worst of all, prostitutes, “very much painted and gorgeously dressed”, were present in the audience – or rather, in the auditorium, since they were not strictly a *part* of the audience. According to Mrs Chant, they were not there to watch the performances; they came to watch for potential clients.[2]

In October 1894 London County Council (LCC) Licensing Committee met to consider applications for the renewal of music hall licences. Licensing of London’s approximately 400 music halls, a function formerly held by magistrates, had passed to the Council on its inauguration as administrator of London under the 1888 Local Government Act. Mrs Chant attended the meeting in order to challenge the renewal of the Empire’s licence, on grounds of indecency on the stage and disorderliness in the auditorium. Although bent on eliminating ‘demoralising’ entertainment, Mrs Chant was at pains to stress that she was not against amusement *per se*, insisting: “I am no Puritan”.[3]

Not all feminists applauded Mrs Chant’s actions. Josephine Butler, for example, informed a close friend: “I tried hard to keep out of the ‘Empire’ conflict ... I continue to protest that I do not believe that any real reform will ever be reached by outward repression”.[4] A ‘repressive’ response to moral matters had been troubling Josephine Butler for several years. Her concern was all the greater because a number of *feminists*, once apparently *laissez-faire* and anti-statist in matters of sexuality and morality, were now, in the 1880s and 1890s, adopting a more repressive stance and were taking to closing brothels, clearing the streets of prostitutes and attempting to ‘clean up’ indecent leisure pursuits, from literature to music halls. Why were these women acting in this way?

The Criminal Law Amendment Act and the NVA

Many feminists in this period held as one of their key objectives the ‘purification’ and ‘civilisation’ of both public and private worlds. As predominantly middle and upper class, feminists’ wish for greater ‘civilisation’ and morality could be interpreted by historians as partly related to their classes’ current fear of a working-class uprising. The 1880s was a period of low profit, high unemployment, severe cyclical depression and a

chronic housing shortage. This economic instability, combined with political developments – the rise of socialism, trade unionism and the immigration into the East End of foreign anarchists and socialists – prompted the propertied classes to attempt a remaking of working-class culture, especially the encouragement of the working class into a ‘middle-class’ respectability.[5] This was to be achieved through legislation and philanthropy. Immoral behaviour was viewed with as much suspicion as overtly political beliefs and activities. Indeed, Victorian moral and social reform converged,[6] with the desire for moral reform present even in the pursuit of what might appear to us today as essentially *material* reform. For example, the concern to improve working-class housing partly related to the belief that overcrowding encouraged incest and juvenile prostitution.[7]

While the respectable working classes were wooed, the casual poor – the ‘dangerous classes’ – were policed more coercively, and their behaviour subjected to greater intervention. The social purity movement of the 1880s was part of this new interventionist approach. All this may give us a small part of the explanation for the interventionist activities of certain middle-class social purity feminists. However, these women were not simply acting as members of the middle class, but also, and crucially, as religious feminists with a history of philanthropy. Thus for a greater understanding of their actions, it is important to look at what informed their vision of purified public and private worlds, and what *means* appeared appropriate to further the desired end. The vision of social purity feminists was partly shaped by certain religious beliefs, and frequently by adherence to ‘temperance’, in which women were seen as the victims of male alcoholic abuse. That some of these feminists’ actions took a repressive and statist form needs to be related in part to their heritage of philanthropy, their views concerning female sexuality, and their changing attitude towards local government and the state. But first, what exactly was this ‘repressive’ activity in which a number of feminists were now engaged?

The story of this apparent volte-face needs to start earlier, in the 1870s. Throughout the 1870s, Josephine Butler’s energy was directed towards the abolition of the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts. The legislation had been introduced in the 1860s to regulate prostitution in the hope of countering venereal disease amongst the army and the navy. The Acts entailed the forced inspection, detention and treatment of women who were suspected of being prostitutes in certain military depots. By the 1870s, opposition to the Acts had sprung up in the form of a coalition of middle-class evangelicals, working-class radicals and an active group of feminists headed by Butler. Despite the difficulties entailed in such diverse groups attempting to work together, sufficient MPs had been converted to the repeal cause to win the CD Acts’ suspension in 1883,[8]

