

*Women, Feminism,
and Femininity in
the 21st Century*

*American and French
Perspectives*

Edited by

BÉATRICE MOUSLI

and

EVE-ALICE

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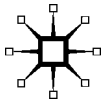


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AMERICAN AND FRENCH PERSPECTIVES

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To Elisenne, Henry, and Milena

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Introduction

BÉATRICE MOUSLI AND
EVE-ALICE ROUSTANG-STOLLER

The essays in this book are the result of a series of lectures held at the Francophone Research and Resource Center at the University of Southern California (USC) in the spring of 2006. The short story is that these lectures happened because we are French women living, working, and raising children in the United States.

The longer story would take us to the benches of the USC campus and its coffee shops where we had never-ending conversations about being French in the United States, being a French employee in an American workplace (and, more specifically, a French professor at an American campus), a French wife to an American husband, and a French mother to American children. As working mothers in the United States, the issues that concern us are by definition those of an American context. Since we moved from France to the United States, our relationship with France has become more theoretical: we don't live there and we make up for it by reading and hearing about it from friends and family. While losing some of our "Frenchness" to become more and more American, it has become a habit for us, anytime we are confronted with a new or perplexing situation, to compare our native country to our adoptive one and to reflect: "So this is how it is for women here, but back there, women do that." To say that we are constantly, consciously and unconsciously, comparing, evaluating policies and cultural traits is to say the least.

We found these comparisons interesting and fruitful not just for understanding our personal and professional lives, but also generally for understanding the way men and women behave toward each other

in the United States and France, and the intellectual, theoretical issues that were thus addressed. So we decided to put some experts to work on these issues. We invited American and French scholars at the USC Francophone Resource Center to discuss some of the following topics: What does the life of a woman look like today in the United States and in France? Since voices demanding more equality between men and women and more opportunities for women were first heard, what's changed? Which milestones have been reached in the professional, private, and political areas? Which areas have realized hopes worded by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s (and even before), and which can still be improved? More generally, in both countries, which part of their lives are women happy about and which would they like to change or improve? And more importantly for us, how can confronting facts about both countries contribute to the reflections taking place in each of them? In doing so, we purposely mixed theory and practice. We wanted a book that presented about current feminist movements and about the actual situations of women as studied by the social sciences, as well as personal reflections on these issues.

Because of the two different, yet related, national traditions addressed in this book, one of the key issues has to do with the involvement of the State: Should the government be involved in regulating relations between men and women and enforcing equality between them? In both countries, to varying degrees, the answer leans toward yes. So, how much and in what ways should the government intervene? Both countries pride themselves on their universal constitution, that is to say, on constitutional texts that do not mention gender, and which do not write gender into the law because the constitution is precisely supposed to be universal. But does it actually succeed in protecting men and women equally? Many feminists believe not. Some of the authors featured here argue that more equality means more acknowledgments of gender differences. But others believe the opposite, that gender must be put aside if more equality is to be reached, and that it is people's personal aspirations that must be taken into account regardless of their gender. Nevertheless, they all argue for more equality and look for various, sometimes differing, ways to achieve this result.

These different points of view are organized in three parts. The first one, "The Battle of the Sexes: From the Bedroom to the Workplace, New Perspectives on Old Issues," deals with issues of family and work with several articles on the United States and others on France. The second, "Parity: A French Interpretation of Affirmative Action," looks at the *parité* (parity) movement in France from both the French and the

American perspective. The last part, "Feminism and Post-Modernism: Looking Toward the Future," addresses issues of feminism in the past and today, as well as sexuality and reproduction from cross-cultural viewpoints.¹

The first part starts with the question of why so many American women should be so envious of the life enjoyed by women in France. Béatrice Mousli's essay answers this question. In France, public policies have favored both women's entrance into the workplace and their opportunities to access quality child care. As a result, France combines a high ratio of female professionals with a relatively (compared to other European countries) high birthrate. In France, the State can certainly be thanked for this situation. One is left hoping that these policies will eventually pay off in the political sphere as well as they have in the professional and private spheres.

