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Winning Project: The Intersectionality of Childless Women Between 1900 and 1950

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Final Project Script: The Intersectionality of Childless Women Between 1900 and 1950
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HIST 651: Women in American History
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Throughout American history, society has had stereotypes of a woman's role being a wife and a mother. In fact, when doing research, a librarian asked me what I was studying, and when I told her I was reading about childless women in the early 1900s, she said she did not think any existed. The fact is, though, that women without children have always existed in America, for a variety of reasons. Environmental scientist Dr. Rachel Carson, poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, author Edith Wharton, activist Angelina Weld Grimké, and playwright Maurine Dallas Watkins are a few notable American women who went without children. Even first ladies Sarah Polk and Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, a role that many Americans associate with a wife and mother, went their entire marriages without children. They are joined by many other American women who did not have children in the early 1900s.¹

Historians have failed to highlight these women in any great detail, and one article I read argued that childless women were only a result of delaying marriage, not a lack of desire to be a mother. While that can be the case for many women, it also does not consider that others delayed marriage to avoid having children, or that there were childless married couples. In fact, a 1935 article published in *The New York Times*, estimated that around one in three married couples in the U.S. remained childless at that time. In 1940, a study of three hundred and eighty-two long-term couples in Indianapolis found that around forty percent chose to remain childless. The

1 "1880-1958 Angelina Weld Grimké," Black Women's Suffrage, <https://blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/key-figures/angelinaWeldGrimke>; Allida Black, "Edith Bolling Galt Wilson," National Archives and Records Administration, 2009, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/about-the-white-house/first-ladies/edith-bolling-galt-wilson/>. Becca Anderson, *The Book of Awesome Women: Boundary Breakers, Freedom Fighters, Sheroes and Female Firsts*, (Coral Gables, FL: Mango Publishing, 2017), 42-46; Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "A Ballade of the Unborn Dead," In *Childfree Museum*, 1914, <https://childfreehistory.com/exhibitions/expressions-of-childlessness/>; "Grimke, Angelina Weld (1880-1958)," Harvard Square Library, <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/cambridge-harvard/angelina-weld-grimke/>; Jean Frantz Blackall, "The Absent Children In Edith Wharton's Fiction," *Edith Wharton Review* 12, no. 1 (1995): 3; "Maurine Dallas Watkins," Crawfordville District Public Library, June 13, 2022, <https://www.cdpl.lib.in.us/services/reference/watkins/>; "Rachel Carson - Interactive Timeline," The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson, <https://www.rachelcarson.org/interactive-timeline/>; "Sarah Childress Polk," The White House, January 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/first-families/sarah-childress-polk/>.

percent of American-born married women who were childless went up from fourteen percent in 1920 to twenty-one percent just twenty years later in 1940. It is obvious that remaining childless was a more diverse issue than just always being the bridesmaid and never the bride. Single or married, many historians have lumped childless women together into one group, without exploring the intersectionality that impacted the decision to go without children, involuntary childlessness, the methods available to control pregnancy, or the societal response to childlessness. The reasons women were childfree, and the ways they remained childfree, in the first half of the 1900s differed greatly based on their other cultural identities.²

Historians can estimate the number of childless women that lived in the past from United States (U.S.) census information, and other similar population surveys. While these numbers are never exact, as not every person filled out the survey, it gives a close estimate, as well as proves that childless women were a large minority that always existed. These numbers often varied by race, for American women born between 1900 and 1910, the rate of childlessness was overall twenty percent, but thirty-three percent for black American women. American women born between 1885 and 1915, who experienced their childbearing years during the early 1900s, had a childless rate of around twenty percent. For American women born between 1900 and 1949, the rate of childlessness at age forty-five varied between nine and twenty-five percent. The age forty-five is at the top of the child-bearing age for typical American women, meaning that most childless women would not have children after these statistics were calculated, making the results more valid. The birth cohort with the highest rate of childlessness, those born between

² Rachel Chrastil, *How to Be Childless: A History and Philosophy of Life Without Children* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 51, 53; S. Philip Morgan, "Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Childlessness," *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 3 (1991): 779–807, <https://doi.org/10.1086/229820>; The Associated Press, "One of Every 3 Couples In Nation Is Childless," *The New York Times*, August 5, 1935, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1935/08/05/93473061.html?pageNumber=1>.

