
*Equality and Difference:
How Catholic Women in Louisiana Reacted to the Struggle for Equal Rights*

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Scholars of the resurgent feminist movement of the 1970s have generally overlooked the ways in which Catholic women in the state of Louisiana felt about and reacted to the renewed effort to promote women's economic and social equality. A study of these women is needed because of the particular cultural context they lived in, the "Bible Belt" South. Known for its right-wing political conservatism and its religious fundamentalism, this region, which Louisiana is a part, provided a cultural environment which was far different from most Catholic women's experiences in the United States. The study of the encounter of Catholic women with evangelical, politically conservative Southerners enriches the body of knowledge on Catholic and Southern political and social dynamics in the period of the second-wave movement.

In this essay, I argue that the idea of "equal rights" and womanhood had meanings for many Catholic women in Louisiana, which were sometimes at odds with definitions promoted by participants in the second-wave feminist movement. Catholic women in Louisiana were guided by their faith in defining equality and true womanhood. Believing women to be endowed with special abilities, some Catholic women in Louisiana, especially those who were more socially conservative, interpreted "equal rights" to mean equal opportunity in the workplace while still allowing laws which compensated for the different abilities and interests of women. For these women, equality did not mean the right to be liberated from the ideal family structure according to Christian values. When they felt that the federal government could intervene and deny states the right to define equality and family on their own terms, some Catholic women in Louisiana took up the familiar refrain of "states' rights" to fend off federal intervention, particularly during the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) debate.

On the face of things, equality seems like a simple concept. Two things are substantially the same in a certain regard. Yet, when the women's rights movement reemerged in the United States in the 1970s, the notion of "equality" became complicated by cultural and political ideologies. The idea of equality between the sexes did not mean the same thing to every person involved in the debate. Equal rights did not necessarily translate to same rights.

For many of the women involved in the suffrage movement for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, equal rights meant the right to vote. Separating from the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1913, Alice Paul and Lucy Barnes formed the National Woman's Party (NWP), which remained a minority faction within the women's rights movement. Three years after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, in 1923, Alice Paul submitted to Congress the first version of the Equal Rights Amendment. This proposed amendment stated that, "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and in every place subject to its jurisdiction. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by

appropriate legislation.”¹ Convinced that women could not have both have legal equality and legal protections, Alice Paul campaigned for legal sameness with men. Concerned that the amendment would ruin all the progress made in gaining protective labor legislation for women and children, social welfare reformers, including the League of Women Voters, did not support the Equal Rights Amendment when it was first introduced in 1923. Twenty years later, the proponents of the amendment had failed to push the amendment through Congress, and Alice Paul decided to revise it. The wording of the amendment then became, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.”² Although the amendment was passed in the Senate in 1950 and 1953, it never survived in the House of Representatives.³

By the 1960s, the outlook of many American women had changed, but they were still legally and socially inferior to men. As a result of changing societal values, the second-wave feminist movement had different aims from the nineteenth-century woman’s rights movement. The women involved in this movement wanted equality in education, employment, and marriage and some advocated for birth control and abortion. Overarching all of these goals was the concept of female consciousness. Tied to the emerging ideas about female identity, the “equality-versus-difference” debate divided feminists. Those who supported the “equality” side of the argument believed that gender should not be a factor in legislative, judicial, educational, or labor decisions. Other feminists argued that women in general have needs, characteristics, and interests that are unique to their sex and that women should not need to deny the ways in which women differ from men. Uniting these women was a desire to not be discriminated against on the basis of their gender. Ann Snitow, in her personal narrative entitled “A Gender Diary”, summed up the conflict as the tension, “between needing to act as women and needing an identity not over-determined by our gender.”⁴

When the Equal Rights Amendment resurfaced in the 1970s, debates about how to define gender equality and the place of women in the family aroused intense emotions. By the 1970s, the political atmosphere in the United States was more sensitive to discrimination, and in this climate, Congress passed the ERA in 1972 with sweeping bipartisan majorities. Congress gave the states until March 22, 1979, to ratify the amendment, but many political experts thought it would sail through state legislatures. At first, the states did not disappoint these optimistic predictions. Within a month, thirteen states passed the amendment, and by the end of 1972, twenty-two states had approved the amendment. ERA supporters included the League of Women Voters, the National Organization for Women, the American Association of University Women, and the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs. Not only did major