The second essay, by Alexandra Migoya, explores, from a different angle, why French women should be the envy of American women. She shows how French women and, more generally, French people are perceived to have a freer sex life. French married women, it is believed, have affairs without jeopardizing their marriage. Migoya turns to history to explain the American perception and demonstrates that, as unsupportive as statistics may be of this opinion, it endures: French women enjoy more freedom in their amorous relationships, and thus have to be happier than American women who, while they engage as much or as little in them as the French, do so with guilt.

But however free French women are, or are supposed to be, they say their situation when it comes to employment is little cause for envy: Jacqueline Laufer explains that there is a strong glass ceiling blocking women's career advancement, despite efforts from the government and from companies. This is true if one looks both at the type of careers chosen by women (they remain in traditionally female fields) and in how well they do (few of them reach the top). To counter this situation, for the past ten years, more and more companies have come up with a number of policies promoting professional equality. But part of the problem is that companies generally design their career management policies with the model of the "ideal worker"² in mind, a man by default. This is to the detriment of women's careers. Companies and management teams must therefore become aware of the prejudices and stereotypes that unconsciously underlie their policies and expectations.

This is also believed by L. Casper and S. Bianchi who, in the fourth essay, look at the evolution of American women's careers and family

time. With J. Pixley's essay they answer the question of what the life of the American woman looks like. Since the 1970s, in the United States, things have greatly improved for women both at work and on the home front. As a result, women born between the early 1950s and late 1960s started working in a labor market very different from the one of their parents: not only is discrimination against women at work now illegal, but also, possibly as a result, professions have become less gender specific, opening many doors for women. Married men can no longer take for granted that *their* career is the only one that counts because it is very possible that their wives will do just as well as them professionally, or even better. At home, they have become more invested in child care and even in the housework. Thus both market (paid) work and housework/child care (unpaid) are less divided along gender lines than they used to be. As a result, the time that both men and women spend with their children (or parents) has increased. One might say that a form of equality has been reached since, if one puts together the total workload, paid and unpaid, men and women work as much. However, in general, men still do more paid work and women more housework and child care. Casper and Bianchi show that the movement towards less gender specialized professional roles seems to have stalled during the past decade. Moreover, in dual-earner couples, spousal income does not predict shares in household tasks: even if the wife has a more successful career than her husband, she is still likely to spend more time than him taking care of their children and home.

Pixley's study of contemporary upstate New York couples corroborates this notion. Examining the balance between the husband's and the wife's careers, she asks whose career gets to advance, whose is discriminated against and why. It turns out that more successful careers for women and greater contribution to the household finances doesn't necessarily mean that the wives' career advancement will be given equal consideration to the husbands'. Women have become professionally and financially more and more equal to men, but the effect this change has had on families has not been proportionate to the change in women's careers. In other words, there might still be a glass ceiling at home.

And what characterizes those less traditional couples who either prioritize their careers equally or favor the wife's career? They are those in which "greater work commitments—and successes—on the part of women do correspond to a higher chance of having an equal or favored career."³ This suggests that if women have better education, they will likely have equal or primary careers since other aspects of the relationship

are already more equal. In developed countries in which equality between spouses has grown and girls and women are going to school and graduating now in higher numbers than boys, there is hope for more equality in the career hierarchy within a couple. In Casper and Bianchi's and Pixley's picture, women and couples have come a long way in term of gender equality within the family, even if there is still room for improvement.

How can such improvements be made? As for recommendations for the future, Casper and Bianchi call for more State and corporate interest and investment in the issue: the stalled revolution cannot be dealt with by individuals alone. There needs to be outside intervention, whether it is individuals putting pressure on corporations or the state imposing rules on them or offering incentives for corporations to offer more flexible work options, or corporations themselves choosing to offer their employees solutions that will make them more productive in the long term. Casper and Bianchi notice that, more and more, a comparison to European countries is invoked in order to show the U.S. delay in labor "family-friendly" policies. The European example is used to describe a world that would be not just fairer to women, but also more pleasant for both men and women. The issue of equality of work (professional and in the home) having been solved, we may dream of a post-equality world where men and women, equal at home and in their professions, work together with the State and private corporations to improve everyone's quality of life, not just women's. Solutions include more flexibility in the work schedule, which would give more freedom and be beneficial to both sexes.

