

## **A4. Disability and Reproduction in the United States**

**A4:1** Miriam Rich, *Women's Reproductive Anxieties and Imaginaries of Disability in the Progressive Era*

This paper examines how a heterogeneous group of women in the Progressive Era navigated and shaped emergent discourses surrounding disability and reproduction. In an era marked by the cultural ascendance of what historian Rima Apple calls “scientific motherhood”—the belief that childrearing should be guided by medical and scientific expertise—U.S. women from varied class and racial backgrounds sought out expert advice on maternity and reproduction, including on matters related to fertility management, pregnancy, and childbirth. Diverse laywomen wrote advice-seeking letters to a range of early twentieth-century institutions, from new government welfare agencies like the federal Children’s Bureau, to eugenic research institutes, to periodicals and newsletters of Black women’s clubs. In these letters, women solicited expert opinions on whether they should have children or on how to best care for themselves during pregnancy, laying out intimate details of their hopes, fears, and self-valuations. Many described anxieties about conceiving and giving birth to “abnormal” or “defective” children, expressed in language steeped in imperatives of gendered and racial obligation. In articulating these anxieties, they described and assessed their own and their family members’ attributes and conditions, foregrounding a variety of physical, sensory, psychological, and intellectual disabilities. By analyzing these writings, this paper reveals how lay discourse on reproduction encoded complex and contested imaginaries of congenital disability, becoming a site where diverse women worked out questions and anxieties related to racial descent, gendered family structures, environmental determinants of development, and disabled motherhood in the early twentieth-century United States.

### Learning Objectives

- Recognize the dynamic relationship between medicine, health, and society throughout history
- Develop a historically informed sensitivity to the diversity of patients
- Deepen understanding of how disability, in conjunction with race, gender, and class, influenced historical experiences of reproduction and motherhood

**A4:2** Emma Wathen, *“Stop Being a Polio Patient, Be a Mother”*: *Polio Mothers and Parenting Narratives in the Postwar United States*

When polio ravaged through American communities in the twentieth century, the disease left a significant number of young women with physical disabilities at a time when Americans were marrying and having children in greater numbers than ever before. Histories of polio and motherhood have typically focused on the non-disabled mothers who marched on behalf of their polio-stricken children during the Mothers’ March on Polio in the 1950s. My paper instead centers the perspective of self-proclaimed “polio mothers” who found themselves trapped between two contradictory societal expectations: that their gender predisposed them to maternity and their disability precluded them from maternity. Drawing from newspapers, homemaker rehabilitation projects, and memoirs, I argue that these polio mothers participated in an early form of disability activism, centered on their gendered public identities as disabled housewives and mothers in the private space of the home. They wrote about their “iron-lung” births, participated in “polio mother of the year” contests, and helped organize Mothers’ Marches. By publicizing their private acts of mothering, these polio mothers accomplished two feats. First, they reinforced their belonging within the status quo of the white, middle-class nuclear family at a time when women with disabilities were widely deemed to be unfit wives and mothers. Second, they called attention to the sexual lives and reproductive needs of polio survivors at a time when support and funding for polio survivors was in decline following the success of the Salk vaccine. While their adherence to white, middle-class family life reflected conservative values, the actions polio mothers took to fulfill the same gender expectations as their nondisabled peers were quietly radical.

Learning Objectives

- Analyze how disability, in conjunction with race, gender, and class, influenced experiences of reproduction and motherhood.
- Deepen understandings of how perceptions of gender and disability affect historical memory.
- Acquire a historically nuanced understanding of disability and ableism.