¹ League of Women Voters Education Fund, *The League of Women Voters and the Equal Rights Amendment*, 8-9 <http://equalrightsamendment.org/misc/LWV-ERA.pdf>. 8.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ League of Women Voters Education Fund, *The League of Women Voters and the Equal Rights Amendment*, 8-9, <http://equalrightsamendment.org/misc/LWV-ERA.pdf>; Heidi Steffens, “Equal Rights Amendment,” *Off Our Backs* 1(1970): 6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25771050>. Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 65, 64, 125-126; Nancy Cott, “Feminist Politics in the 1920s: The National Woman’s Party,” *Journal of American History* 71 (1984): 44, 50, 59.

⁴ Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1991), 9,138; Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 6.

women's groups now support the ERA, but over half of all Americans did as well. A number of polls taken between 1974 and 1977 showed that a majority of Americans favored the ERA.⁵

Those who supported the ERA believed that the current laws did not offer women enough protection from gender-based discrimination, and they wanted the guarantee of a Constitutional amendment to ensure their rights. Janet K. Boles, a feminist who was involved in the ERA struggle, explained, "The basic principle on which the amendment rests is that gender should not be a factor in determining the legal rights of either men or women."⁶ In 1972, Sylvia Roberts, the president of the National Organization for Women Legal Defense and Education Fund maintained that the Fourteenth Amendment "could not be relied upon to insure women of their rights" since the United States Supreme Court failed to use it to defend the rights of women in the past.⁷

However, the momentum to pass the amendment slowed after 1972 as an opposition movement took root. Eventually, the opponents of the ERA came to include the American Party, the National States' Rights Party, and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Leading the fight were Happiness of Womanhood and STOP ERA, a group organized by Phyllis Schlafly, a Catholic woman who mobilized her Eagle Forum to combat the amendment. Her speeches, books, radio talks, and newsletter aroused socially conservative Americans to protest against changes that they perceived to threaten Judeo-Christian values. Although Congress extended the deadline to June 30, 1982, the amendment never did receive the approval of thirty-eight states, which is required for ratification.⁸

Much of the opposition to the ERA was in the South. Of the fifteen states that did not pass the ERA, ten were in the South. Among the arguments against the ERA were claims that it would open the draft to women, force women to earn half of the family's income, destroy family structures, and strip women of legal protections. ERA opponents stressed that women were different than men and had special needs. Although many supported legal safeguards to protect women from discrimination, they did not want to overturn legislation that took into account women's unique interests and abilities. Some of those who fought against the ERA asserted that the language of the amendment was too broad and open to multiple interpretations. State Senator Brown Ayres from Tennessee claimed that he was, "...in favor of equal treatment of women, equal pay, equal rights,"⁹ but he thought the amendment lacked clarity and was capable of being misunderstood. However, reminiscent of southern cries during the Civil War Era and Reconstruction, his deepest concern was that the amendment would take the power away from the states to deal with any unjust actions or practices.¹⁰

⁵ League of Women Voters Education Fund, *The League of Women Voters and the Equal Rights Amendment*, 8-9, <http://equalrightsamendment.org/misc/LWV-ERA.pdf>; Heidi Steffens, "Equal Rights Amendment," *Off Our Backs* (1970): 6; Janet K. Boles, *The Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment*, 1,2, 62, 103. "Equal Rights Amendment Big Issue In Legislatures," *Times-Picayune*, March 11, 1973.

⁶ Janet K. Boles, *The Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.* and "Equal Rights Amendment Big Issue In Legislatures," *Times-Picayune*, March 11, 1973.

⁸ League of Women Voters Education Fund, *The League of Women Voters and the Equal Rights Amendment*, 9, <http://equalrightsamendment.org/misc/LWV-ERA.pdf>; Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 225-227; Janet K. Boles, *The Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment*, 4; Slyvie Murray, "Donald T. Critchlow: Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade," *American Historical Review*, 112 (2007), accessed April 1, 2012, <http://web.ebscohost.com>; Judith Warner, "She Changed America," *New York Times*, January 29, 2006.

⁹ "Equal rights Amendment Big Issue in Legislatures," *Times-Picayune*, March 11, 1973.