For Pixley, as far as the division between professional and house work goes, women can improve the situation. But whether or not they still do a lot more than their husbands at home, this is not a front on which to fight. Energy should not be spent making husbands perform more household tasks, but, for women, on changing their attitudes toward professional work. It seems that if they become more powerful there, then they will have more power at home and extended chances of balancing career hierarchy within the couple. Pixley's study also points out that a successful woman is one devoted to her career and to having a career; hence, a woman comfortable with assuming a large, or even the larger, part of the breadwinning in the family. If complete equality is to be reached, women as well as men must change their attitudes toward traditional gender roles. In order to make men more like women at home, women will also have to become more like men at work. How many of them desire to do so remains to be seen.

Littleton, who describes the various stages through which sexual harassment laws were accepted, and whose concern is women at work,

would agree that it is men who need to change. She shows that while antidiscrimination laws have been key to allowing women to access equal professional opportunities, these very laws now run the risk of limiting women's freedom because employers now insist that all relations between employees remain strictly professional. Employers, who at first were wary of these laws, understood all the advantages they could derive from them, and have embraced them in possibly an excessive way. In a co-ed workplace, the problem is now to distinguish between mutual relations versus forced ones, instead of banning them all indiscriminately. Littleton believes that regulation should address the latter relations while allowing the former because forbidding all relations is a restriction of freedom. Like Casper and Bianchi, Littleton calls on the law, this time to take up the specific situation of aggressive male behavior.

What comes out of the first part of this book is that progress in gender equality has slowed down or stalled. In order for there to be new progress, the governments of both countries have to make new commitments to gender equality and be proactive in implementing them. Individuals and couples can only do so much on their own. There has to be an atmosphere in which equality is not only materially possible, but also desirable and acceptable by men and women. One is reminded of an important idea formulated by second-wave American Feminists: the personal is political. When it comes to gender equality, there is no separation between private and public spheres because they influence one another.

This idea arguably underlies the parity movement in France. Parity is a concept which refers to equal representation of men and women in political office. It was adopted in France in 1999. France became one of the few countries to codify gender equality in the political sphere in its constitution. Christine Fauré argues that this is justified by France's republican system, whose very birth was an act of excluding women from public representation. The French constitution states France's republican universalism. The French Republic being "one and indivisible," it cannot take into account gender, which divides citizens in two groups. As a result, an unequal sexual order is at the core of French democracy. Hence parity had to go against history.

When the parity law was finally adopted, after many years of debate, Fauré states, it was time to move on from a text written in completely different historical circumstances (the French Revolution) and acknowledge the modern challenge faced by our institutions. In the eighteenth century, a medical discourse had emerged that asserted women's inferiority

and justified their exclusion from the political sphere (the same discourse was used to expel people of color from political representation). Thus the concept of parity “was not aimed at upsetting existing balances by introducing a homeopathic dose of women into the electoral system, but rather at correcting an anachronistic conception of national representation.”²⁴ In the United States, the same type of unfairness was to be corrected thanks to affirmative action.

Réjane Sénac-Slawinski specifies that the challenge for the concept of parity is to articulate differences (gender differences) within equality. This idea is valuable because it denounces the naturalization of gendered power relationships. And this is why it has been so successful: parity has become instrumental in understanding the importance of sexual order as opposed to other orders (natural, social, economic, etc.). We can now ask how the concept of democratic equality takes into account gender differences and revealed that some of these differences, usually gender ones, are illegitimate and amount to gender inequalities. Moreover, parity doesn’t just ask for more political equality, it also questions equality in other spheres: public, professional, and private.