In 1885, after 15 years of fighting for the abolition of the CD Acts, there was much optimism that their repeal was close at hand. In her address

to a meeting in the spring of that year, Josephine Butler spoke of a new concern - 'repressionists' in their midst: those bent on abolishing prostitution and introducing moral behaviour through repression. At this point however, she was adamant that:

these people are not our enemies ... mistaken as we think they are in their methods, [they] are still honestly desirous of getting rid of prostitution; ... the advocates of the Contagious Diseases Acts desire the very opposite. They believe prostitution to be a necessity ... It is the fervent desire of my heart to win and gain over entirely to our side all that crowd of repressionists who are now ... going in a distinctly wrong direction ...[9]

The CD Acts were repealed in 1886. A year later, Butler's concern with repressive actions remained. It was now voiced specifically in relation to Britain's central social purity organisation, the National Vigilance Association (NVA), which at this time numbered many repealers amongst its members [10], Josephine Butler included, although her membership was always only nominal. The NVA's work had many dimensions. It provided support to victims in cases of sexual assault and rape, including the offer of a solicitor's services. It argued for the introduction of women magistrates and women police, and campaigned to change various aspects of the law concerning sexual offences.[11] Josephine Butler praised the NVA's activities in all these respects; her unease lay primarily with another aspect of its work: the enforcement of those clauses of the Criminal Law Amendment Act concerning brothels.

Butler was not alone in her concern. Veteran feminist and repealer Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy was similarly worried about "those with whom for 17 years I have worked for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts", who, "by a strange perversion, now sanction and command the means and the methods of a cruel repression".[12] Mrs Chant was one such example - a member of both the feminist repeal organisation the Ladies National Association, and the NVA. Ten years later, having lost hope long ago of winning such people, Butler warned her colleagues:

Beware of 'Purity Societies' ... ready to accept and endorse any amount of inequality in the laws, any amount of coercive and degrading treatment of their fellow creatures in the fatuous belief that you can oblige human beings to be moral by *force*. [13] (her emphasis)

It was still the NVA to whom she was principally referring.

The NVA had been set up by social purists in order to ensure the enforcement of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. The Act had hurriedly passed through parliament in the wake of W. T. Stead's sensationalist 'revelations' in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July of that year on the extent of London's juvenile and coerced prostitution. There had been unsuccessful attempts to secure a Criminal Law Amendment Bill for a

couple of years, each Bill aiming to raise the age of consent and reform the law on sexual assault. Most feminists supported these measures, but the Bills had also contained various repressive clauses relating to soliciting and brothels. The Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights (known since its beginnings simply as the 'Vigilance Association'), of which Josephine Butler and many other repealers had been founder members in 1871, had always been wary of each new version of the Bill. Despite its chief aim being opposition to 'over-legislation' in the name of personal freedom, it gave guarded support to the version of the bill that finally got through. (Incidentally, it made no reference to the clause that criminalised 'indecent acts' between men.) However, it was soon worrying about the enforcement of the Act's clauses on brothels.

Suppression of Brothels

The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 outlawed brothel keeping and the procurement of women for prostitution. Under summary proceedings, brothel keepers and their agents could be sentenced with a fine up to £20 or 3 months imprisonment with hard labour for the first offence, and £40 or 4 months for the second and subsequent convictions. Prosecutions of brothels rose dramatically: in the 10 years prior to the Act, an average of 86 brothels were prosecuted in England and Wales each year; from the year of the Act up to the First World War the average number rose to more than 1200.[14] Landlords could be held responsible under the Act if they knowingly let houses for the purpose of prostitution. Rising pressure on such landlords from vigilance groups led to a wariness about letting property to 'suspect' women (such a label would apply to most women living without men). This created a housing problem not only for women working as prostitutes and living in lodging-house brothels, but also for any women living with other women, and even women living on their own, although the latter did not constitute a 'brothel'. Self-contained flats did not come under the legal definition of a 'brothel' either, but over-cautious landlords apparently did not make, or know about, the distinction. The situation resulted inevitably - and ironically, given the aims of the instigators of the Act - in many prostitutes being forced to resort to setting up house with pimps, or, as they were called, 'bullies', to provide a cover for their work. Pimps were only too eager to give their 'protection'.