¹⁰ Janet K. Boles, *The Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment*, 4, 226; "Equal Rights Amendment Big Issue in Legislatures," *Times-Picayune*, March 11, 1973.

In the “equality-versus-difference” debate over gender, the Catholic church would take the “difference” stance. At the close of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council on December 8, 1965, Pope Paul VI stated, “As you know, the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and in the course of the centuries, in diversity of characters, to have brought into relief her basic equality with man.”¹¹ Six years later, Pope Paul VI addressed a crowd of 1,550 feminists gathered in Vatican City for the international Soroptimist Conference. At this time, the Church was under attack by feminists who claimed it perpetuated sexism. Pope Paul VI assured the Catholic feminists that the Church agreed with their stance that women should have equal rights with men. However, even though the Church asserted that women should have the same rights as men and that women, both married and single, should be able to pursue careers, the Church maintained that women had unique gifts and capabilities. The Pope stated that women have dignity and “basic equality with man,” but they are not the same as men and have a “specific mission.” The Pope imparted the message that women’s primary mission was to take care of their families and spread the teachings of the Church.¹²

During the 1970s, American Catholics were divided over the ERA, with a little over half supporting the amendment. Among those Catholics who backed the ERA were the National Coalition of American Nuns and the National Assembly of Women Religious. But some Catholic groups, including the National Council of Catholic Women, denounced the ERA. Apparently, there was a disparity between the leading organization for women religious, the National Coalition of American Nuns, and one of the major organizations for lay Catholic women, the National Council of Catholic Women. Catholic opinion on the ERA varied across demographics, and even the Church leadership itself did not take a firm, unified stance on the issue. Lack of a definitive, official position from the Vatican (the Vatican didn’t refuse to offer an opinion, it just didn’t do so) may have caused, or at least contributed to, the disparity among American Catholics, who were left to analyze the amendment on their own if their local Church leaders did not offer them guidance.¹³

In their attack on the ERA, the Catholic Daughters of America (CDA) and the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women (ACCW), which was affiliated with the National Council of Catholic Women, used arguments that focused on two intertwined themes: the protection of women and the preservation of Christian values. Their fears were based on the fact that the ERA did not specifically identify areas where women would have “equal rights,” and so they believed the amendment might strip women of, in their view, necessary legal privileges. They also maintained that the ERA was unnecessary because legal prohibitions against discrimination based on sex already existed.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Catholic Daughters of America waited years before taking a position on the ERA. At this time, the national regent of the CDA was a Louisianan woman from

¹¹ Pope Paul VI, “Closing of the Second Vatican Council: Pope Paul VI Address to Women”, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-donne_en.html.

¹² *Ibid.*; Patrick O’Keefe, Pope Paul says Church favors Women’s Equality, *The Times-Picayune*, July 11, 1971; Henry Fesquet, *The Drama of Vatican II*, 806; Mary J. Henold, “*Catholic and Feminist*,” (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 18.

¹³ Nancy Schwartz, “Women and the Amendment,” *Commonweal* 98 (1973), 329. “Proposed Women’s Rights Law Getting Opposition,” *Clarion Herald*, August 6, 1970; Ruth A Wallace, “Joseph H. Fichter’s Contributions to Feminism,” *Sociology of Religion* 57 (1996): 361; Janet K. Boles, *The Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment*, 102; Kent L. Tedin, “Religious Preference and Pro/Anti Activism on the Equal Rights Amendment Issue,” *The Pacific Sociological Review* 21(1978), 60

the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Winifred L. Trabeaux, who, as a member of Louisiana's CDA state board, also helped lead Louisiana's CDA. Another Louisianan, Archbishop Philip M. Hannan, was the national chaplain of the CDA. As the archbishop of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Archbishop Philip M. Hannan also provided spiritual guidance for Louisiana's CDA and the ACCW. Despite Phyllis Schlafly's release of her tract, "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women," in 1972, neither the national CDA nor the Louisiana state Catholic Daughters of America had taken a stance on the ERA by 1974. In fact, the *Clarion Herald* believed the group supported the amendment. The state regent, Barbara Songy, corrected the *Clarion*'s misunderstanding with the statement, "In our resolution we did not take a stand for or against the Equal Right Amendment. Rather, it was decided that the CDA would pursue an educational course for women, through forums on the Equal Rights Amendment."¹⁴ However, when the Catholic Daughters of America finally came out in opposition to the ERA in March of 1975, it came out with fervor.¹⁵