1910 and 1914, came to age during the Great Depression. The birth cohort with the lowest number of childless women were those born between 1940 and 1944, who came to age during the financial success of the post World War II period. While not the only reason for not having children, lack of financial security often played a major role in the decision to not create dependents.³

Women did not only remain childless due to the cost of children, but often times because they could not afford to both leave their careers and raise kids. Depending on the career women were able to obtain, there was a high chance a job would fire a woman once she became pregnant or had children. Teaching and flight attendant jobs both offered a steady career for women with a decent income, but pregnant women in these fields often faced immediate termination. In a 1913 survey of professional women, seventy-five percent did not have children, and a survey in 1931 showed that a large number of jobs would not even hire married women due to the risk of them having children. Louis D. Brandeis, a lawyer who later became a supreme court justice, was quoted in 1908 saying that all women were potential mothers who should not work many hours as it would make them unfit to become a parent. In 1907, one woman wrote into the *Independent* about her reasonings for remaining childless. Her letter displayed her emotions over her situation, and it is safe to say she was not happy. She resented her options of having to either raise a child in poverty, or not have any children at all. She wrote that she was the sole breadwinner in her family, and becoming pregnant would mean losing her income. Even if she was able to find another job, she knew that having a child at home would limit the number of

³Chrastil, *How to Be Childless*, 37; Donald T. Rowland, "Historical Trends in Childlessness," *Journal of Family Issues* 28, no. 10 (2007): 1311–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x07303823>, 1315; Peggy O'Donnell Heffington, *Without Children: The Long History of Not Being a Mother* (New York: Seal Press, Hachette Book Group, 2023), 93.

hours she could have worked. In her anger, she ended her letter by saying she refused to have any children who would be stuck in the same economic status as herself, living at the mercy of their employer, nor would she be considered nothing but a vessel to have children. I respect her honesty. For women of color, the necessity of keeping employment was even more dire. They already struggled to find jobs that would hire women of color, and often made less than white women, making it more difficult to give up a career in order to have children.⁴ Even during times of the worse economic struggle, women received backlash for their decision to remain childfree. In a 1935 letter to the editor in the *New York Times*, James Lawrence wrote, “If she is forced by economic necessity to refrain from having children, then the solution is not a perversion of the facilities of which have made her name sacred,” as an argument against the use of birth control.⁵

In addition to the childlessness percentages following economic trends, the number of women without children also varied geographically. Throughout the early 1900s, there were fewer childless women in the Southern and Western states, with the Northeast states showing the highest percent of women who never had children. According to the 1910 census, of women aged between forty-five and forty-nine, New Hampshire had a rate over of thirty percent childless women, the highest of any state, where as Oklahoma had the fewest number at under six percent of the female population in the age range being childless. These statistics are not linked directly to the number of women who were married in the state. For New Hampshire, if only women who were ever married are counted, the number of childless women only goes down to nineteen percent, showing that married women also remained without children. Other cultural factors played a role as well, in the 1950s U.S. census, the highest rates of childlessness were

⁴ Chrastil, *How to Be Childless*, 47-48; O'Donnell Heffington, *Without Children*, 90-91, 93

⁵ James Lawrence, “Letter to the Editor Opposing Birth Control,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1935, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1935/05/15/94608131.html?pageNumber=20>.

white women with a higher education degree. The intersectionality of multiple parts of a woman's identity factored into the decision to have, or not have, children.⁶