As brothels closed, women were being thrown out into the streets with nowhere to go. Some of these women were being subsequently sent to prison on charges of vagrancy. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy pointed out that brothels "after all, are the only 'homes' known to many hapless women", and "the very first step will be that she is 'taken up' by some policeman as 'an idle and disorderly person'". Elmy warned that these women could then be inspected under the Prisons Act, resulting in the

virtual re-introduction of the CD Acts – Acts that her “old fellow workers” had once so vehemently “denounced and resisted”.^[15]

In contrast, over the following two years the NVA’s *The Vigilance Record*, edited by Mrs Ormiston Chant, was full of the ‘good work’ being done by vigilance groups in closing brothels. Yet the NVA faced a recurrent problem: prostitutes’ lack of inclination “to leave their sinful life”. Attempts at ‘rescue’ work seem to have been decidedly unsuccessful so far as the inhabitants of closed-down brothels were concerned. The outcome of the NVA’s closing of a ‘colony’ of brothels in Aldershot in 1888 was a case in point. Asked what would happen to the 400 girls and children rendered homeless by their action, William Coote, the NVA’s secretary, replied in an open court that “he was prepared to take charge of the whole of the girls and children ... provided they were anxious to make an effort to lead an honourable and honest life”. Only one girl took up the offer. Of those prostitutes unwilling to be ‘saved’, 90 marched through Aldershot in protest, four abreast, singing as they went. *The Vigilance Record* was shocked: “a very bad sight was witnessed”.^[16] The Personal Rights Association (formerly the Vigilance Association; it had renamed itself so as not to be confused with the NVA), christened the NVA “vigilant stampers upon the feeble”, and observed that these ‘stampers’ unfortunately included women, notably Mrs Millicent Fawcett and Mrs Ormiston Chant.^[17]

Prostitution on the Streets

In a pamphlet written in the 1880s, feminist NVA member Dr Elizabeth Blackwell differentiated between three methods of dealing with prostitution. Firstly, she referred to the ‘let alone’ system, (*laissez-faire*). In operation in London, it encouraged the streets to be “a public exchange of debauchery for vicious men and women, [with] brothels allowed to flourish and multiply”. Secondly, she presented the female regulation system – the system favoured on the Continent and in operation in the UK under the Contagious Diseases Acts. She was adamantly opposed to this method too because it fostered “corruption and ... moral degradation”. The third system – “the only righteous method of dealing with vice by means of law” – was the repressive system.^[18] However, she wanted the system to operate only where it had public backing, and the police were subject to citizens’ control – where they were “servants of the people”.

By the early twentieth century, the NVA clearly thought that this stage had been reached. (Dr Blackwell’s opinion on this is unknown; she was in her eighties, and had retired to Hastings.) In 1901 the NVA and the Watch Committee of the newly founded London Public Morality Council, backed unanimously by Westminster City Council, recommended to the Home Secretary that “vigorous action should be at once taken to clear the streets of prostitutes”.^[19] The Home Secretary complied. The Watch Committee

included feminists Lady Isabel Somerset (leader of the British Women's Temperance Association), Millicent Fawcett (leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) and Salvationist Mrs Florence Booth. 1901-6 saw the most intense repression of prostitutes in London, with women being convicted *without* proof of annoyance. According to the current law, solicitation was outlawed if there was 'annoyance' to an inhabitant or passer-by, and the annoyed party was meant to appear in court. Now, however, women were being convicted on police word alone. Indeed, the NVA and the Public Morality Council were recommending that this practice be enshrined in law through the abolition of the 'annoyance' clause.[20] The campaign had also developed a racist slant, both organisations claiming that a large majority of prostitutes and brothel keepers were foreign. They welcomed the 1905 Aliens Act.

By this time the NVA and the Public Morality Council had developed excellent relations with the police. NVA branches throughout Britain co-operated with local police over the prosecution of brothels, street prostitution, obscene books, pictures and displays, as well as exchanging information in relation to cases of sexual offences.[21] Although few feminists were still involved, their more repressive actions in the 1880s and 1890s had made their contribution.