But while the concept of parity was being theoretically so fruitful, what happened was not an acceptance of differences within equality, but equalization through differences, as Sénac-Slawinski demonstrates. The fact that there are far fewer women elected than men has become a topic both of studies and of public policies, but it doesn’t mean that the question of equal legitimacy of both genders to exert power has been solved. In other words, consciously or unconsciously, men are still considered more apt, and better equipped than women to be politicians. Such is their “nature.” Therein lies the difficulty of the concept of parity: It is both a political principle (theoretical aspect) and its legal and electoral translation (practical aspect).

In particular, parity failed to bring women into the French political sphere as men’s equals. They were brought in all right, but because they were supposed to bring something else to politics, such as a concern for “care” issues. Sénac-Slawinski shows that the equality brought about by parity was conditional, for it failed to question women’s relegation to the private sphere, and to upset the gender of power. And indeed, parity was avoided by political parties in several ways, whether men kept the high-power, strategic positions or chose female candidates not according to their experience, but according their ability to resemble the people they were to represent.

The successes and shortcomings of parity are exposed when one considers American feminists' outlook as shown in Amy Mazur's essay. Feminists in the country of affirmative action were certainly most interested in seeing the emergence of the parity movement and eagerly waiting for the law's application. Parity could have been another reason why American women were jealous of French women. Mazur's essay presents the three viewpoints (that of reform-oriented, empirical, and cultural feminism) on parity in order to explore links between French and U.S. feminism, to better understand parity's repercussions for feminists in the United States and to assess what lessons can be drawn from it.

The most positive viewpoint comes from reform-oriented feminism, which holds parity in high opinion because it brought diverse actors and groups together. Moreover, these actors and groups were able to overcome divisions, thus showing that feminists of all types can work together to achieve specific ends. More negative, empirical feminism sees the derisory actual results of the parity law and deplores that it did not translate into concrete reforms. While reform-oriented feminists see parity as an important symbol, what's important for empirical feminists is precisely that the reform is just a symbol with little actual bearings on reality. Finally, cultural feminism holds a completely negative view of parity because it did not concern itself with bringing issues of race and ethnicity into the public discussions of women's political representation. As a result, the strategies of the movement effectively codified and institutionalized a culturally blind approach into French policy that systematically closed out any future treatment of race/ethnic-based discrimination in political representation. In the end, the gender-biased republican model remains unchanged and unchallenged. The great success of the parity movement according to some is also, for others, its main shortcoming: The fact that the movement was able to unify individuals of otherwise diverging opinions, an amazing achievement for reform-oriented feminists, means for cultural feminists that the debate is close in the long run to bringing issues of race within the debate about gender equality.

The parity movement, arguably the most organized feminist movement of the past twenty years in France, while demonstrating that a large and diverse group can achieve a common objective notwithstanding their other disagreements, also reveals, by default, the absence of great feminist causes in France. As if French women were happy enough about gender equality in the private sphere that the only remaining

focus for them would be the public one, or as if they had decided that in order to achieve more progress in the private and the professional spheres, more had to be done in the political one.

With parity's mixed results in France and American families still somewhat stuck in traditional gender roles, how are both countries to renew feminism in the wide sense of the movement promoting equality and opportunities for women? The third part of this book tackles this question. For Roustang-Stoller, French feminists would be well inspired to cast their eyes on the United States. Because many American women (self-described feminists and others) believe that there are so many elements in their lives that need change and improvement, the literary production on the subject is rich. Roustang-Stoller's critical review of these books shows the diversity of their nature and their interests. The genre of creative nonfiction, which does not exist in France to the extent it does in the United States, is one women favor to reflect on of feminine and, more broadly, social concerns. The abundance of nonacademic books about women and families (to put it in very general words) is proof of the dynamism of these topics and of their ability to interest and mobilize not only academics and experts. On the contrary, it seems that French feminism has lately put all its hopes in the hands of the French government and lawmakers. This is important, but what Creative nonfiction by American women suggests is that in order to federate enthusiasm, issues need to involve people personally so that they feel empowered about being able to change or improve things themselves. While Roustang-Stoller's essay points out what many Americans believe to be shortcomings of their government, it is a tribute to the dynamism of American (women's) ability to reflect on specific problems in order to come up with solutions that can be acted on by civil society.

