



Pierre du Bois Annual Conference 2023
Organiser: Professor Nicole Bourbonnais

Women and Children as Sites of Intervention: Past, Present, Future

Wednesday 18th and Thursday 19th October 2023

Synopsis

The image of “women and children” – as a coherent, recognized unit - has formed one of the most dominant, long-lasting motifs in national social planning and global health, development, and humanitarian work. There may be no more prescient signifier of conflict, hunger, and poverty than the tired, worried mother clutching her emaciated child to her breast. But women and children have also been presented as critical sites of intervention, as the foundation of national strength, and as promising “agents of change.”

This conference will examine how a variety of actors – eugenicists, feminists, child rights activists, public health professionals, colonial officials, states, and global institutions – have centered motherhood and the family within a diverse set of political and social projects. The conference will adopt a comparative and transnational perspective, looking beyond borders to explore some of the critical tensions underlying maternalism, child saving, family planning, and reproductive control. How did the fate of “women and children” become so closely tied to one another in discourse and practice? How has this history been shaped by imperialism and race, class, and national inequality? What are the underlying structures that lead us to task mothers with building nations, solving conflicts, and/or preventing poverty? What happens to non-procreative women, wayward girls and boys, fathers, and queer families when we see “women and children” as the core of kinship and reproduction? Is this an inherently conservative tradition, reinforcing traditional gender relations, or can motherhood be a progressive, even radical vision? Can we decolonize or revolutionize our understanding of – and engagement with – parenthood, reproduction, and the family?

This conference will bring historians together with anthropologists, sociologists, feminist theorists and activists to address these questions and explore the past, present, and future of “women and children” as sites of intervention.