Religion, Temperance and Feminism

I have suggested that to understand why certain feminists took the action they did, it is necessary to begin by considering their religious beliefs. At face value, being amongst the most patriarchal of discourses, Christianity appeared to offer little to women. Yet many nineteenth-century feminists drew on Christian moral precepts to challenge the amorality of secular capitalist and male-dominated society. The Evangelical emphasis on personal morality and a moralising role for women within the home, gave women a language and a voice with which to demand moral behaviour from those within that home, including their husbands. While ideologically contributing further to women's domestic confinement, this emphasis simultaneously gave women a sense of mission and spiritual worth, and thereby a strong incentive to engage in philanthropy – to enter the homes of others in the pursuit of greater morality.[22] Thus somewhat ironically, religion acted as an instigator for middle-class women's entry into the public sphere and the 'purifying' of that sphere.

Social purity feminists frequently united their religious beliefs with a commitment to 'temperance'. By 'temperance' was meant 'moderation in the consumption of alcohol', although by the late nineteenth century for many temperance workers it meant 'total abstinence'. The United States saw the direct linking of feminism with Evangelical religion and temperance teachings – 'Gospel Temperance' – in the form of the Women's Christian

Temperance Union. The British Women's Temperance Association made similar connections, although the religious rhetoric was less pronounced. Set up in 1876, by 1892 the BWTA claimed 570 branches and 50,000 members.[23] Feminists cited male alcoholism as a major cause of men's violence towards women. As Philippa Levine points out, it was again a challenge to a double standard "that privileged male preference and pleasure over female health, safety and liberty".[24] The emphasis of the temperance movement earlier in the century had been on women using their influence at home to turn their husbands, brothers and sons away from drink. Now feminists called for women to move their temperance campaign into the *public* sphere, both in defence of the home (a 'maternal struggle'), but also in the quest for greater safety for women on the streets.

Women's Work within Philanthropy and Local Government

Earlier I suggested that women's role within philanthropy and local government also played a part in the move of certain feminists towards a repressive moral politics. Throughout the nineteenth century, feminists, including feminist repealers, were often engaged in philanthropic activities. By the end of the century, many of them began to move into local government.[25] It was a logical move, for they saw local government as they saw philanthropy, as involving the extension of women's home influence - their domesticating and 'civilising' role - into the wider world. Women active in local government thought of themselves as engaging in municipal housekeeping. Whatever particular opinions feminists held about the state in the 1870s, by the 1880s and 1890s the attitudes of many were changing. With women's entry into local government, and their entry into the national government supposedly in the offing, their hostility towards the phenomenon of state intervention began to wane. Included here was their attitude towards the police. They believed that if women could be an active *part* of state bodies, including the police force (indeed there were feminists arguing for women police from the late nineteenth century[26]) these bodies would be transformed accordingly. Such was the optimism of feminists of the day. Note also that many social purity feminists defined themselves as Liberals, and thus their changing attitude toward the state, local and national, was probably also informed by the current changes in Liberal attitudes to the state, in particular the rise of 'new liberalism' and its view that individual liberties and true 'equality of opportunity' could only be realised through greater state intervention.[27]

It may surprise readers today that women, excluded from central government until 1918, were able to play an important part in local government several decades earlier. From 1869, unmarried and widowed female ratepayers were able to vote in local elections, although it was not until 1907 that women were finally allowed to stand for election in borough

and county councils. However, from 1870 *any* woman could stand for the new school boards, but they had to be a ratepayer to vote for them. Thus in this case it was easier for a woman to stand as a candidate than to be a voter! Female ratepayers could vote and stand for Poor Law boards; encouraged by the Women Guardians' Society, there were over 800 elected women by 1895. As Patricia Hollis points out,[28] by the mid-1880s women on school boards and Poor Law boards were helping to shape education and poor relief, but the built environment - its streets, houses, public health and policing - was still outside their remit, and in the hands of (male) town councillors. If women could not be councillors themselves, a number were at least determined to pressurise male councillors in the pursuit of certain objectives. What objectives were these?