Two months after the National Board of the Catholic Daughters of America announced publicly its opposition to the ERA, the Louisiana chapter of Catholic Daughters of America declared their support for the National Board's position. The state regent of the CDA, Barbara Songy, denounced the amendment, warning that it posed "a threat, not a support to women's rights."¹⁶ After asserting that specific women's rights problems need to be addressed by specific laws, Songy also remarked that women in Louisiana did not need any new legal protections against inequality. In 1974, Louisiana had adopted a new constitution that contained a non-discrimination clause affirming women's right to equality. However, it allowed for different legal treatment of people based on sex, age, birth, and other factors if the special treatment was "reasonable." According to one *Times-Picayune* writer, this clause was intended to be a compromise between feminists who wanted an equivalent to the ERA in the Louisiana constitution and the "vast majority of Louisianans" who:

...do not want to tamper with our community property laws, with the husband's obligation to support wife and children, and with other reasonable distinctions as to sex that society does not want to throw overboard in a mindless obsession with egalitarianism.¹⁷

For the rest of the women in the nation, Songy, echoing the National Board, pointed out that the "existing state laws, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Opportunities Act of 1972" provide for women's rights.¹⁸

When it released its official stance on the ERA, the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women also identified the sweeping terms of the amendment as one of their reasons for disapproving of the ERA. In April 1973, the chair of the Legislative Committee of the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women sent a letter to the editors of the *Times-Picayune* to declare that the ACCW stood with the National Council of Catholic Women in its denunciation of the ERA. The editorial rejected the idea of adding an overarching statement about

¹⁴ "CDA Does Not Support ERA," *Clarion Herald*, June 13, 1974.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; "CDA Iterates ERA Opposition," *Clarion Herald*, May 8, 1975; "CDA Does Not Support ERA," *Clarion Herald*, June 13, 1974.

¹⁶ "CDA Iterates ERA Opposition," *Clarion Herald*, May 8, 1975.

¹⁷ "Rights Bill's Right Measure," *The Times-Picayune*, September 2, 1973.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* and "CDA Iterates ERA Opposition," *Clarion Herald*, May 8, 1975.

discrimination based on sex to the Constitution because it would be “subject to court interpretation” and might “bring chaos and regrettable consequences.”¹⁹ They believed state legislatures should determine laws about gender discrimination, and they repudiated, “the by-passing of state legislatures as governing bodies in the public affairs of our citizens.”

Like Louisiana’s CDA, the ACCW feared that “equality” would be interpreted as “same” by the courts if the ERA was passed and that any laws which treated women differently from men would be ruled unconstitutional. In their letter to the *Times-Picayune*, the ACCW voiced their fear that the ERA would take a certain type of legal right away from women, the right to “be different” from a male, and all of women’s legal protections under Louisiana’s laws would be thrown out along with this right. Believing that the “Louisiana legislature will be robbed forever of the power to regulate laws granting a distinction between men and women,” the ACCW predicted that women would be stripped of “protective labor laws, child support payments, community property, and child custody laws.”²⁰

The religious beliefs of the members of the CDA and the ACCW drove them to denounce the ERA as a “threat to the family, the basic unit of society.”²¹ To keep the “traditional” family structure intact, they worked to save the legal protections of wives, especially housewives. Both the Louisiana CDA and the national CDA allied with Phyllis Schlafly. For its biennial convention in March of 1976 the Louisiana CDA arranged for Phyllis Schlafly, the national chair of STOP-EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT, to give an address. Schlafly predicted that if the amendment passed, wives would be required by law to provide the same amount of financial support for their family as their husbands. If this happened, housewives would be forced to desert their children in order to earn an income. This, along with the loss of other laws that benefited wives, would lead to the breakdown of the family unit. Denouncing the women’s liberation movement as a whole as “anti-family,” Schlafly asserted the ERA would also guarantee “abortion on demand; and... state nurseries for all children, universally available.”²² In her opinion, radical feminists wanted state nurseries because they believed it to be, “unfair for mothers to be expected to take care of their babies”²³ because they desired to, “be out fulfilling themselves in other jobs which, in their viewpoint, are so much more fulfilling than taking care of children.”²⁴

