

## WOMEN IN THE JUVENILE COURT

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A woman came into the court the other day to get information about our work and about what she must do to get a position in the probation office. While talking to her, she expressed surprise that we had any *men* officers, saying she had always supposed the juvenile court was made up of *all women* except possibly the judge who, she knew, was usually of the male persuasion. This was the first time it had ever occurred to me that anyone could have imagined the work as being done entirely by women, because when I first went into the work in St. Louis, I found a man probation officer had been visiting some of the girls, that he made investigations in cases where the delinquent girl was involved; and then I heard that it was not uncommon in juvenile courts for men officers to be sent to the homes of these delinquent girls to get information and reports. It seemed on the very face of it as if this procedure would have been considered unwise, but so do people look on such things at one time, when a few years later they would not countenance them.

There are two capacities in which women serve in our juvenile court: that of probation officer looking after delinquent girls and supervising neglected children, and of hearing the reports of and visiting the delinquent boy up to the age of fourteen, and that of judge or referee in the cases of delinquent girls. We make this age limit because we think that the boy up to the time he leaves school is better off in the hands of a woman, though this rule is not arbitrary, and some of our men officers take charge of small boys; but, with very few exceptions, we believe women should not take, as probationers, boys over fourteen, this age being better understood by the men, the problems of this age whether physical, mental or economic, being better handled by men and the men appealing more than women to boys over that age; although even here the rule is not cast-iron. There may be cases in which the big boy having a pretty good sort of a father but no mother, or worse than none, may profit by having the friendship of a strong fine woman

who can give him the kind of attention he has missed in his own home. Then, on the other hand, there are cases of boys under fourteen where there may be no father but a good mother, and here again the rule need not be followed, and we will assume that this boy may do better through having a man for his probation officer, in order to supply that temperament and point of view which he does not get in his own home, and the lack of which shows in his make-up.

These questions should allow of much latitude, should be treated with as much individuality as possible, and the individual probation officer be so carefully chosen that these matters could be safely left to her discretion and judgment, so that she would be able to see when a child would be better off under some other officer than herself, and make the transfer because of specific reasons. These transfers may be made to advantage from a woman to a man officer and vice versa, or from officer to officer according to temperament and intuition.

I recall one boy of school age with whom I labored to get acquainted. Every time he came to report or I went to his home, I had to begin all over again—there seemed to be a barrier between our natures. I turned him over to a man officer who shortly got his confidence and was able to help him.

In another instance a man officer turned over to me a boy he had worked with for several months saying that he had accomplished nothing, that the boy did not seem to respond to him and did not like him. I got at him easily and he made progress. Temperament tells here, just as surely as it does in the family or out in the world, some people "take to" others, some they cannot "get at," not for lack of trying, not for lack of interest, but because of something we do not ourselves understand.

When it comes to the care of the *girls* in the juvenile court, there can be but one opinion: that men should *never* take care of court girls.

The first day I went into juvenile court work, less than a decade ago, my first duty was to take a delinquent girl over to the city dispensary for physical examination. As she and I entered the waiting room, a young doctor called out: "Hello, there! juvenile court girl, eh? Well, what's the matter with you? Been naughty, eh?" Within three weeks after this experience, when I had gone back raging to the office and declared I would never again take a girl over there, I had arranged for such examinations to be made at

the house of detention by a woman physician, who on hearing my story offered her services gratis, and, moreover, instead of wholesale examinations, the girls were thenceforth subjected to them only when we decided they were absolutely necessary. There was criticism of this reform, there will always be criticism of such reforms and sneers at the sentimentality of them, but the women doctors know what it means and we of long experience with the girls know the difference, and the girls themselves are keenly alive to the situation, realizing, perhaps for the first time, why we have taken such a stand, but thoroughly understanding and appreciating it.

Some of these girls are overwise with regard to sex matters but in most cases their over-wisdom is due to inexact knowledge which has been derived from other girls, or from the gossip of their elders, many of whom do not, themselves, know the truth about these questions, so that there is a mystery, a vulgarity, a superstition enveloping the subject.

With these girls we must enter simply and plainly into the subject, telling them the truth, answering without hesitation all their questions, little by little drawing out their innate modesty, developing the spark of purity in them, and placing the question on a personal basis as regards themselves and someone they care for, or their brother and some girl he goes with.

