

"To Shield From Temptation" The Business Girl and the City

Dawn Sebire

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*"To Shield From Temptation":
The Business Girl and the City.*

Dawn Sebire

The "business girl," a term coined early in the 20th century, was a relatively new phenomenon in the labour-force. Referring to clerical workers, the expression included stenographers, secretaries, typists, file clerks, and receptionists. In 1891, 14.3 per cent of all Canadian clerical workers were female. However, by 1941 as a new level of clerical work was created as a result of an administrative revolution, the number of women engaged in this once male-dominated occupation grew to 50.1 per cent.¹ A rise in corporate capitalism necessitated the employment of an educated, efficient, and cheap work-force. Women, it was felt, possessed these qualifications and would accept lower wages than men who held the same qualifications.

At a time when there were few employment opportunities available to educated women, other than nursing or teaching, clerical work offered a means to earn a living in a respectable fashion. But, if a young woman aspired to work in an office, she had to move to a large city, if she did not already reside in one. The migration and the decisions of some women to live alone engendered a shelter problem in many urban centres. For the purposes of this paper the city of Hamilton and the popular literature of the 1910s will be used to illustrate the type of housing made available to single women living in the city. The independent living of a young single woman prompted a host of reactions. Parents expressed fear and horror at the prospect of their daughters moving to and living in the city without the protection and guidance of their families. Urban Christian institutions stated a concern for their morals, and the young women themselves, while attracted to the freedom and the glamour that the city seemed to represent, were often unprepared for the coarser aspects of city living. Housing for single women became an issue that directly affected the business girl.



Several explanations have been advanced to explain the trend of women leaving the family home. Martha Vicinus suggests that single women had become "simply redundant in middle-class families."² As marriage was considered to be the true vocation of most women during this period, the public display of single living denoted failure on the part of the woman and her family. "Unmarried daughters were expected to be invisible."³ However, some women began to defy convention by opting out of this redundancy and finding work, either charitable or paid, that satisfied their need to contribute to society and feel useful. Other women, particularly lower-middle-class women, found themselves without a benefactor. In some cases, a father was unable to support a single daughter, and in others the father had died leaving no one or no money to provide for the family. The single daughter became the means of support for the family or, at the very least, supported herself. This new role of "breadwinner" often necessitated the young women leaving the family home.

Initially, employers of young women established boarding-houses. This was particularly true for mills, hospitals, schools, shops, and charities. Vicinus, examining the American situation, states that "for the sake of respectability and safety, hospitals, schools, shops and charities frequently supplied room and board as part of the salary."⁴ In Canada several philanthropic institutions established boarding-houses or residences in major cities for women. The Young Women's Christian Association was one of the first to establish such residences for women. In 1908 the Hamilton YWCA proposed that a boarding-house be established for "the self-supporting young woman, which shall be within her means and which shall give her some of the advantages and privileges of a refined and Christian home."⁵ Under the guidance of a matron, a working woman could rent a room at a reasonable cost and have little fear that she had chosen the wrong boarding facility in which to stay. Accommodations were "warm, clean and sanitary, with wholesome food and (an) attractive social environment."⁶ Those in charge of the YWCA recognized that the real importance of their work lay in education.

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The young woman coming to the city ignorant of its snares and allurements must be advised and cautioned, the frivolous and giddy ones must be protected against themselves, the discouraged ones must be given fresh courage and most difficult of all the undisciplined ones must be disciplined.... No girl of immoral character or vicious habits may remain in residence. Testimonials of good character are required upon application for board.⁷

The YWCA had established other services that were designed to attract working women. In 1892 the Hamilton YWCA had opened a restaurant and two years later enlarged it to accommodate noon-hour diners. "Previous to this a small room had been used, where young women could bring their lunches and purchase a cup of tea, but this did not meet the idea of a comfortable midday meal, so arrangements were made whereby a good hot dinner was provided for 10 cents, under most attractive and homelike surroundings."⁸ Women employed in nearby shops and offices could enjoy their noon-hour lunch and use the reading room. The YWCA provided classes in bookkeeping, dressmaking, singing, cooking, shorthand, Bible study, and general improvement.⁹ Later, classes in physical fitness were added.