To combat the ERA, both the Louisiana CDA and the national CDA engaged in political action. When she first announced the Louisiana CDA’s official position on the ERA, the state regent, Barbara Songy, stated that the CDA would ask all 105 of the state’s courts to oppose any attempts to ratify the ERA in Louisiana. Trabeaux, the Louisianan woman who led the national CDA in the 1970s, assured delegates at a national CDA convention in 1978 that the organization “will do all within its power to influence the Congress to oppose any extension of the deadline.”²⁵ The deadline she was referring to was one that Congress had set for the ratification of the ERA. When the Senate approved the ERA, Congress gave the states seven years, until March 1979, to ratify the amendment. Fearing that the states would not accept the amendment by the deadline, supporters of the ERA began to pressure Congress to extend the deadline as March

¹⁹ “ERA Foe,” *Times-Picayune*, April 25, 1973.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; “CDA Stands Firm against ERA,” *Clarion Herald*, March 27, 1975; “CDA Iterates ERA Opposition,” *Clarion Herald*, May 8, 1975.

²¹ “CDA Leader Raps ‘Action’ Goals,” *Clarion Herald*, November 18, 1979.

²² George Gurtner, “Anti-abortion Position Reaffirmed By CDA,” *Clarion Herald*, July 22, 1976.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “CDA Opposes ERA Extension,” *Clarion Herald*, March 2, 1978.

1979 drew closer. When Trabeaux said the organization would do all within its power, she was not exaggerating. Later that year, she testified before the Senate sub-committee on the Constitution, which was holding hearings on extending the deadline for the ratification of the ERA.²⁶

The CDA did not oppose the ERA because they believed that all of the claims made by second-wave feminists were illusory. Neither the CDA nor the Catholic Church denied that women faced inequality or that they should be able to pursue meaningful work. Rather, they believed that the current laws, though adequate, needed to be better enforced. Claiming that their campaign against the ERA prevented them from addressing “the real issues of women’s rights,”²⁷ Trabeaux identified a real women’s right issue as pay equity, “The earnings gap between men and women has been widening instead of decreasing. Women holding full-time jobs average . . . 43 percent less than the \$11,800 earned by men. But 20 years ago women earned 36 percent less than men.”²⁸ They maintained that these were specific issues could be addressed by specific laws. So, while Trabeaux agreed that women experienced employment discrimination, she did not believe the ERA was the appropriate means to address this injustice.²⁹

Before the members of the Louisiana CDA even began their lobbying efforts, a sizable number of representatives in Louisiana’s legislature had already announced their opposition to the ERA. When the amendment went before the Louisiana legislature in May of 1972, the Senate approved it. However, that same day, it died in the House Judiciary Committee B, due in large part to Rep. Louise Johnson, a Democrat who opposed the amendment. Arguing that women would be deprived of legal safeguards if the amendment passed, Johnson convinced the committee to reject the amendment. Declaring that she was “proud to be a lady” and while simultaneously owning two businesses, real estate, and credit cards, Johnson asserted that she had never been discriminated against. She opposed the ERA because the state’s constitution already forbade discrimination on the basis of sex and she was apprehensive about the federal intervention that would accompany the amendment.³⁰

Louisiana’s first pro-ERA coalition formed in May of 1972, and it consisted of six women’s groups, including the Black Women’s Caucus and the League of Women Voters of Orleans and Jefferson Parishes. This group’s mission was to “. . . talk to the leaders about the amendment and stress to them its provisions.”³¹ Four years later, another coalition, ERA United, organized. Consisting of sixty organizations, this group aimed to persuade the legislatures to support the ERA and to educate the public. In 1973, Gov. Edwin Edwards, offered his support to those who backed the ERA and gave them advice on how to campaign.

Leading the forces against the ERA was the Woman’s Auxiliary of the Chamber of Commerce and Louisiana Women Opposed to the ERA. Lobbyists wore tags that read, “ERA is not the Way” and “I’m a girl and proud to be, so ERA is not for me.”³² The president of the Woman’s Auxiliary maintained that the ERA would take power away from the states, make

²⁶ “CDA Opposes ERA Extension,” *Times-Picayune*, August 5, 1978 and “Morgan City CDA Celebrate 50 Years,” *Clarion Herald*, September 6, 1979.

