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Mothers of All Children: Women Reformers and the Rise of Juvenile Courts in Progressive Era America

Elizabeth J. Clapp

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The establishment of juvenile courts in cities across the United States was one of the earliest social welfare reforms of the Progressive Era. The first juvenile court law was passed in Illinois in 1899. Within a decade twenty-two other states had passed similar laws, based on the Illinois example. *Mothers of All Children* examines this movement, focusing especially on the role of women reformers and the importance of gender consciousness in influencing the shape of reform. Until recently historians have assumed that male reformers dominated many of the Progressive Era social reforms. *Mothers of All Children* goes beyond simply writing women back into the history of the juvenile court movement to reveal the complexity of their involvement. Some women operated within nineteenth-century ideals of motherhood and domesticity while others, trained in the social sciences and living in the poor neighborhoods of America's cities, took a more pragmatic approach. Despite these differences, Clapp finds a common maternalist approach that distinguished women reformers from their male counterparts. Women were more willing to use the state to deal with wayward children, whereas men were more commonly involved as supporters of women reformers' initiatives rather than being themselves the initiators of reform. Firmly located in the context of recent scholarship on American women's history, *Mothers of All Children* has broad implications for American women's political history and the history of the welfare state.

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