Unable to meet the needs of such a growing number of women, the Hamilton YWCA in 1904 stated that "there is a great need of more accommodation for strangers coming to the city. Last week between thirty and forty were turned away, there being no room for them."¹⁰ In 1907 the "Y" proposed a new residence. But the board discontinued the plan "until stronger sentiment in its favour is manifested by our leading citizens, especially those employing large number of girls."¹¹ By 1913 the superintendent of residences reported that "one hundred girls (were) being crowded into rooms which were meant for sixty - while hundreds have been turned away."¹² And two years later a new building

was at last completed that could house 200 resident boarders.

Each room contains a pretty white iron bed with snowy linen coverings and warm Scottish plaid comforter, a commodious new oak dresser, a small table and chair, and a clothes closet fitted with roller for shirt hanger and towel bars.¹³

To meet the continuing demand for housing, in 1917 the dominion council of the YMCA

proposed that each local association "compile and keep up-to-date a list of certified rooming and boarding houses for the benefit of girls arriving in strange cities."¹⁴ Householders, wishing to let rooms, were encouraged to contact the YWCA. Each room would be carefully investigated and the unsuitable ones weeded out. Any houses suspected of being unclean or not respectable were banned. In this way the girls could be sure of the kind of house they were entering.¹⁵



Room at Y.W.C.A. n.d.

Provincial Archives on Ontario, YWCA

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Residences for women, including the YWCA, were inclined to restrict the activities of a young woman, who, looking forward to the freedom from her family and the excitement of the city, often resented the rules that the institution had developed for her benefit. "Many homes were not able to strike the right balance between freedom and regulation; they held on to restrictive regulations for decades, making them increasingly unpopular in spite of their financial advantages."¹⁶ And some women complained about the other women in the residences who did not meet their own personal standards. "The morale of women in such (places) deteriorated further in the twentieth century, as women fought the stigma of other 'failure.'"¹⁷ While the citation deals with the American situation, one must remember that the YWCAs in Canada borrowed heavily from their counterparts below the border. The American residences for women and the problems associated with such institutions heavily influenced the establishment of Canadian residences for women.

The routines and operations of residences for women were somewhat similar. Dorothy Richardson in her semi-autobiographical work entitled *The Long Day* discussed her lodgings at a home for working girls.

It was a shabby respectable looking building of red brick, with a narrow, black painted arched door. On the cross-section of the centre panel was screwed a silver plate, with the name of the institution inscribed in black letters, which gave the door the gruesome suggestion of a coffin set on end.¹⁸

Dorothy chose the dormitory at a cost of 10 cents a night as opposed to a single room that would cost \$1.50 a week. The rules of the house were quite simple.

First bell at six o'clock, when everybody must leave the dormitory not to return until bedtime. As to that hour, it came at



Hamilton YWCA Garden Feta, 1920.

Hamilton Public Library

various times: for waifs it was seven o'clock; for the regular lodgers, ten o'clock; and for the transients, from seven till twelve o'clock, at which hour the house was closed for the night ... Later on I learned that each must have her drink of water before entering the dormitory, because, once there, it was an ironclad rule that we should not leave until after the rising bell had rung at six the next morning.¹⁹

In 1919 a Toronto reader of *Everywoman's World* wrote the following to the editor.

What about the surroundings of the business girl out of business hours? ... Oh, the unthinking persons say — "Why half of the business girls live at home"; but what of the other half? Where do they live? Third floor, hall bedroom 2 by 3, so refreshing after a weary day, 9:00 to 5:30 pounding a typewriter. And what of the interior? Lovely slanting roof, wall paper ancient and atrocious! Walls enlivened by chromos. Priceless privilege obtained at the rate of \$5.00 per (minus board).²⁰

Many business girls shared accommodations. The correspondent to *Everywoman's World* reported on the circumstance of a "room-mate forced on you because said room will be \$4.25 per - a not-to-be despised saving out your weekly wage."²¹ As to her fellow boarders, the business girl had no say in who resided in the same boarding-house. Writing in 1908 to the *Globe* a business girl commented on the predicament in which many young women found themselves.

