



Pierre du Bois Annual Conference 2023
Organiser: Professor Nicole Bourbonnais

Women and Children: Discourse and Intervention in the Twentieth Century

Synopsis

This conference will examine the rise of ‘women and children’ as a subject of humanitarian intervention, political mobilisation and global health initiatives, with a focus on the twentieth century. When and how did ‘saving women and children’ become the dominant narrative of humanitarian campaigns and interventions abroad? To what extent have women’s rights and child rights movements intersected and/or contradicted one another? How did maternal health and child health come to be fused to one another (as “Maternal and Child Health (MCH)” in global health communities), and what does this imply for women’s health outside of the reproductive sphere? Last but not least, what happens to fathers, single women and non-procreative relationships when the family/central unit of intervention is defined as “mother and child”?

Speakers will take up these questions through analysis of global institutions, transnational movements, and local case studies. Topics will include:

- The use of mother-child imagery in historical campaigns, from anti-slavery activism to anti-colonial conflicts and beyond
- The mobilisation of maternalist narratives in suffrage, birth control and other feminist movements in the early twentieth century
- The rise of ‘children’s rights’ and changing understandings of childhood, adolescence and parenthood
- The links between imperialism and the rise of maternal and infant welfare clinics internationally
- The growth of ‘maternal and child health’ initiatives in global institutions and the critique to this model posed by “women’s health” movements
- The global family planning movement and the rise of reproductive rights
- Conflicts over breastfeeding and formula standards at the World Health Organization
- Marginalised histories of fatherhood, single women and childlessness

Panellists would include a mix of historians as well as some sociologists and anthropologists who write from a historical perspective on these themes. It is expected that this conference will draw an audience not only from the International History Department but also from the Gender Centre/community at the Institute. The conference will be publicised among contacts Professor Nicole Bourbonnais have within the international community, including the WHO, UNFPA, UN Women, the Center for Reproductive Rights, Sexual Rights Initiative and Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. The conference will allow scholars, policymakers and activists alike to reflect critically on the problems and possibilities of the concept of women and children

The conference will lead to an edited book volume or special journal issue with contributions from the panellists. The discussions will also contribute to Professor Bourbonnais’ sole-authored book manuscript project, *Mother Earth – Maternal Health and Global Institutions in the 20th Century*.