²⁷ “CDA Backs Rights,” *Clarion Herald*, August 18, 1977.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Women’s Rights Courses Differ,” *Times-Picayune*, May 19, 1972; Arthur E. McEnany, “Speaks for ERA,” *Times-Picayune*, July 8, 1972; Jerry Estill, “Senate Unit Defers Action on ERA, To Await House,” *Times-Picayune*, May 29, 1974; John LaPlace, “ERA Out Again,” *Times-Picayune*, June 12, 1975.

³¹ “Coalition Gives Support to ERA,” *Times-Picayune*, May 28, 1972.

³² John LaPlace, “ERA Out Again,” *Times-Picayune*, June 12, 1975.

women eligible for the draft, and excuse a husband from supporting his wife. Claiming that the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave women all the protection they need, the chairman of Louisiana Women Opposed to the ERA contended that the amendment was unnecessary.³³

Despite statewide polls that showed a majority of Louisianans supported the ERA during the years of the debate, the amendment never made it through the House Committee. Looking back on the struggle the year the amendment reached its Congressional deadline, an editorialist for the *Times-Picayune* offered his theory for why the ERA was never ratified in Louisiana. The four reasons he proposed were “a natural resistance to change,” an equal organized match between pro-ERA and anti-ERA efforts, the unethical tactics used by the backers of the ERA, and the reluctance of Louisianans to jeopardize their family laws. If supporters of the ERA ever wanted the amendment to be ratified in Louisiana, the author concluded, then they would need to elect new legislatures.³⁴

During the debate in the Louisiana legislature, U.S. Representative Lindy Boggs received appeals from citizens in Louisiana to adopt their position on the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1973, Boggs, who was Catholic, had become the first woman to be elected to Congress from Louisiana. She was a Democrat who represented the Second District, which included New Orleans. Hoping Boggs, a “respected” legislator, might influence the Louisiana legislature to approve of the ERA, the League of Women Voters of Louisiana and the National Organization for Women sent her letters prompting her to act. With little variation, Rep. Boggs offered the same reply to each request. After thanking them for alerting her as to their opinion on the matter, she stated that Hale Boggs, her late husband, had supported the amendment, and she “certainly” intended, “to continue this interest in equal rights for women.”³⁵

Surprisingly Boggs was not disappointed when the ERA failed to make it through the Louisiana legislature in 1975. A strong supporter of states’ rights, she stated that the amendment was not appropriate for Louisianans if the state legislature decided that it would not be. Since the amendment had highlighted several flaws in the legal system, Boggs said the amendment had still done a great deal of good. Overall, she was simply happy that democracy reigned and a state had been allowed to choose whether a piece of legislation would be suitable. Thus, it would appear Boggs was not an avid supporter of the ERA, for she merely saw it as one means to an end. However, it is also possible that Boggs was merely pandering to the political views of her constituents. Southerners used the “states’ rights” assertion to fight federally mandated social changes during the civil rights movement, and it was a popular view in the South.³⁶

Another Catholic woman who was involved in Louisiana’s political scene during the debate about the ERA, Janet Mary Riley, did not support the ERA in the early years of the

³³ “Coalition Gives Support to ERA,” *Times-Picayune*, May 28, 1972; Millie Ball, “ERA-ers Rally Efforts for Legislative Session,” *Times-Picayune*, April 4, 1976; Tom Jory, “Edwards Still in Favor of ERA,” *Times-Picayune*, April 7, 1973; John LaPlace, “ERA Out Again,” *Times-Picayune*, June 12, 1975; “More Harm Than Good in ERA, Opponents Say,” *Times-Picayune*, June 26, 1974; Jonica M’Daniel, “House Panel Kills ERA Bill,” *Times-Picayune*, June 20, 1974.

³⁴ Merikaye Presley, “ERA Support Underrated,” *Times-Picayune*, May 6, 1975; “Voters Favor Passage of ERA,” *Times-Picayune*, January 8, 1979; Joan Treadway, “69 Percent in Louisiana are Anti-ERA-Survey,” *Times-Picayune*, March 9, 1979; Jack Wardlaw, “Why ERA Failed In La.,” *Times-Picayune*, June 30, 1982.

