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## Doing Business with Gender: Service Industries and British Business History

Business historians have failed to recognize British women's participation in business. Beginning in the eighteenth century, English women overcame a range of socially constructed constraints to assume a more important role in financial and entrepreneurial activities than has been hitherto acknowledged. Women's apparent affinity with the service sector in employment, self-employment, and business enterprise has encouraged a limited view of their activities, relegating them to a separate, female sphere, rather than viewing them as part of the masculine world of rational profit maximization. Several approaches drawing upon social and cultural ideas are proposed to rectify the prevailing blindness toward issues of gender. The eclectic methodological underpinning of British business history offers some hope that the topic of gender can soon be incorporated into the discipline.

**W**omen have played a more important part in British business than historians have acknowledged. Men and women have interacted in business for centuries, both within and outside markets and firms, as producers and consumers and as partners and competitors. Yet business continues to be perceived as a male activity. Men's construction of success drives business, and this "maleness" is reinforced by their dominance in the field of business history.

The contribution of gender analysis—the study of how society defines male and female and decides which characteristics and behaviors are appropriate for each sex—is evident in many subdisciplines of history, but it has regrettably played no part in British business history.

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Although the gender dimension has been of greater interest to British business historians than to their colleagues in Europe, Britain still lags well behind the United States. In Britain, despite the publication of challenging research by some individuals and the growing awareness that paradigmatic progress is required, few business historians have tackled the broad issues concerning gender and business.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the intellectually innovative climate in which business history is conducted in the United States has encouraged considerations of gender in the field.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will explore the service industries as an example of gendered business activity and will demonstrate how the subject has the potential to expedite consideration of gender. By appraising the existing literature, my goal is to survey the state of gender and business history in Britain and offer suggestions for ways forward. I have divided the paper into three sections. In the first, I assess the lack of enthusiasm in Britain for considering gender as part of business history and explain how this situation has come about. In the second, I explore changes in the business environment that have had an impact on gender and consider the social and legal contexts within which British men and women have engaged in commerce since the eighteenth century. I will analyze the nature of segregation in the production of goods and services, with particular reference to the labor market, self-employment, and business activity within the service industries. In the third section, I identify positive recent trends in British business history, especially in the area of service-sector activity. Finally, I explore the ways that this research might stimulate historians to begin integrating gender analysis into their study of business.

### Business History in Britain

British business history has its roots in economic history, a discipline that relies on quantitative analysis. From its early days as an independent discipline, the conceptual base of business history was informed by notions of structure, efficiency, rationality, and profitability, resulting in an emphasis on robust, quantifiable elements and a neglect of sociocultural forces. Above all, it became a discipline driven by empiricism; where theoretical work existed, it “concentrated on efficiency

<sup>1</sup> Trevor Boyns suggests that business historians in Britain discuss methodological issues much less frequently than their colleagues in other countries. See “British Business History: A Review of the Periodical Literature for 1996,” *Business History* 40, no. 2 (1998): 96.

<sup>2</sup> The Hagley conference on the future of business history, for example. Some differences between the United States and Great Britain are alluded to in Katrina Honeyman, “Engendering Enterprise,” *Business History* 43, no. 1 (2001): 119–26.

of specific forms of organization rather than on the human relationships that underpin them.”<sup>3</sup>

Reviews of the periodical literature published during the last decade have consistently pointed to three themes: First, British business history does not have clear boundaries. Second, British business historians produce eclectic work on diverse subjects, ranging from narrow empirical case studies to broad overviews. Third, the subject is methodologically varied and interdisciplinary.<sup>4</sup> These latter tendencies can promise excitement through diversity, but they can also erect barriers, since the creation of different languages makes it “impossible for historians from different methodological backgrounds to talk to one another.”<sup>5</sup> Amid this eclecticism and the search for new paradigms, it is surprising that there has not been a more vigorous effort to apply the lens of gender to the history of business activity.<sup>6</sup> In recent years, isolated attempts to do so have been overshadowed by renewed enthusiasm for quantification and the manipulation of data sets.<sup>7</sup>