Marcela Iacub's essay is also a tribute to the United States, this time to American judges' inventiveness and ability to take action on new situations created by new technologies. She analyses the legal status of offspring in France showing that to be a mother there, a woman needs to have given birth. The surrogate mother is illegal, and the French family does not "revolve around marriage, but the fertile woman's womb."⁵ As a result, when it comes to having children, many inequalities exist, not just between men and women (and in this case, it is women who are favored), but also between fertile and sterile women, heterosexuals and homosexuals. Describing a couple of concrete cases in which technology made it hard to decide who the "biological" parents were, Iacub

explains how American judges used the poetic role of the law to invent a new way of becoming a parent. In this sense, law can create new definitions and new realities. She calls for a world in which biological relationships would be founded on choices, not on biology. The consequence would be equality between all types of parents and couples. This would also create more equality between biological and adopted children, by suppressing the implicit hierarchy between them.

What Iacub calls for may become reality in the future. For her it is the condition of complete equality between sexes. In the distance of her vision is the artificial womb, which would radically alter gender roles in parenting. Iacub's essay as well as Maniglier's evokes a futuristic world, because according to them, only radical changes will lead to real gender equality.

For Maniglier, this would be realized in the utopia of the postsexopolis. Contrary to Littleton, Maniglier believes that in order to achieve sexual equality and freedom, it is not more, but fewer rules that are needed. Instead of regulating which sexual behaviors and practices are allowed and which are illegal (prostitution, sodomy, etc.), the State should not concern itself with anything sexual, or be involved in any sexual encounters (as long as they are mutually agreed to). The law and institutions should keep out of sex because they are reductive of what the definition of sex is. Maniglier argues that one cannot define what a sexual act is, because there might be as many definitions as individuals giving them. It is, therefore, better to let everyone have their own definitions, and to allow for a plethora of definitions. This is the way to have truly free sexuality. In the postsexopolis, sexuality is simply not an issue; men and women can have sex with whomever, whenever, and wherever they want. For Maniglier as for Iacub, complete freedom (of one's sexual activities, of the nature of one's offsprings) is the condition that leads to complete equality.

This somewhat radical position is not embraced by the essay closing the book. Douglas Kellner and Rhonda Hammer's essay's first virtue is to remind us of the wealth of ideas, positions, and debates within feminisms and among feminists. Thus they pay tribute to feminists, gays, and lesbians, who have had an essential role in raising issues and sparking debates on topics such as sexuality, family life, procreation, and gender and sexual equality. While Hammer and Kellner do not embrace the complete sexual freedom pictured by Maniglier, they remind the reader that such a utopia was made possible by a first-, and then second-wave feminism. Hammer and Kellner refuse, however, to speak of a third-wave feminism, because

they see this movement as a backlash from conservative women and groups, which doesn't deserve the name of feminism. They point out that sexuality is still a terrain of pleasure and danger and question the possibility of Maniglier's utopia: that a place without law regarding sexuality would be a place with many victims and predators. But according to them, traditional gender roles are still too marked to allow for a postsexual city. They believe that, despite all the progress made thanks to feminism, we still live in a macho culture in which male aggressiveness is valued, and which will need tremendous work to tame it.

Of course, Maniglier is not so naïve as to believe that the Postsexopolis is actually possible. But as he invents it, he forces us to question our beliefs about the relationship between sexuality and the law. Do we live in a permissive society or in a repressed one? Maniglier and Iacub, on a different, yet related topic, show that the answer is not as obvious as it seems. Hammer and Kellner call for a de-machoing of our Western culture, and they also point out that Maniglier's postsexopolis may not be the solution to this problem. If sexuality is so intertwined with pleasure and danger, as Hammer and Kellner and common sense suggest, the Postsexopolis is not only impossible, it may not be desirable: Is the Postsexopolis possible without men becoming like women and women becoming like men, without blurring the two genders? Doesn't this utopia imply a desire for an androgynous state? Even if one, like Littleton, Hammer and Kellner, wishes for men to give up what currently defines them as men (simply put, their aggressiveness or machismo), would a sexuality in which men and women are interchangeable be attractive?