For many women, the absence of children was not always a choice. Unfortunately, eugenics played a role in childlessness in many women of color. The eugenics movement encouraged the birth of white babies, while simultaneously working to advocate for forced sterilization of those considered unfit for pregnancy, often due to their race or class. By the 1970s, around 60,000 Americans were forcibly sterilized due to racist and discriminatory eugenic practices. In 1927, the case *Buck v. Bell* went to the Supreme Court, which upheld states' right to forcibly sterilize anyone deemed unfit. This allowed racist laws to continue to be carried out across the country, and they were primarily enforced in communities with a majority population of people of color. In some states, the eugenic laws only allowed for the forced sterilization of prisoners, but this was abused by locking up women of color in disproportionately high numbers in order to sterilize them. In 1934, two girls who were only sixteen at the time accused the Wayne County Training School in Detroit, Michigan of having them sterilized against their will and without consent from their parents.⁷ Not everyone supported eugenics or forced sterilization, however, and it was a debated topic even in its most popular years. In 1941, Rev. James A. Garvey wrote that forced sterilization was a sin against the poor, and he was not alone in his

⁶ Morgan, "Late Nineteenth-and Early Twentieth-Century Childlessness,"; Rowland, "Historical Trends in Childlessness," 1323.

⁷Alexandra Fair, "The Sterilization of Carrie Buck," Origins Ohio State University, October 1, 2022, <https://origins.osu.edu/read/sterilization-carrie-buck>; "Eugenics and Scientific Racism," Genome, <https://www.genome.gov/about-genomics/fact-sheets/Eugenics-and-Scientific-Racism>; "The Supreme Court Ruling That Led to 70,000 Forced Sterilizations," NPR, March 7, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/03/07/469478098/the-supreme-court-ruling-that-led-to-70-000-forced-sterilizations>; O'Donnell Heffington, *Without Children*, 137; The Associated Press, "Forced Sterilization Alleged at Detroit," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 11, 1934, Vol 86 No 128, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/138916842>.

opinion. Despite backlash, the practice continued to remove the choice of motherhood from tens of thousands of American women.⁸

While women were being sterilized, healthy white women were heavily encouraged to have children. In a 1913 edition of *The Omaha Daily Bee*, a New York Scientist ran an ad which offered to pay a man and woman who they determined to be fit to get married and have children for a eugenics test. The ad took up most of the newspaper page, and included multiple photos of families, all of which were white.⁹ In the 1920 book *The Science of Eugenics*, the author encourages women he feels are fit to have children, telling women that, “having children under proper circumstances never ruins the health and happiness of any woman. In fact, womanhood is incomplete without them,” the same book advised women that their love letters will not be read if they fold it in an annoying way, so the entire book was hogwash.¹⁰ Eugenics and the idea of fit motherhood created a vastly different experience for women of different backgrounds.

Involuntary childlessness in some women was caused by infertility issues that were more natural than forced sterilization. Even with disease related infertility, black women have historically had more cases than white women. When people think of a woman being childless due to fertility issues, they often assume it is due to her own infertility. While this of course happened, plenty of women went without children due to their husbands or other male partners being sterile. A 1926 article addressed this issue, warning men that alcoholism was linked to one of the leading causes of sterile men. I am not sure how many men were willing to give up alcohol

⁸ Rev James A Garvey, “Catholic Charities,” *The Oklahoma Courier*, December 13, 1941, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/833528047/>.

⁹ Frederick H. Robinson, “Wanted at Once,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, November 2, 1913, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99021999/1913-11-02/ed-1/seq-24/>.