An examination of the membership of the Women Guardians' Society and the Women's Local Government Society reveals that members were involved in a network of Liberal, philanthropic, temperance and social purity organisations, including allegiance to the NVA. Mrs Ormiston Chant, for example, belonged to the Women's Liberal Federation, the Ladies National Association and the British Women's Temperance Association, and she was a founder member of both the Women Guardians' Society and the NVA. (Indeed the NVA actively supported the election of female Poor Law Guardians.) Thus the objectives of women active in local government tended to relate to issues of morality, of 'social purity', to use the term of the period. The London County Council (LCC) was perceived as a possible vehicle for the furtherance of social purity concerns, not least in its role as the licenser of London's music halls. To ensure 'decency', Mrs Chant and other members of the NVA encouraged the newly created LCC's 'Theatre and Music Halls Committee' to "vigilantly watch our entertainments, and vigorously repress whatever is clearly contrary to good morals".[29]

The LCC did not need much encouragement, for until 1907 it was controlled by the 'Progressive' Party, a progressive alliance between Liberal, Fabian and Labour representatives. Known as 'Municipal Puritans' or 'Municipal Socialists', the Progressive councillors were mainly Non-Conformist and in favour of 'temperance', seeing alcoholism and moral corruption as the chief causes of working-class social unrest.[30] They were as keen as any member of the NVA, indeed several of the councillors *were* members of the NVA, to rid music halls of impropriety, vice and alcohol and turn them into sites for 'wholesome' family entertainment. The Progressives institutionalised vigilance in 1890 with the introduction of an LCC inspectorate. The 23 inspectors were instructed "to devote their attention chiefly to the nature of the performance and to the character and conduct of the audience, especially the female portion thereof".[31] The LCC was also in favour of morally concerned citizens engaging in voluntary inspection - precisely the kind of civic activity being enthusiastically undertaken by Laura Chant.

Given its moral politics, it was no surprise that the LCC upheld Mrs Chant's complaint at its Licensing Committee in October. After all, the Empire was the most notorious of upper-class Englishmen's pleasure grounds, anathema to the Municipal Socialist ethic. The 'Empire' was informed that its licence would only be renewed if alcoholic drink was banned from the auditorium, and the Promenade – the site of Empire assignations between prostitutes and clients – was abolished. The public's response was one of outrage, if the 170 letters sent to *The Daily Telegraph* are anything to go by. A number of these letters labelled Mrs Chant a dangerous example of the 'New Woman'.^[32] The Empire's response was the erection of a canvas screen between the auditorium and the bar, thus fencing off the audience from the drink and the prostitutes. The next week, however, the music hall was invaded by a band of upper-class men, headed by the youthful Winston Churchill, who proceeded to tear down the flimsy screen. The partition was rebuilt, but the following year the Empire was able to secure an unconditional licence once again. This time, protest from various social purity feminists was to no avail.^[33]

The shift in various feminists' attitudes towards the state contributes one small clue as to why certain women turned to repressive action. Another piece to the puzzle lies in the very *practice* of philanthropy which these women brought with them to their work on issues of morality. Whatever the benefits to its recipients, philanthropy clearly entailed their subjection to specific forms of surveillance, including the imposition of middle-class norms of domesticity. To transform the character of a class, it was thought necessary to influence the disciplining of children, and to persuade mothers to play a key role in such disciplining. Positively, as Judith Walkowitz points out,^[34] the encouragement of 'women's home influence' provided the rationale for a mother's right to control sexual access to her daughters thereby subverting the man's authority in the home. Negatively, it promoted a custodial, if caring relationship between mothers and daughters relating to the middle class Victorian idea of the sanctity of childhood (which working-class parents were frequently thought to be violating), and a view of adolescence as a period of social dependency – in contrast to the reality of most working-class (employed) adolescents' lives. To the middle classes, *all* girls needed 'protection', or rather, 'protective surveillance' – from themselves, from men, and from 'unsuitable' company. These attitudes tended to pervade the actions of those feminists involved in social purity campaigning. The desire to administer 'protective surveillance' was likely to be 'repressive' in its implications. It was also crucially related to the dominant ideas about female sexuality.

