

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

May 19-20, 2022
International Conference
Online and in 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).

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 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 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.

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:

- 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 a 500-word proposal as well as a short biography to Christen Bryson (christen.bryson-charle@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr), Anne Légier (a.legier@univ-amu.fr), and Amélie Ribieras (amelie.ribieras@u-paris2.fr) by February 1, 2022.

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