Womanhood(s) in the United States: Cultural, Social, and Political Conflicts in Achieving Equality since the 1920s

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Womanhood(s) in the United States:
Cultural, Social, and Political Conflicts in Achieving Equality since the 1920s
May 19-20, 2022
Paris, France

Keynote Speakers:
Julie C. Suk, Professor of Law at Fordham University, author of *We the Women: The Unstoppable Mothers of the Equal Rights Amendment* (2020).

Karissa Haugeberg, Associate Professor at Tulane University, author of *Women against Abortion; Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century* (2017).

Call for Papers

What has it meant and what does it mean to be a woman in the United States? How has womanhood been constructed for women of color, for White women, for LGBTQ women, for well-off, middle-class, working-class, and poor women? While American womanhood connotes many things, its construction has been exclusive, privileging a
model based on racialized, heteronormative, and class-biased norms that conflate American womanhood with an American woman of a certain race, class, sexual-orientation, and gender identity. Among others, the New Woman of the 1920s and the mid-century suburban housewife epitomize the cultural, social, and political trends that converged to create, sustain, and perpetuate American womanhood as a singular concept during different eras. Even within these hegemonic orderings, however, feminine identities have been contentiously debated on cultural, social, and political grounds.

It is in the context of the upcoming 100th anniversary (2023) of the Equal Rights Amendment’s introduction to Congress and the 50th anniversary (2022) of the decisive vote on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) by both chambers of Congress that this conference aims to offer a reflection on womanhood(s) and feminine identities in the United States. The debate on the Equal Rights Amendment has been shaped by conflicting political, social, and cultural visions of womanhood that seem endemic to the history of women's rights. Recently, scholars have argued that anchoring equal rights into the law would allow for it to be more in line with and protective of the diverse experiences of women (Neuwirth 2015). This is precisely because American legislation and jurisprudence has not necessarily followed “the arc of the moral universe [...] toward justice” (King 1968). Whether the law’s intent has been discriminatory or not, it has not acted to protect all women and all forms of womanhood throughout United States history. Rather singular social, economic, and cultural models of womanhood have been read through the law and thus been interpreted as the “proper protections” for “respectable feminine identities,” like married, heterosexual, mothers who are economically dependent on their spouses. The very fact that women have rallied around or against different feminine identities to advance or hinder the law indicates that the legal passage of an ERA is seen as having an effect on cultural and social conceptions of womanhood. Taking the
introduction of the ERA to Congress in 1923 as a starting point for the discussion, we would like to focus on the notions of womanhood and equality as well as on women’s agency in creating their various social identities. We also wish to assess the legal progress that has been made in the past one hundred years and why the Equal Rights Amendment has yet to become a reality. We are likewise interested in the gap that is often noticeable between social discourse and cultural practices, especially in the continuity of traditional images of womanhood and family arrangements, despite evidence that women’s educational objectives, participation in the workforce, work-life balance, values and expectations of life have evolved tremendously over time. To what extent, then, have American women achieved equality since the 1920s, despite the absence of an equal rights amendment?

We hope this conference will serve to question the notion of womanhood as a monolith: representations of women have tended to exclude women who are not heterosexual, cisgendered, white, and middle class. Dominant trends in American women’s history reveal a complicated relationship between women, equality, and their rights, especially as race, ethnicity, and class act to situate women differently. The abolitionist movement has been noted as a sort of genesis for women’s collective reflections on their place within American society, but it also revealed how the nascent women’s rights movement sought to privilege a hegemonic vision of womanhood. When Sojourner Truth, the only Black woman attending the 1851 Akron Women’s convention, rose to speak despite attempts to silence her and delivered her iconic “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, she set the stage for a conversation on the diversity of women’s experiences. Truth challenged an essentialist vision of women belonging to the “weaker sex” by recounting the physical demands of enslavement. She also questioned notions of “true womanhood” grounded in whiteness (Crenshaw 1989, 153-154). As she repeatedly asked “Ain’t I a Woman?”, Truth “exposed the class-bias and racism of the new women’s movement. All women
were not white and all women did not enjoy the material comfort of the middle classes and the bourgeoisie” (Davis 1981, 40).

Foundational to our questioning on the adequation between legal frames and sociocultural models of womanhood, the 1920s allowed new debates about gender equality, with the landmark 19th amendment. They pointed to a conflictual understanding of the right to vote: it was not necessarily synonymous with equality, which had to be achieved by other means. After the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920, when women were finally enfranchised across the nation (although some African American women would have to wait until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965), the question of gender equality remained. Some women, in particular in the National Woman’s Party, proceeded to pursue the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment by convincing legislators to introduce it to Congress in December 1923. Yet, the prominent organization, The League of Women Voters opposed the amendment arguing that it would upend labor reforms that protected women and children (Cain, 2021; The Library of Congress, n.d.). In her recent book We the Women: The Unstoppable Mothers of the Equal Rights Amendment, sociologist and political scientist Julie C. Suk points out, “most women’s organizations opposed the ERA when it was first introduced,” and those who were calling for more reforms started to focus on other issues, such as health, working conditions and wages, showing that women had diverging opinions on the meaning and consequences of equality (2020, 33).