The essays in this book show the many challenges that the very notion of equality presents. For the parity movement, equality means a political (and social) revolution. For others, it requires the intervention of the government to impose and of private corporations to invent new ways of creating professional equality. And still for others, equality means a technological and legal revolution that will allow all individuals, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, to decide whether or not to become parents because individuals should be equal whether they have children or not and regardless of their ability to procreate. It is the purpose of grouping these different points of views to show the complexity of the gender equality issue. Far from fearing they will discourage the reader from tackling this question, the authors of this book hope to move him or her to creative action or thought in order to contribute to making it happen.

Notes

1. Here, we will use Amy Mazur's broad and precise definition of feminism (p. 59). For her it implies three elements:
 1. A certain understanding of women as a group within the context of the social, economic, and cultural diversity of women.
 2. The advancement of women's rights, status, or condition as a group in both the public and private spheres.
 3. The reduction or elimination of gender-based hierarchy or patriarchy that underpins basic inequalities between men and women in the public and private spheres.
2. A term defined by Joan Williams in *Unbending Gender. Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About it* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
3. See p. 02 of this book.
4. See p. 27 of this book.
5. See p. 192 of this book.

PART I

*The Battle of the Sexes:
From the Bedroom to the Workplace,
New Perspectives on Old Issues*

CHAPTER 1

France in 2009: A Glimpse into Women's Lives

BÉATRICE MOUSLI

In the United States, French women have an aura that refuses to go away. They incarnate both sensuality and intelligence; they have a reputation for being experts in the art of living, for knowing how to manage the office and the kitchen, children and friends; they do the impossible, balancing family and professional lives while remaining slim, caring, and sexy.¹ “In the French version, women weren’t expected to forgo high heels and chivalry in exchange for equality. So it’s not surprising here when successful women retain their charms. In the United States, the two can seem mutually exclusive”: Pamela Druckerman (2008) takes up what appears to American journalists as one of France’s many paradoxes.² But beyond this anecdotal, glossy magazine image, what is the position of women in French society today?

Equality between the sexes regularly makes front-page news in France; indeed, at the time of this writing, “Institutions: la parité professionnelle inscrite dans la constitution” (Institutions: Professional Parity Inscribed in the Constitution; AFP 2008) and “Séparer filles et garçons à l’école: ‘cela n’arrangera en rien la cohabitation homme-femme!’” (Separating Girls and Boys in School: “That Will Only Make Matters Worse for Male–Female Cohabitation”; *Le Monde* 2008) are two headlines on the front page of the daily *Le Monde*. A few weeks ago, the same newspaper ran a story on the necessity of increasing the

number of places in day-care centers in and around Paris³ and another commenting on the implementation of the salary equality law.⁴ This tiny and nonrepresentative sampling of what is published each week on these questions in all the newspapers and magazines of the Hexagon is but the reflection of a well-provided program of laws. For thirty years, the country has tried to put into place the tools that, from birth until retirement, will guarantee equality between the sexes, in both the public and private spheres.

School Days

At the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, the Palme d'Or was awarded to *Entre les murs*,⁵ a film that shows the day-to-day life of a middle-school teacher and his class in a working-class Paris neighborhood and poses anew the question of academic equality between the sexes. Some have gone so far as to propose a return to single-sex middle and high schools, studies having shown that the two sexes benefit greatly (academically) from this solution. The worry is not new in France and has for years sparked propositions and even laws intended to promote the equality of chances for girls and boys in the context of the schools. Thus, article 121-1 of the education code insists on the notions of equality and human rights:

Elementary, middle, and high schools and establishments of higher education are responsible for transmitting to students and helping them to acquire knowledge and work methods. They promote diversity and equality between men and women, notably in the matter of orientation. They contribute to an education in civic responsibility and participate in the prevention of delinquency. They assure an education in the knowledge of and respect for human rights as well as an understanding of the concrete situations affecting them. They dispense an education adapted in its contents and its methods to the economic, social, and cultural evolutions of the country and its European and international environment.