Traditional business history has been blind to gender, the result of longstanding barriers to women’s entrepreneurial and managerial activities and men’s dominant presence in the world of business. In Britain, this lack of attention may also be due to men’s predominance in the field of business history.<sup>8</sup> The masculinity that permeates business activity

<sup>3</sup> According to John F. Wilson, theoretical discussions have been “languishing in the doldrums.” See “British Business History: A Review of the Periodical Literature for 1992,” *Business History* 36, no. 2 (1994): 1. See also Mary Rose, “Networks, Values and Business: The Evolution of British Family Firms from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century,” *Entreprises et Histoire* 22, no. 2 (1999): 19.

<sup>4</sup> Boyns “British Business History,” 95. This is a recurring theme in literature reviews of the discipline. See, for example, Robin Pearson, “British Business History: A Review of the Periodical Literature for 1995,” *Business History* 39, no. 2 (1997): 1–20.

<sup>5</sup> Michael French, “British Business History: A Review of the Periodical Literature for 1997,” *Business History* 41, no. 2 (1999): 11; Duncan Ross, “British Business History: A Review of the Periodical Literature for 1998,” *Business History* 42, no. 2 (2000): 12–13; Boyns, “British Business History,” 96.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Toms and John Wilson, “Scale, Scope and Accountability: Towards a New Paradigm of British Business History,” paper given at the Association of Business Historians (ABH) conference, University of Cambridge, 2003. See also David Higgins, “British Business History: A Review of the Periodical Literature for 2003,” *Business History* 47, no. 2 (2005): 159. Mansel G. Blackford argues that British business history should make “more of an effort to move in new directions. . . [especially] . . . the role of gender and race. . . in business developments,” in “British Business History: A Review of the Periodical Literature for 2001,” *Business History* 45, no. 2 (2003): 11.

<sup>7</sup> For example, David Jeremy made the case for “innovative” work in this area in “New Business History?” *Historical Journal* 37, no. 3 (1994): 717–28.

<sup>8</sup> This is reflected in a gender analysis of participants at mainstream business history conferences. For example, participants at the past two conferences of the Association of Business Historians were not only overwhelmingly male, but the majority of the women attending were either graduate students—clearly a good thing in terms of future development—or visiting scholars from the United States or the continent of Europe. At the 2006 ABH conference there were no papers on gender history.

is taken for granted in the study of its history in Britain, embodying ideological notions of hierarchy and power.<sup>9</sup> Although “gender” as a conceptual approach to historical understanding does not constitute a challenge to male dominance but, rather, aims to make it transparent and to explore it, the reluctance by historians to examine the topic may be based on such concern. In British academic institutions, gender studies are viewed as either potentially subversive or as irrelevant to mainstream research. However, the recent surge in research on notions of masculinity may attract a wider range of adherents to the study of gender in business history.<sup>10</sup> The paucity of such analysis in British business history can also be traced to the institutional development of both business history and the history of women. The former is largely studied in management or business schools or in economics departments. The latter has progressed more slowly as a separate discipline in Britain than in the United States, often languishing as a minority enterprise in “mainstream” history departments. Thus, little institutional opportunity exists in Britain for the disciplines to work together. Another difference between the two countries can be seen in the development of the respective disciplines of women’s history (which focuses on the particular contributions of women) and gender history (which considers the construction of gender identities and the relation between women and men). American historians have concentrated on women’s history while simultaneously producing influential insights into gender.<sup>11</sup> U.S. business historians, both male and female, publish research on gender, and gender and women’s historians write about business subjects; in this way, the study of history becomes a shared venture.<sup>12</sup>

In Britain, while gender history has gained ground at the expense of women’s history, scholars in the latter field have done more to reclaim women’s business past.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, however, they are driven

<sup>9</sup> Following the approach of Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75.