³⁵ Hale and Lindy Boggs Papers, Louisiana Special Collections, Tulane University, Box 1809, Folder 8.

³⁶ Dwight Ott, “Boggs: ERA Out: Democracy Wins,” *The Times-Picayune*, July, 3, 1975.; Sarah H. Brown, “The Role of Elite Leadership in the Southern Defense of Segregation, 1954-1964,” *Journal of Southern History* 77 (2011): 828-829.

debate, although she eventually changed her position. Like the ACCW and CDA, she opposed the ERA because of its imprecise wording, its removal of gender distinctions, and its legal redundancy. Her experience as a lawyer led her to reject the broad wording of the ERA for a reason the CDA and ACCW did not mention. Speaking before a group called Women of the Church at the Catholic Center at Louisiana State University, Riley acknowledged that she was “in favor of women having all possible legal rights,” but she opposed the ERA because of its “inflexible wording.”³⁷ She told a Louisiana state senator that previous versions of the ERA with “qualifying phraseology” had died in Congress, and the one that was eventually sent to the states had “no limitations.” Therefore, if the ERA were to be ratified, the courts would have reason to use the “strictest judicial interpretation.” Since members of the government, she believed, would have to “put on blinders and pretend there is no difference” between men and women, governmental policies would be devoid of “even reasonable differentiation between the sexes.”³⁸ She also maintained that both Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 14th Amendment, which was interpreted by the Supreme Court in *Reed v. Reed* to forbid “unreasonable discrimination” based on sex, already prohibited employment and pay discrimination on the basis of sex.

Women in Louisiana, despite the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974, had their own unique problems with credit. When trying to “get her own credit card, buy a car, make a small personal loan, or...buy her own home in her own name,”³⁹ they faced serious obstacles. Janet Mary Riley narrowed in on the state’s community property laws as the cause of this discrimination. Based on the centuries-old Napoleonic Code, Louisiana State Law identified husbands and fathers as the “head and master of the households.” Even though husbands and wives jointly owned all property accumulated during the marriage, wives only had “imperfect ownership without use” of this community property under Louisiana law.⁴⁰ Thus, wives had no legal control over how their husbands dealt with the property. Any income she earned also became community property, and her husband had reign over this money.

When the Louisiana State Law Institute needed someone to research and propose revisions for the section of the Louisiana Civil Code dealing with “matrimonial regimes” in 1973, it turned to Janet Mary Riley. Agreeing to the task, she worked with a committee to devise an “equal management” plan. Under this plan, either spouse could handle community property without the consent of the other spouse except when dealing with immovable property such as real estate, land, improvement, timber, and mineral rights. Both spouses had to agree to mortgaging or leasing property or selling movable property. Along with her desire to eliminate discrimination against women, Riley hoped this revision of the law would strengthen marriages and families. She told the dean of the Louisiana State Law Institute that the stated goal of the revision should be to create “such fairness in the law as to reduce property problems as irritants, which have contributed to unhappy marriages.”⁴¹ Her plan, she predicted, would “encourage couples to talk things over.”⁴²

³⁷ Janet Mary Riley Papers, Archival and Manuscript Collection, Loyola University, Box 21, Folder 14.

³⁸ Janet Mary Riley Papers Box 26. Folder 3.

³⁹ Pat Shuster, “Louisiana Women and Credit: Equal Protection of the Law?” *Clarion Herald*, January 16, 1975.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Janet Mary Riley Papers, Box 13, Folder 1.

⁴² Allured, Janet, “Janet Mary Riley: 1916-2008,” *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times: Volume II*, unpublished; Janet Mary Riley Papers, Archival and Manuscript Collection, Loyola University, (Box 11, Folder 3); Jean Blake, “Women Win Their Cases as Legal Eagles,” *Times-Picayune*, November 2, 1986.