In Europe and the countries of the OECD in general, it has been demonstrated that girls succeed better than boys. In France,

In 2005, 82.3 percent of girls obtained a diploma whereas only 75.6 percent of boys did. Girls are 8.8 percent more likely than

boys to be orientated toward the best streams: the general and technological second class.⁶ They pass the *baccalauréat* at a rate of almost 82 percent versus boys at 77.7 percent. 68.4 percent of a generation of girls are today the holders of this diploma, almost 11.5 percent more than the boys of the same generation. (Ministère de l'Education Nationale 2008)

But girls are less audacious in their academic and professional orientations and remain prisoners by and large to the stereotypes of their sex. They are therefore found in greater numbers in the service and social streams than in the scientific ones. They are more likely to transmit knowledge than to seek it, to provide care rather than cures. Girls are also a majority in the literary fields, where they are usually oriented toward teaching. The question posed by the education specialists is the following one: How can girls be brought to overcome the stereotypes and “dare” to study the sciences as early as elementary school? In effect, the French academic structure obliges children very early on to make choices that will condition their future professional orientation and limit their possibilities of ulterior reorientations. In 2006, the government took numerous measures intended to restore equilibrium. On the one hand, a “common foundation”⁷ intended to put all students on the same footing was established by the ministry: “The common foundation of knowledge and competencies instituted by the decree of July 11, 2006, precisely identifies respect for the opposite sex and the rejection of stereotypes among the social and civil competencies that each student must acquire and develop over the course of his mandatory schooling. The establishments are urged to inscribe this preoccupation in their internal rules” (Ministère de l'Education Nationale 2008). In addition to this “foundation,” that same year, eight ministers signed a “Convention pour la promotion de l'égalité des chances entre les filles et les garçons, les femmes et les hommes dans le système éducatif” (Convention to promote equality of opportunities between girls and boys, women and men within the educational system), whose premises are the following:

Girls succeed better than boys on the scholarly level, in terms of the average length of their studies, the average level of their diplomas, and their exam success rates. Despite this, they remain less present in the most prestigious fields and the most promising jobs. In higher education, girls are thus overrepresented in the literary fields, the professional fields of service, the Instituts de formation

des maîtres (IUFM, K-12 teacher training colleges), and the paramedical and social schools. Boys are overrepresented in the scientific and industrial fields, notably in the *Instituts universitaire de technologie* (IUT, technology colleges) and the engineering schools. Thus, it is a matter of allowing girls and boys to escape from all sexed determinism for their orientations so that their aspirations and competencies may prevail.⁸

Until the generations formed in a system governed by these new laws reach working age, let us meanwhile consider how things stand today for women in professional life.

In the Office

The advances in the right of women to work correspond to the periods in which the country was forced to rely upon women in order to produce and to survive: periods of war and economic expansion. It is no coincidence that a number of these rights followed on the heels of World War I or that one of the great victories of World War II was the right to vote accorded to women by General de Gaulle in 1944. On the other hand, when jobs have been scarcer, married women have found it difficult to gain acceptance in the workplace. Thus, in 1919, women were sent back to their homes with a clear mission: to have children. In 1930, they were discouraged from working, the state going so far as to block female candidates from access to certain civil service exams. Women would have to wait until 1982 to gain equal access to the civil service and until 1988 for it to be completely implemented.

Today, we are again in a period of “prosperous times” for women: the retiring baby-boomers must be replaced, and it seems that France has, over the last forty years, put into place a legislative arsenal that attempts to best guarantee professional equality.

First of all, the reform of the matrimonial regime in 1965 has had a decisive influence on the lives of working women. Up till then, the girl and then the wife had no legal capacity: considered a minor, she passed directly from the guardianship of her parents to that of her husband. Now, she can freely control her own assets, practice a profession without the authorization of her husband, and receive unemployment benefits, a right previously refused to her because she had been considered the responsibility of her husband (another way for the state to