Female Modesty and Sexuality

Josephine Butler and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy may have been horrified by their former colleagues' repressive actions, but most Butlerites and repressive moralists shared an attitude towards female sexuality that had 'protective surveillance' within its logic. They saw women as 'pure', inherently modest, and barely sexual – unless they had the misfortune to 'fall'. To say that a woman had 'fallen' implied that she had lost her modesty and become quite 'other'. Despite recognising the possible contribution of financial hardship in women's resort to prostitution, feminists tended to view a woman's 'fall' as heralding her total transformation. The position of the feminist social purity organisation, the Moral Reform Union was not untypical:

Modesty and a chaste deportment are a young girl's birth right and her choicest adornment ... But when the beast and the harlot have taken the woman's place, there is no depth of shameful sensuality into which she is not prepared to sink.[35]

However, before "the beast and harlot" had "taken the woman's place", the prostitute who was a *victim* of circumstances could still be saved – whether the circumstances be economic hardship or male 'seduction'. She could never of course be *fully* saved, for "purity and innocence once lost we know but too well can never be regained". According to Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, prostitutes, if *not* caught in time, became 'demons' – "human tigers who delight in destruction and torture".[36] Blackwell had clear ideas on the need to distinguish between the woman who was determined to remain a prostitute and the woman who was prepared to change. She offered this advice: "The tenderest compassion may be shown to the poor creature who *ceases* to be a prostitute; ... but do nothing to raise the condition of prostitutes as such, any more than you would try to improve the condition of murderers and thieves"[37] (her emphasis). The distinction between the reclaimable and the unreclaimable prostitute was akin to philanthropy's distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor.

Such ideas informed Laura Chant's view of the performers and prostitutes at the Empire. In relation to the performers, she was sure that "the unhappy girls in the ballet and choruses ... had lost something if they did not feel the loss of clothing".[38] She was implying, of course, that they had lost their modesty and sense of shame. And if "the unhappy girls" were 'rescued' in time, they might still be saved. Her greatest condemnation of fallen womanhood she reserved for the Empire prostitutes. She was insistent that there was a clear distinction to be made between women such as these, who were engaged in 'gilded vice', and poor women who worked the streets. 'High class' prostitutes, supposedly making good money from their trade, transgressed the ideals of femininity; to Laura Chant they had calculatingly

chosen their profession. Street-walkers, however, she saw as *victims* of economic circumstance and/or unscrupulous men. When accused of forcing the Empire prostitutes back out onto the streets and thus *adding* to street prostitution, she defended herself by claiming that these women were not off the streets in the first place, since the Empire explicitly stated that street-walkers were refused entry. She referred to the 'Empire' prostitutes as those "who minister entirely to the demands of lust, and who love darkness and secrecy because their lives are evil".[39] They were Dr Blackwell's 'demons'. As for the street-walker, Laura Chant was at pains to emphasise that her house had "always been open as a refuge to the poor creatures". Although innocence could never of course be regained, some street-walkers were reclaimable. The Empire women were beyond the pale.

Women and Public Spaces

Laura Chant's concern was partly about the danger of demoralisation, but it was surely also about the desire to transform the streets and sites of public entertainment into places where women could move freely without fear of attack or of the label of unrespectability. As Elaine Showalter notes "Victorian ladies were not permitted to cross urban, class and sexual boundaries".[40] Crossing the boundaries could spell death for women - the 'moral' message of the 1888 Jack the Ripper murders.[41] The term 'public woman' was used interchangeably with the terms prostitute, street-walker and actress; they all implied that the public world excluded respectable women, and was reserved for men and those women who 'immorally' serviced them. Indeed women were literally excluded from many male public preserves, such as mens' clubs and public houses. Yet 'respectable' women in this period were increasingly entering the public domain; they were there in various guises - as philanthropists, missionaries, Poor Law guardians, clerical workers, civil servants, teachers.