All this is done only by close personal touch through visits to the girl, but, best of all, through her visits to me in the privacy of my own home. It isn't long before she forgets that her probation officer is an officer of the court, and, before she realizes it, she is talking with me in the most intimate way of matters which her mother has never broached, about which she has been curious and anxious to know, without a knowledge of which she is in danger all the time, and through ignorance of which she may have done something which was the occasion of her coming into the juvenile court and being placed on probation. In these quiet, private talks I discover how much she knows and how true her knowledge is, and then supplement it or correct any misconceptions, leading her along step by step according to her age and development.

An intelligent girl, aged 17, said to me—

I was a good girl up to 13. Then my elder sister (the mother had been dead several years) took me to a skating rink. She went on skating with a man and left me alone. A boy came up and asked me to skate; he was nice

and I liked him. When it came time to go home he asked to go with me. I looked at my sister, and she said, "Of course, that's all right." On the way home he told me I was sweet and pretty and that he liked me better than any other girl he knew. He came to see me a few nights later, took me to the rink another night, always flattering me the same way, I always believing him. In a week's time I thought it was awful nice to have a beau and I thought I loved him, so I was ready to do anything he told me to, and this was the way I began, not meaning to do wrong, and hardly realizing it was wrong until it was too late.

"Then," I asked her, "why did you continue to do wrong when you realized what you had done?" She looked quickly up at me with her nice blue eyes and hesitated a moment before she replied, "I suppose it was nature, for I couldn't help it after that." This has been my answer in many cases and I believe it is the answer in many more who are ashamed to tell me so.

Another girl, grown, married, said she had just turned twelve when she had her first experience, which also began by going with an older girl to a skating rink.

There were all sorts and kinds of boys and girls there, and the boys at the rinks are always those who never work, who are always on the bum. There were men and women there, too, and I now know that some of the women were from houses of prostitution, there for the purpose of leading girls astray, and the men with them were there to help them. The young men from 18 years up always take the young girls to skate because they can make them believe anything. They make love, offer presents, flatter, and make all sorts of promises if the girl will run away with them.

She blamed the boys, and said the girls were mostly like herself, ignorant, in for a good time with no intention of wrong doing, just led away by the pride and fun of having a beau, "A fellow who thinks we are it, and we believe every word he says. Then, when we once yield, we keep on because passion gets the best of us, and we don't know how to control ourselves; we've never been told things, nor how to keep good."

To speak plainly, after the first offense, there is the call of the wild, and these girls are too weak and too ignorant to resist.

From stories like these it is evident that men officers ought not to have dealings with these girls, that the men could not reach them in the right way, that there would be danger for the girl and temptation for the man.

The development, last winter in the St. Louis juvenile court, of having women act as referees to the judge in cases of delinquent girls, came about very naturally. Four girls, fourteen to sixteen years of age, who had been before the court and sent to an institution, ran away from it, got in with a girl they knew who was earning her living by having men come to her room, stayed with her, went through some horrible experiences in her room, were arrested and brought back to court. A new judge was on the bench that day. These girls came before him but he could get nothing from them. He took them to his chambers, but still they would not talk; so he turned them over to me to see what I could get. Soon the whole revolting truth came out, the girls even omitting details to me, being ashamed and disgusted with their experiences. "Nora," I asked, "Why didn't you tell the judge the truth? Didn't you see that he was kind and good and your friend?" "Oh, yes! He was so kind, but I couldn't have told a man what I have told you, for any amount of money."

Three days later, two women were hearing all cases of *delinquent girls*, besides doing their regular probation work—in order to try out the plan. It has worked well except that the referee has too much to do, and it only remains for an amendment to be made to the law to make it possible for a woman to sit legally on such cases, be paid for it and keep only a small number of probation cases.

The judge, who knew he was not getting the truth from those four girls and who felt instinctively that a man was not the one to question them about their sexual delinquencies, was right. Women will be more and more a force in the juvenile court as time goes on, but the powers that be must see to it that she be educated and refined, good and true; have mental balance as well as heart; be wide awake and intelligent, with broad sympathies and a broad outlook on life, for there is nothing we need so much in working with these girls and boys as a clear vision and a true perspective.