The Louisiana State Legislature did not pass a version of her “equal management” provisions until 1977. Looking back over her efforts to secure equal control of community property for Louisianan women, Riley said, “I worked hard at eliminating the ‘head and master’ so that there would not be discrimination against the full-time homemaker.” She went on say:

When I think of the homemaker, I think of the full and rewarding lives that my mother and sisters have had. A young woman should not be handicapped by following such a career. The role of mother is probably the most important career a woman can have.⁴³

Of course, not every Catholic woman in Louisiana opposed the ERA. In 1975, the same year that the Louisiana CDA announced its opposition to the ERA, the Sisters Council of the Archdiocese voted unanimously to join ERA Central. Subsequently, they distributed a “Declaration of Equality” to Gov. Edwards and all state senators and representatives of districts within the archdiocese. The Catholic Women for the ERA, Christian Feminists, the National Assembly of Women Religious, the National Coalition of American Nuns Network, Priests for Equality, Sisters Formation Conference, and Catholics Act for ERA all had chapters in New Orleans. To support the ERA, members of these groups signed an open “letter of conscience,” which claimed that Vatican II had imparted a mandate that “every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color... is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.”⁴⁴

Women in Louisiana adopted and reflected the arguments and viewpoints about the Equal Rights Amendment circulating nationally. The ACCW and Louisiana’s CDA, both of which tended to reject “progressive” cultural changes, adopted versions of Phyllis Schlafly’s opinions on the ERA. Schlafly herself was politically conservative, and the ACCW and the CDA identified with her position on transforming cultural mores. Although they supported women who wanted to pursue careers and wanted women to have equal rights and opportunities, the CDA and ACCW had a different vision of “equality” than many feminists, and their ideas about equality were tied to their religious beliefs. God endowed women, in their view, with certain abilities, which were appropriate for their vocation, the nurturing of life. As a result, they opposed the ERA for the possible implications it had for both housewives and working women. Along with taking legal protections away from working women, it would, they predicted, force women to abandon their role as “caretaker” and destroy the “traditional” family unit.

Catholic women in Louisiana who opposed the amendment were particularly invested in states’ rights in the arguments that surrounded the ERA debate. Since before the Civil War, the South has used the cry of “states’ rights” to fend off unwanted federal legislation. Southerners continued to use this assertion to fight progressive federal intervention during the civil rights movement. Concerned that desegregation would cause social chaos, southern politicians stressed the “compact” the federal government had with the states and that states’ were sovereign.⁴⁵

In their comments about the Equal Rights Amendment, the ACCW, CDA, and Rep. Boggs stressed the importance of state sovereignty. The ACCW explained its opposition to the

⁴³ Blake, “Women Win their Cases.”

⁴⁴ Allured, Janet, “Janet Mary Riley: 1916-2008,” *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times: Volume II*, unpublished.

⁴⁵ Sarah H. Brown, “The Role of Elite Leadership in the Southern Defense of Segregation, 1954-1964,” *Journal of Southern History* 77 (2011): 828-829 and Janet Mary Riley Papers, Box 26, Folder 3.

ERA on the grounds that the amendment would lead to the “by-passing of state legislatures as governing bodies in the public affairs of our citizens.”⁴⁶ They believed that the power to make laws giving men and women separate benefits, such as child custody laws, should be left to state legislatures. Trabeaux, the Louisianan woman who was a leader for both the national and the state CDA, attacked the ERA because the “interpretation of Constitutional Amendments by the Supreme Court takes the whole matter out of the hands of the states.”⁴⁷ Still resenting the fact that the Supreme Court had voided the decision of the states on the issue of abortion in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, she connected the ERA to abortion-on-demand and her fear of federal usurpation of states’ rights. Even though she supported the ERA, Boggs called the defeat of the ERA in the Louisiana legislature, as *The Times-Picayune* termed it, a “triumph for democracy.” She stated that, “I think each state must decide if it is the right thing for its own state, its own code of laws, its own condition of life and so on. That’s the great thing about the government—that the national government is able to respect states’ rights.”⁴⁸ Whatever the outcome of the state legislature’s decision on the ERA, she was merely grateful that the state “in its wisdom” was able to decide.⁴⁹ Thus, Catholic women in Louisiana were both inspired by their faith and the political climate of the Bible Belt South in their response to efforts to gain equality for women during the resurgent feminist movement of the 1970s.

⁴⁶ “ERA Foe,” *Times-Picayune*, April 25, 1973.

⁴⁷ “CDA Backs Rights,” *Clarion Herald*, August 18, 1977.

⁴⁸ Dwight Ott, “Boggs: ERA Out: Democracy Wins,” *Times-Picayune*, July 3, 1975.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; “CDA Backs Rights,” and “ERA Foe,” *Times-Picayune*, April 25, 1973.