Feminists then, as now, wanted the streets and other public places to be safe for women, both literally and symbolically. For a woman to be unable to venture into such places without fearing attack, being labelled 'immoral', or suspected of being a prostitute, necessarily acted as a constraint upon her freedom of movement, Olive Schreiner, for example, related how she was suspected by a policeman of being a prostitute when walking one evening in London with a male friend. Her lack of gloves and hat were taken as additional signs of her 'unrespectability'.[42] Breaking down the constraints on freedom of movement was obviously part of the feminist agenda. Just as Mary Wollstonecraft had argued that rights of 'man' must include the rights of 'woman', so too did these feminists demand *women's* right to protection as a basic civil liberty.

Victims of Vice and their Liberty

What about the liberty and civil rights of the prostitute? The NVA, and the feminists active within it, such as Laura Chant, Millicent Fawcett and Elizabeth Blackwell, never thought of their vigilance work as a curtailment of prostitutes' liberty. On the contrary, they assumed that their removal of 'vice' *helped* the victims; their actions offered the hand of reclamation to reclaimable prostitutes, and gave freedom from immorality to that other group of 'victims of vice', namely 'ordinary citizens', including respectable women like themselves, who wished to be able to enter public spaces without fear. Millicent Fawcett saw the liberty of 'vice' and the liberty of the subject as polar opposites, especially where the subject was a *woman*: "Some ... appear to think that any curtailment of the liberty of vice is an unjustifiable curtailment of the liberty of the subject ... I think that *freedom* in vice is an unjustifiable curtailment of the liberty of the subject".[43]

While the liberty of the 'ordinary citizen', the citizen as ordinary *woman*, was at risk in the face of the unregenerate prostitute and other agents of vice, the regenerate prostitute needed *her* 'liberty' *rescued from* a life of vice. 'Saving' the prostitute was seen as the restoration of her liberty. Even where prostitutes were clearly not being 'saved', but rendered homeless, the NVA did not view the project as a failure. The prostitutes concerned were labelled hardened and unreclaimable, as in the case of "the very bad sight" of the Aldershot protest march. In the case of the prostitutes at the Empire, repressive purity feminists did not think of them as victims either, but as women who had calculatingly chosen a life of 'vice', and whose livelihoods deserved to be destroyed.

Conclusion

The repressive purity feminists shared with their less repressive sisters the desire to bring about a transformation in public and private morality, especially in sexual relations between men and women. They appeared to believe that one of the best means to this end, at this point in time, lay with the 'domestication' and 'civilising' of the public world through philanthropic and statist interventions. Their wish to transform the public world for the benefit of all, though especially of course for women, was rooted in a wider feminist vision in which women had freedom of movement in all spheres of society, and the issues of men's behaviour towards women was squarely on the political agenda. One part of their work entailed campaigning for women's entry into government at both local and national levels. Another part of their work involved addressing issues of sexual violence - providing support to victims of male assault and campaigning for changes in unjust laws. The aspect of their work towards which feminists today might feel

more ambivalent was the attempt to eliminate prostitution through a focus predominantly on the *prostitute* rather than her male client. In their approach to prostitution, their attitude tended to be one of 'protective surveillance'; this related to their views on female sexuality, and their concomitant distinction between repentant and unrepentant prostitutes, or victims and calculating 'demons'. Coupled with their optimistic belief that their own presence within state bodies would radically change the nature of these bodies, repressive purity feminists acted in and through the state in an effort to transform the sexual morality of the time.

These women cannot be dismissed as simply 'prying prudes' or 'interfering busibodies', however undesirable the means to their feminist ends may seem to us today. It is worth recognising that in our approach to current issues of pornography, prostitution and the sex industry, many of the same dilemmas and difficulties remain as to how to use the law and how to take issue with beliefs and practices that we, as feminists, find unacceptable. As in the past, there is no one feminist position, and there is no one feminist answer to these problems.

Notes

An earlier version of this article appears as: Feminists vigilantes in late Victorian England, in C. Smart (Ed.) *Regulating Womanhood: historical essays on marriage, motherhood and sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992)

[1] L. Chant (1894) *The Woman's Signal*, 1 November; L. Chant (1895) *Why We Attacked the Empire* (London: Horace Marshall & Son).

[2] Chant, *Why We Attacked the Empire*.

[3] Chant, *The Woman's Signal*.