The people in boarding houses are not so nice either, after you get to know them pretty well. You don't choose them, and some of those young women are rough and not what any well-brought up girl should have to live with. But there they are, morning and night, every day, and if you move to another boarding-house, why you soon find out they're pretty much the same there, so you grin and bear it.²²

Another woman, writing in 1908, noted that "there is something dreary and sordid about the average city boarding-house, to which the newspapers funny column had not yet done justice." She spoke for "girls who have

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slender pocket books and refined taste, who are homesick for cleanly and dainty surroundings.”²³ Eleven years later pleas for better housing were still being pressed as stated in *Everywoman's World*:

Did I dream it, or is it true that there is a stirring among the dead leaves to hasten better housing for business women? Will the subject which was among the very first to be discussed by the recent Welfare Congress die a natural death - let us keep the flickering flame alive until the fire of enthusiasm has spread from business girl to business man as her employer and to the government as backer of all housing problems whether for the working man and his family, mothers and their pensions, or the ever increasing crowds of wage earning girls who long for a haven of rest at the end of the day anything but perfect, where they can relax and rebuild their bodies by rest and recreation under comfortable, cheering and helpful condition.²⁴

In 1917 the Toronto Local Council of Women created another model: the Aberdeen Club, located on Bain Avenue, consisted of 24 suites of apartments which formed part of the Riverdale Courts. “In the Aberdeen club there are small flats containing a living room, bath, kitchenette, and two or three bedrooms; these flats rent for \$29.50 and \$33.50 per month. This rental when shared by two or three girls, is not excessive.”²⁵ A chaperone was provided for those flats that were under the council's supervision. The tenants were reported to be “mostly school teachers and stenographers, living two and three to an apartment.”

Considerable attention was paid to the “country girl,” who left her rural home to seek employment in the city. Often the columns in the periodicals of this period seemed to persuade the country girls to return to their rural homes. In 1910 the *Canadian Magazine* ran a story that illustrates this point.

The young girl from the country or the small town who leaves a comfortable home in the belief that a business position in the city means advancement and a brighter life is likely to change her mind after a few years of experience over those nerve-racking “keys.”²⁶

To add credibility the author included a “true” story of one young woman's encounter with the business world and city living. The young woman relates her experience as follows:

Yes I'm going home to cook and wash and make beds. I'm tired out — tired of the noise and the rush of the city, and I never want to see a trolley car again. I've earned eight dollars a week, but five dollars and half went for room, board and carfare. I've bought bargain hats, bargain coat suits and cheap blouses, and have managed a small bank account after all. But it's not worth it.²⁷

In 1922 the June issue of *Maclean's Magazine* printed a personal story that encouraged girls to stay at home. Miss Mary McMahon, manager of a placement bureau for business girls, recited her experience of a country girl who had come to her agency in search of employment.

The glow of the outdoors was still in her cheeks, the sparkle of it in her eyes. (One morning she came to Miss McMahon.)

“Miss McMahon” she said, “I am going home.”

“Whatever for?” I explained.

“Well,” she answered, “I've been standing on Main Street watching all the people go by. They looked so cold and miserable, all of them, and I wondered why they didn't eat at home — things that make you fat and warm. Then I just remembered that I had not eaten a meal like that myself since I came here, so I went into a restaurant and ordered all the good things

I could think of. It cost me all the money I had, and now I know why people are so thin. It is because they can't afford to eat in the city restaurants. I can't afford it either, and I'll soon get to look and feel like them. I don't think I could stand it, so I'm going home now, before it happens.”²⁸

Gertrude Pringle, writing in the July issue, discussed some of the difficulties of a business career in the city.