¹⁰ B. G. Jefferis and J. L. Nichols, *Searchlights on Health: The Science of Eugenics* (Naperville, IL: J. L. Nichols & Company, 1920), <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/13444/pg13444-images.html>, 38, 241.

to have a chance to make babies, but the warning was there. The same article expressed the author's shock that infertility was not always a woman's issue, so the stereotype is not new.¹¹

Women in same-sex relations may not have been infertile, but were obviously unable to conceive naturally with their partners. Due to adoption laws, same-sex couples could not adopt a child. It was not until 1979 when a same-sex couple adopted a child together for the first time in the U.S. and the final state, Florida, did not overturn the ban on same-sex adoptions until 2010. Other states allowed same-sex couples, but only if they married, which in practice meant most same-sex couples could not adopt until 2015.¹² IVF and sperm donation did not yet exist, so those were also not options for same-sex couples.¹³

While some women may have chosen childlessness due to their circumstances, or may not have been able to have children, there were plenty of women who just decided it was not for them, regardless of the situation. In a 1911 letter to *Good Housekeeping*, a woman wrote about her reasonings for not having children, despite having already been married for years. "Without any shame or hesitation, I say that I have been married seven years and have deliberately avoided having children." She continued her letter saying how her friends with children complained about all they had to give up to provide for their child, and how their husbands had the opportunities to go out and socialize, but they did not. She did not want a life like her friends who had, "worry [as] their constant companion," and she even added that one of her friends,

¹¹A. L. Wolbarst, "Childlessness - A Medical Problem," *Hamilton Evening Journal*, September 14, 1926, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/22125819>; Rowland, "Historical Trends in Childlessness," 1323.

¹²Dana Rudolph, "A Very Brief History of LGBTQ Parenting," *Family Equality*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.familyequality.org/2017/10/20/a-very-brief-history-of-lgbtq-parenting/>.

¹³W Ombelet and J Van Robayas, "Artificial Insemination History: Hurdles and Milestones," *Facts Views Vis Obgyn* 7(2) (2015): 137–43, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4498171/>.

“look[ed] like an old hag,” since having children.¹⁴ I was curious why she did not sign her name to the letter, and then I read her old hag comment and was like, yeah, that makes sense. Petty in private. A newspaper article from 1931 calls it fashionable to be childless, “especially with the class that takes the development of the individual seriously,” but insults women by condescendingly noting that they are just following trends and only convincing themselves that they do not want a child.¹⁵

Regardless of why a woman chose childlessness, unless it was due to infertility, she had to use the birth control options available to her at the time. Unfortunately, these options were not equally available to all women, due to both lack of knowledge or funding. For the most part, women had the options of diaphragms, vaginal sponges, pessaries, abortions, condoms, and abstinence or infrequent sex. Some advice books told women to wait to have sex until eight days after their menstrual cycle to avoid pregnancy, but for many women this would have been the time they would have been most fertile, leading to mixed results. The FDA did not approve the sale of birth control pills until 1960, but various pills and tonics, with questionable safety, were sold before that time. Forms of condoms have been around longer than America has been a country. By the early 1800s, they were made of rubber but only covered the tip of the penis, and in 1858, the full-length rubber condom was invented. These rubber condoms were expensive, but were able to be washed and reused. In the later 1800s, a thinner-rubber condom was invented, and so was a condom made from the thin material of a fish bladder. I am not sure what is worse, imagining a condom being reused or thinking about a fish bladder being used during sex. Finally,

¹⁴ “Postponing Parenthood,” *Good Housekeeping Magazine*, 1911, sec. Vol 53, Issue 4, https://archive.org/details/sim_good-housekeeping_good-housekeeping-magazi_1911-10_53_4/page/460/mode/2up, 460.

¹⁵ Alice Beal Persons, “Childlessness Is Not Now Regarded as Curse,” *Kansas City Times*, August 27, 1931, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/655449527>.

in the 1930s the modern latex condom hit the market. The main problem with many of the forms of birth control was lack of education, especially for women of color or of poorer financial status. It was illegal to mail out information on sex or birth control, and Margaret Sanger, along with other women, spent time in jail for distributing the information.¹⁶