[4] J. Butler to Mary Priestman, Letter, 5 November 1894.

[5] See G. Stedman Jones (1974) Working-class culture and working-class politics in London, 1870-1900, *Journal of Social History*, Summer; G. Stedman Jones (1976) *Outcast London* (Oxford: Peregrine Books).

[6] See B. Harrison (1984) State intervention and moral reform in nineteenth-century England, in P. Hollis (Ed.) *Pressure from Without* (London: Edward Arnold).

[7] Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 224.

[8] See J. Walkowitz (1980) *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[9] J. Butler (1885) speech at Exeter Hall, reported in *The Shield*, 11 April.

[10] *The Sentinel*, April 1887.

[11] See S. Jeffreys (1985) *The Spinster and Her Enemies* (London: Pandora Press).

[12] E. Wolstenholme Elmy (1886) *Journal of the Personal Rights Association*, May.

[13] J. Butler, quoted in J. Higson (1897) *The Story of a Beginning* (London: SPCK).

[14] J. Bristow (1977) *Vice and Vigilance*, p. 154 (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan).

[15] E. Wolstenholme Elmy (1886) *Journal of the Personal Rights Association*, May.

[16] *Personal Rights Journal*, January 1889.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] E. Blackwell (1883) *Right and Wrong Methods of Dealing with the Social Evil* (Hastings: D. Williams).

[19] London Council for the Promotion of Public Morality, *Annual Report*, February 1902.

[20] See *The Vigilance Record*, October 1906.

[21] London Council for the Promotion of Public Morality, *Annual Report*, February 1903.

[22] L. Davidoff & C. Hall (1987) *Family Fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson)

[23] P. Hollis (1987) *Ladies Elect: women in English local government, 1895-1914*, p. 48 (London: Clarendon Press) See A. Sebestyen (1980) Women against the demon drink, *Spare Rib*, 100; L. Shiman (1986) 'Changes are dangerous': women and temperance in Victorian England, in G. Malmgreen (Ed.) *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930* (London: Croom Helm).

[24] P. Levine (1990) *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, p. 87 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

[25] See Hollis, *Ladies Elect*.

[26] L. Bland (1985) In the name of protection: the policing of women in the First World War, in C. Smart & J. Brophy (Eds) *Women in Law: exploration in law, family and sexuality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

[27] See J. Clarke et al (1987) *Ideologies of Welfare* (London: Hutchinson).

[28] Hollis, *Ladies Elect*.

[29] *The Vigilance Record*, April 1889.

[30] See P. Summerfield (1981) The Effingham Arms and the empire: deliberate selection in the evolution of music halls in London, in E. & S. Yeo (Eds) *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914* (Brighton: Harvester).

[31] Quoted in S. Pennybacker (1986) 'It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it': the London County Council and the music halls, in Peter Bailey (Ed.) *Music Hall: the business of pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press).

[32] See J. Stokes (1989) *In the Nineties* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf).

[33] See E. S. Turner (1950) *Roads to Ruin: the shocking history of social reform* (London: Michael Joseph).

[34] J. Walkowitz (1984) Male virtue and female vice: feminism and the politics of prostitution in nineteenth-century Britain, in A. Snitow et al (Eds) *Desire: the politics of sexuality* (London: Virago).

[35] Moral Reform Union, *Fallen Woman!* (n.d.).

[36] E. Blackwell (1887) *Purchase of Women: the great economic blunder* (London: John Kensit).

[37] E. Blackwell (1881) *Rescue Work in Relation to Prostitution and Disease* (London).

[38] Chant, *The Woman's Signal*.

[39] Ibid.

[40] E. Showalter (1991) *Sexual Anarchy: gender and culture at the fin de siecle* (London: Bloomsbury).

[41] J. Walkowitz (1982) Jack the Ripper and the myth of male violence, *Feminist Studies*, 8, Autumn.

[42] Olive Schreiner (1885) To the Editor, *Daily News*, 28 December, reprinted in R. Rive (Ed.) (1988) *Olive Schreiner's Letters. Vol 1. 1871-1899*, pp. 70-71 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[43] M. Fawcett (1893) *The Vigilance Record*, June.