Nothing can exceed the loneliness of some of these young girls who come to distant cities and live in room or boarding-houses. They learn that the friendly atmosphere prevalent in small places does not obtain in a large city, and they can be years in a large office and yet never meet their fellow workers outside of business hours.²⁸

Ignorance of city ways and life-styles prompted some organizations to deliver the county girls from the “evils” of the city. Christian workers in Hamilton took up the call to protect these young women who were strangers to the city. “We Mothers in the city - Mother our daughters, shield our girls, the country girls come to the city - we must become mothers to this larger family.”³⁰ The fears expressed by the “Mothers of the City” were in many cases well founded. Stories of young women being abducted at train stations appeared in newspapers. Young women, travelling alone and having little knowledge of the city, were often duped at the station by some smooth-talking man or woman who offered assistance to the newcomer. In 1912 Dr Lyle, a clergyman, speaking on “White-Slave Traffic,” made the following comment:

It had been proved that Hamilton is the head place for the traffic in Ontario, because it is the best place for transferring girls to other places.³¹

The Hamilton YWCA, in response to the threat, established a travellers' aid program in

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Typing Class YWCA n.d.

Provincial Archives of Ontario, MU 3533

1910. With financial aid provided by several churches and individual donations, the YWCA was able to provide a representative to meet incoming trains, who would hold a sign with the words TRAVELLERS' AID. In 1911 the YWCA made the following report on the program.

During the year the Travellers' Aid has helped 1,526 people in different ways; 130 have been taken to their destinations in the city. Sometimes it is a young girl, who has just arrived from the Mother

Land ... One hundred and eight girls and women have been taken to the YWCA. Some for just a meal and a rest, other for over night ... A large number of girls come from far and near, to our city, to earn a livelihood.³²

Christian organizations confronted the housing of single women as best they could by providing residences for women. These residences did not meet the needs of all women, nor could they accommodate all single women, but they did suggest by their

mere presence and more than full capacity that the need for housing for single women had become a matter of importance.

Notes

- ¹ Graham Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution* (Toronto, 1987): 49.
- ² Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*. (London, 1985): 31.

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- 3 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 5 *Hamilton Spectator*, 14 March 1908. The Hamilton YWCA since its inception in 1889 had a mandate that clearly stated its concern for the young women of the city. For a discussion of YWCAs across Canada see: Diana Pederson, "Building Today for the Womanhood of Tomorrow: Businessmen, Boosters, and the YWCA, 1890-1930." *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 15 (February 1987): 225-42 and "Keeping Our Good Girls Good: The YWCA and the 'Girl Problem,' 1870-1930." *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la femme*, 8 (Winter 1986): 20-24.
- 6 Hamilton YWCA Collection, Hamilton YWCA (hereafter YWCA), *Annual Report* (1919).
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Hamilton Spectator*, 26 Sept. 1894.
- 9 *Herald* (Hamilton), 29 Sept. 1891.
- 10 YWCA, Minutes, October 1904.
- 11 YWCA, Minutes, 7 May 1907.
- 12 YWCA, Minutes, 21 Jan. 1913.
- 13 *Hamilton Spectator*, 16 Jan. 1915.
- 14 *Hamilton Spectator*, 22 Nov. 1919.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Vicinus*, 296.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Dorothy Richardson, "The Long Day" in *Women at Work*, ed. W. L. O'Neill (Chicago, 1972): 157.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 171, 176.
- 20 *Everywoman's World* (Toronto), June 1919: 3.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Globe* (Toronto), 30 May 1908.
- 23 *Canadian Magazine* (Toronto), July 1908: 270.
- 24 *Everywoman's World*, June 1919: 3.
- 25 *Hamilton Spectator*, September 1917.

- 26 *Canadian Magazine*, February 1910: 383.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Maclean's Magazine* (Toronto), 1 June 1922: 69.
- 29 *Maclean's Magazine*, 1 July 1922. For an American example see: Helen Hoerle and Florence Saltzberg, *The Girl and Her Job* (New York, 1919). Hoerle and Saltzberg describe in detail why the "country girl" would be better off never leaving her country home.
- 30 YWCA, Quarterly Meeting, 17 Nov. 1911.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*



Parliament Building, Registrar General's Office. Miss Scobie at desk. February 16, 1898.

Provincial Archives of Ontario, S 17920