Adjacent to gaining the right to vote in 1920, women’s private and public behaviors were more prominently examined during the decade that followed. Women’s sexuality was being discussed with interest as the birth control movement gained ground and rates of divorce and premarital sex climbed (Davis 2008, 1138). A
driving force in this discussion was Margaret Sanger who was attempting to shine a light on the need to improve women’s health through reproductive knowledge and healthcare. Additionally, White women’s employment had been increasing since the end of the 19th century, in white-collar employment, in particular (ibid.; England and Boyer 2009, 309). Historian Nancy Cott has noted that the women working and the jobs they were doing evolved significantly between 1910 and 1940. Married women joined the workforce, making up 30% of the total female workforce and taking on low-paying menial jobs to help support their families. The increasing numbers of women in white-collar, service sector jobs led to the growth of “women’s jobs” (Cott 1987, 129-33). While this history has often been told as central to the advancement of women’s economic roles, it neglects the fact that African American women’s economic importance in terms of labor had been recognized since the time of slavery and continued to be paramount to their families’ economic survival throughout this period (Helmbold 1987, 634). This latter fact might also be said to be true for women of color, more generally, as well as for working-class women. Nevertheless, this focus in feminist scholarship has attempted to show a continuity of women’s progression into the public sphere as a means for women to take ownership of that space at a time when the push for legal equality became more diffuse and some feminist leaders brandished the protections in newly passed labor legislation as safeguards against sexism.

With the onset of the Great Depression, contradictory impulses affected women’s lives as they were asked to leave the rarefied jobs to men, the “actual breadwinners,” even though their paychecks helped their families make ends meet (Cott 2000, 454; May 1988, 50). Working women contended with social stigma even though their jobs were protected precisely because they were located in sex-segregated parts of the workforce (Helmbold 1987, 639) Despite the fact that
married women’s employment grew during that time, millions of women were unemployed during the Depression but their need and right to work remained socially and politically unrecognized (Fearon 2008, 429; Helmbold 1987, 636). This was especially true for Black women whose participation in the workforce declined disproportionately compared to other women (Helmbold 1987, 636). Working-class women in domestic service were considered expendable at a time when middle-class women could “tighten their belts” and “make do” on their own without domestic employees, increasing their own responsibilities in the home at the same time leaving working-class women to languish (Fearon 2008, 428). Women, regardless of class, worked harder in the home during the Depression. “When cash income declined, housewives replaced purchasing with subsistence production. Whether they planted gardens, canned food, remade old clothing, made do with less heat, or moved into poorer housing which required extra effort to keep clean and comfortable, women worked harder” (Helmbold 1987, 638).

The ambivalent place of women in American society continued through World War II and the 1950s. During the War, nearly 350,000 women served in uniform in the various women’s organizations of the Department of War (“History at a Glance: Women in World War II). Women’s employment continued to rise during the War. In 1944, 1.7 million women were part of the workforce, in particular in defense industry jobs, where they replaced men (Campbell 1984, 72). The U.S. government’s incredibly effective propaganda machine enticed women out of the home at the same time that it did not let them forget that their true calling was taking care of their families, contextualizing their public role in the war effort as temporary and patriotic (Le Dantec-Lowry, 2016). In the immediate postwar era, White, middle-class, married women were supposedly shoved back into the home, but this too was temporary. During the 1950s, women’s workplace participation grew, enrollment in
higher educational institutions increased. The realities of women’s lives were different even though the tug-of-war between women’s place in the home and outside of it continued to dominate much of the cultural and social discourse of that time, making womanhood seem monolithic when women’s experiences varied greatly.

The divisive nature of defining American womanhood became a forceful issue during the 1960s and 1970s as the feminist movement proliferated across the nation. One way in which this was done was through the battle over the Equal Rights Amendment and the quest by some for legal equality to be inscribed into the law. In her study on the confrontation between feminists and antifeminists in the 1970s, however, historian Marjorie Spruill argued that, “There were two women’s movements in the 1970s: a women’s rights movement... and a conservative women’s movement” (2017, 1). In 1972, tensions between the two camps crystallized as the Equal Rights Amendment resurfaced and was once again considered by the US Congress. Approved by the House in 1971 and by the Senate the following year, the proposed amendment was designed to inscribe equal legal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex into the US Constitution. However, the ERA triggered acrimonious debates on women’s rights. On one side, some women were fighting for increased access to and recognition in the public sphere, against gender discrimination and, for the more radical adherents, to overthrow the patriarchal order itself. They mobilized in national organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and in small, local chapters such as consciousness raising groups as well as other activist organizations. They rallied around a myriad of initiatives related to medical and reproductive rights, sexuality, education and the professions, the media and the arts, race, housework, and many other issues. On the other side, some conservative women opposed feminist discourse and became
involved in a multifaceted countermovement that resisted women’s further emancipation and the expansion of women’s social, cultural, and political roles. They instead glorified traditional gender roles for men and women. Benefiting from the emergence of a powerful conservative movement and the renewal of the Religious Right, figures like Phyllis Schlafly, Beverly LaHaye, and Anita Bryant rose to prominence and mobilized women in favor of traditional and religious values that primarily celebrated women’s domestic identities. These had been carefully cultivated in the 1950s as representing the pinnacle of feminine achievement and fulfillment. Because of a strong conservative mobilization led by antifeminist Phyllis Schlafly, the ERA was eventually unable to gather the necessary approval by three fourths of the states within the time frame allotted by Congress for the amendment to be ratified. The conflicting philosophies of women as political, social, and cultural actors has shaped not only women’s activism, but also the very construction of American womanhood, as Schlafly’s ability to galvanize women around their identities as housewives and mothers has demonstrated. Gloria Steinem has recently made the argument that this contentious in-fighting between liberal and conservative women’s groups “gave the press an image of women against women,” which, in her mind, seems to overemphasize the importance of differences between women (2015, xiii). This conference is particularly interested in the thorny nature of both theoretical impulses: universalizing womanhood and multiplying womanhood(s).

