

MARTIN-LUTHER-UNIVERSITÄT
HALLE-WITTENBERG



Call for Papers

5th Crosscurrents Conference—Women and Health in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic World

4 - 6 December 2025

Venue: University of Madeira – Rectory Building (Madeira Island, Portugal)

Organised by

Intercontinental Cross-Currents Network
and

University of Madeira, Faculty of Arts and Humanities - Department of Languages, Literatures and
Cultures

and

Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg

“On every hand we hear it acknowledged that in physical health, women of the present day are inferior to those of half a century ago. In form, in freshness and real beauty of countenance, in vigor and sprightliness, in animal spirits and powers of endurance, and in ability to perform duties that require energy and force, no one doubts that women in America are constantly depreciating. [...] It is fast spreading among all ranks, and reaching all portions of the land.”

(Rev. Anson Smyth in Dinah Maria Mulock Craik,
A Woman's Thoughts about Woman, 1858, vii-viii)

Notions of women's health in the long nineteenth century were part and parcel of transatlantic societies' gender politics. Therefore, it doesn't come as a surprise that foundational twentieth-century feminist scholars turned to questions of women's health in their critique of patriarchal power structures. In the 1970s and 1980s, researchers such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, in their so-called “feminist reconstruction of history,” argued that we should study nineteenth-century health discourse in order to make apparent how the social role of women was constructed. This argument was based on the assumption that changes in social and cultural attitudes are made “evident in the language of health” (7). They believed that models of health and sickness showcased a plurality of notions of womanhood, i.e., they indicated what was considered personal shortcomings in women, what was construed as social problems, appropriate moral behaviour, women's citizenship roles, etc. Scholars started to dissect health concepts and their cultural

environment to see what judgements and expectations ideas of health have conveyed (see *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*; 1986, 6-7). After a two-decade-long interest in issues of women and health, interest ebbed until more recently when the Covid-19 pandemic starkly highlighted the gendered and racialised norms and prejudices tied to notions of health. This global health crisis generated renewed interest in questions of women and health across many disciplines, including medicine, history, social science, cultural and literary studies, as well as queer and gender studies.

Our interdisciplinary conference contributes to the conversation by focusing on comparative transatlantic perspectives on women and health in the long nineteenth century. We invite scholars and professionals from diverse fields to explore the intricate relationship between health discourses and concepts of womanhood, as well as the experiences and realities that women encountered, engaged in, resisted, or helped create.

We encourage cross-disciplinary studies and comparative transnational perspectives. Thus, the conference will address a broad range of topics, including but not limited to:

- ✓ Medical Discourses and Women's Health in the 19th century: How societal attitudes toward women's health shaped medical knowledge.
- ✓ Women's Journals and Health Discourse: Popular notions of women and health in periodical literature.
- ✓ Maternal Health and Childbirth: Practices, challenges, and changing perceptions.
- ✓ Women in Medical Professions: The roles and struggles of women as healers, midwives, and physicians.
- ✓ Women's Mental Health: Diagnoses, treatments, and cultural perceptions of women's psychological well-being.
- ✓ Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights: Contraception, abortion, and the fight for bodily autonomy.
- ✓ Women and Infectious Diseases: Gendered impacts of epidemics and public health responses.
- ✓ The Intersection of Class, Race, and Women's Health: Disparities and systemic barriers to care.
- ✓ Sexual Morality, Purity, and Public Health Campaigns: The impact of social movements and moral discourses on women's health.
- ✓ Women's Health in Literature and Art: Representations and critiques in creative works.
- ✓ Diet, Exercise, and Women's Physical Health: Changing norms and practices.
- ✓ Philanthropy and Public Health Initiatives Led by Women: Women's leadership in health and welfare reforms.

- ✓ Women's Autonomy in Healthcare Decision-Making: Personal agency and systemic constraints.
- ✓ Women and Disability: Experiences, advocacy, and evolving frameworks.
- ✓ Alternative Perspectives and Treatments of Women's Health During the 19th Century: Traditional, holistic, and non-Western approaches.

Conference Format

For conference contributions, we envision a paper and response format. Therefore, in a first step we are soliciting original papers on the topics outlined above. In a second round, we will ask for scholars willing to respond to the papers based on the abstract proposals provided by speakers. Presentations will be 15-20 min long, and responses 8-10 min (depending on the number of contributors). Presenters will be asked to send a draft of their talk, or at least an outline of the main arguments, two weeks before the event so that respondents can prepare. By this method, we hope to include a variety of people and to engender an engaged discussion from the outset. The same format will be followed in the subsequent publication we plan to emerge from this conference, as with many of the essays from our most recent conference, published in 2023 in [Transatlantic Women at Work](#).

Submission Guidelines

We welcome individual papers that align with any of the conference's themes above. Submissions should include:

- A 300-word abstract of the proposed paper.
- A brief biography (150 words), including the author's name, institutional affiliation, and contact information.

Please email your submissions to crosscurrents@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de **by March 31, 2025**, with the subject line: "Submission – Women's Health Conference." Notifications of acceptance will be sent by April 20, 2025.

Call for Responses

The Call for Responses will be issued at the end of April. Please feel free to be in touch earlier in case you can already say that you would be potentially interested in responding to papers and we will reach out to you directly with suggestions once the line-up of talks has been decided.

Publication Opportunity

A selection of papers will be considered for publication in an edited volume or a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal.

Registration Fee

The full registration fee is expected to be no more than €120; reduced €60 (PhD students); subject to adjustment based on the final number of participants. The confirmed amount will be communicated as soon as possible. We appreciate your understanding.

Accommodation

The conference will be held at the University of Madeira Rectory Building in Funchal – *Colégio dos Jesuítas*, conveniently within walking distance of various accommodation options. Further details can be found [here](#).

Contact Information

For inquiries, please contact the local conference organiser, Inês Tadeu (inest@staff.uma.pt), or the co-host and network coordinator, Julia Nitz (julia.nitz@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de). Further details will be made available soon on our [website](#).