When women could not access reliable birth control before pregnancy, many women remained childless by finding a way to have an abortion. Before the 1820s abortions were legal in the U.S., but by 1880, abortion was a felony in each state. Early abortion pills were sold in newspapers with coded language in order to circumvent the legalities of the product, though the most efficient abortion at the time was procedural, as the pills were not actually approved and usually not effective or safe. Due it being criminal, records on abortions are spotty, but historians estimate anywhere from 250,000 and one million illegal abortions were conducted each year in the early 1900s. In 1938, the president of the Maternal Health Center in Oklahoma City estimated there were almost thirteen thousand abortions conducted in the prior twelve months in the city. The number of abortion related criminal cases reported in newspapers also gives proof that it was not a rare occurrence. A 1907 article in an Indiana newspaper details how anyone who helped a woman gain access to an abortion could be convicted of the same abortion crime, with the same punishment as the doctor and women. In 1948, Dr. Cyril B. Babb of New York, was arrested after admitting to performing over thirty abortions when one of his patients died after

¹⁶ Audiey Kao, "History of Oral Contraception," *Journal of Ethics American Medical Association*, June 1, 2000, <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/history-oral-contraception/2000-06>; Chrastil, *How to Be Childless*, 45; Hallie Liberman, "A Short History of the Condom," *JSTOR DAILY*, June 8, 2017, <https://daily.jstor.org/short-history-of-the-condom/>; Morgan, "Late Nineteenth-and Early Twentieth-Century Childlessness," 797; O'Donnell Heffington, *Without Children*, 113; S. Schwarz, "Special on Pills," *The Courier-News*, March 28, 1902, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/429270398/>; The Diamond Brand, "Chichesters Pills," *The Belleville News-Democrat*, April 18, 1914, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/768999704>.

the procedure. Not only were abortions illegal, unregulated, and risky, but they could also be expensive and hard to obtain for many women depending on their financial means.¹⁷

Regardless of the reasoning why a woman decided not to have children, many received harsh criticism from society, with perhaps the exception of women of color in most regions due to racist eugenic mindsets. In 1911, pastor George Stewart of Cleveland said that childless women should be shipped out of the country and replaced with “an equal number of good, old-fashioned mothers.”¹⁸ Childlessness was common enough for Dr. Pinto, an Omaha health commissioner, to propose a bill in 1924 that would void marriages after two years without producing children. Dr. Pinto wrote, “Many young women marry these days and remain in their work because of their love for jewelry, furs and their feeling of independence which comes when both are on a regular wage basis,” implying that childlessness was due to women being selfish and materialist.¹⁹ In 1930, Supreme Court Justice Harry Lewis said in a statement that childless women were destroying the home life in Brooklyn, and were causing unhappy marriages and divorces.²⁰ While childless women always existed, society did not always accept them or their breaking of gender norms.

Despite the stereotypes around women traditionally being at home raising children, childless women have always existed in American history. Throughout the first half of the

¹⁷ Chrastil, *How to Be Childless*, 45; “City Abortion Toll Is 12,936 in Year, Claim,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 5, 1938, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/444465659>; “Criminal Charge Against Doctor,” *The Columbus Republican*, January 10, 1907, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/5819203/>. “Held in Abortion Death,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1948, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/12/05/96440378.html?pageNumber=67>; NY History Society, “Female Remedies,” NY History, accessed July 19, 2023, <https://www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/female-remedies>.

¹⁸ “Export Childless Women,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 1911, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1911/08/28/104835100.html?pageNumber=7>.

¹⁹ “Would Void Marriage If It Is Childless,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 1924, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1924/12/12/101627076.html?pageNumber=24>.

²⁰ “Finds Birth Control Wrecking Home Life,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 1930, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1930/06/10/96150306.html?pageNumber=23>.

twentieth century, childless women were diverse individuals with multiple reasons for not having children, both voluntary and involuntary. They creatively used the limited resources at their disposal to control their own fertility, both inside and outside of marriage. These women broke gender stereotypes in their everyday lives, and despite historians frequently leaving them out of the narrative, showed that women are capable of creating whatever life they decide is best for themselves.

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