Even when women’s rights have been enshrined into the law, they have been questioned on the grounds that they undermine the family and women’s “natural” place within it. There is no greater example of this than the Supreme Court’s decision Roe v. Wade in 1973. In its aftermath, women opposed to abortion were active on the ground founding crisis pregnancy centers to respond to the supposed
needs of vulnerable pregnant women and provide them with alternatives to abortion during their pregnancies (Haugeberg 2017, 19-22). The New Right had triumphed in their struggle to convert the Republican Party to their socially conservative way of thinking that would cut government spending on family planning services, paving the way for Reagan appointees to use cost-cutting as a means to attack birth control, reproductive health care services, and sex education (ibid., 27-28). Like their liberal counterparts, women working to limit recourse to abortion, believed that the sexual revolution was responsible for women’s newfound vulnerability. Karissa Haugeberg explains the divide between the different activists, thus, “But while liberal feminists sought policy solutions to address the educational and economic discrimination that made out-of-wedlock pregnancy a path to poverty for so many women, conservative women sought to strengthen the patriarchal family” (ibid., 32). As such, the New Right in particular, and the GOP more broadly has been able to claim that they are the “pro-family” party precisely because they have attempted to maintain a status quo rooted in obfuscating the importance of women’s roles outside the home.

The conversation over different types of violence committed against women is a striking illustration of the complex and sometimes contradictory feelings towards gender equality in the United States. As women entered the workforce in large numbers in the 1970s, they were faced with a patriarchal system that utilized “sex” to keep them in subservient positions. Struggling to describe a common negative workplace experience for women, Lin Farley coined the phrase “sexual harassment” in 1978. A little more than a decade later, a young African American law professor named Anita Hill became the unwitting face of gender harassment. Called by the Senate Judiciary Committee to testify at the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in 1991, Hill was thrown into a battle that divided the nation and took both sexist and racial overtones. Even if Hill’s testimony was dismissed by Congress and the
public at the time, it opened a conversation that allowed more women to press charges in such cases. In more recent years, the #MeToo movement has highlighted the persisting prevalence of sexual harassment and has raised awareness on how unequal distributions of power connected to race, class, gender and sexuality may facilitate physical or psychological violence against women.

These challenges as well as issues of pay inequality, an absence of paid parental leave, and many others beg the question whether equality in the law must be formalized in order to ensure women have access to equal rights in American society. While the ERA has been known as a failed amendment for nearly half a century, there has been renewed interest in its ratification as Nevada, Illinois, and Virginia became the 36th, 37th, and 38th states to ratify it in 2017, 2018, and 2020 respectively (Alice Paul Institute 2018). Its significance in bringing about legal gender equality on a national scale seems to be driving this recent activity. Proponents of the amendment argue that not only would it categorize “sex” as a suspect classification for differential treatment but that it would help ensure pay equity, establish paid maternity and paternity leave, protect pregnant women and members of the LGBTQ communities from discrimination, provide legal justice for victims of gender-based violence, and further secure abortion rights in the United States (Lyons, Astor, & Salem, 2020; Neuwirth 2015; Puckett-Pope, 2020). The issues that advocates point to as being consequential for its passage demonstrate that the codification of legal rights for women would have far-reaching social, cultural, and economic impacts on American society.

We encourage paper proposals that examine the notion of equality as it pertains to American womanhood(s) since the 1920s. Possible lines of inquiry could include:

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Visions of womanhood, of essentialism and the social construction of womanhood
Women on the margins: normative and transgressive forms of womanhood
Models and countermodels of motherhood and maternity
Reproductive rights
(The) American family(ies) and gender roles
Social movements, major figures, major organizations, women’s communities
Feminist discourse, antifeminist discourse
Women’s rights: legal evolutions, progress and setbacks
Intersectional challenges to achieving equality for women
Writing women’s history

Please submit proposals by February 1, 2022 to Christen Bryson (christen.bryson-charle@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr), Anne Légier (a.legier@univ-amu.fr), and Amélie Ribieras (amelie.ribieras@u-paris2.fr).

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