<sup>10</sup> Research on the history of masculinity, especially as it intersects with business history, has been the product of both male and female historians; see, for example, John Tosh, “What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth Century Britain,” *History Workshop Journal* 38 (Autumn 1994): 179–202; and Katrina Honeyman, “Following Suit: Men, Masculinity and Gendered Practices in the Clothing Trade in Leeds, England, 1890–1940,” *Gender and History* 14, no. 3 (2002): 426–46.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York, 2002); and Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930* (Baltimore, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Examples are cited in the introduction and elsewhere in this issue, but the case in point is Philip Scranton, ed., *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender and Culture in Modern America* (New York, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> In “women’s history,” the historical subjects are women, and analysis focuses on their experiences. “Gender history” places greater emphasis on the analysis of gender relations and gender as a symbolic system. See, for example, Catherine Hall, *White, Male, and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York, 1992), 1–7. Examples of these will

more by the desire to bring women out of the shadows, to render them visible, than consciously to further the project of business history. In turn, British business history has failed to welcome the research produced by women's historians, and thus has not changed any of its paradigms. The unsatisfactory progress of gendered business history in Britain is not only the outcome of the failure of male business historians to contemplate gender issues but is also the result of the apparent unwillingness of gender historians—be they male or female—to pursue their concerns within business history.

If such reluctance continues, British business history will not only be impoverished; it will also fail to reflect adequately the context within which it operates. Business is not a discrete sphere based on a distinct value system but is influenced by the beliefs and practices of the surrounding culture.<sup>14</sup>

### The Gendered Context of Business and Its History

The degree of difference between male and female enterprise, and its significance, has been largely overlooked by researchers. Acknowledgment of the myriad forms of business organization and strategy is a first step toward a richer understanding of how business functions. A useful question, for example, would be, Why were women's businesses concentrated in the service industries? Was it from choice? The result of a conditioned tendency to provide care and service for others? Were opportunities in other sectors of the economy closed to them? Or was this segregation due to some combination of these factors? More evidence is needed to discover the answer to this question. In this section, the findings of recent research on women's position in business are cited to indicate some of the reasons that the service sector would be a fruitful area for future studies.

Women's business activities in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been thoroughly investigated, but their activities in the twentieth century have not received the same thorough

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be considered in the second section of this paper and include Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1919); Beverly Lemire, "Petty Pawns and Informal Lending: Gender and the Transformation of Small-scale Credit in England, circa 1600–1800," in *From Family Firms to Corporate Capitalism: Essays in Business and Industrial History in Honour of Peter Mathias*, eds. Kristine Bruland and Patrick O'Brien (Oxford, 1998), 112–38; and Maxine Berg, "Women's Property and the Industrial Revolution," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24, no. 2 (1993): 233–50.

<sup>14</sup> Maggie Walsh makes the point that business activities are part of the social environment within which people live; thus the gender context is important. See Walsh, "Gendered Endeavours: Women and the Reshaping of Business Culture," *Women's History Review* 14, no. 2 (2005): 194–95.

scrutiny, reflecting the interests of women's historians who have produced the bulk of such work and the failure of business historians to engage in comparable research for more recent periods. The most promising developments can be found in studies of the nineteenth century, where there has been some convergence of women's and gender history and business history.<sup>15</sup>

During the eighteenth century, prior to industrialization and the consequent changes in business sectors, family and inheritance were important to women's business enterprises. Before industrialization, many female-run businesses appeared to originate as family enterprises, which they inherited from fathers or husbands.<sup>16</sup> Not all widows were willing to continue their dead husbands' businesses, however, nor were they always encouraged to do so.<sup>17</sup> But recent research has indicated that men's readiness to bequeath control of their businesses to their wives reflected confidence in their spouses' experience and ability.<sup>18</sup>

Although the family was often the site of women's business activity, family positions and relationships could also act as a constraint. Most important were legal barriers that limited married women's scope for business ventures. The common law of coverture, for example, which gave husbands control of their wives' property during marriage, restricted married women's access to independent activity and contained harsher terms than the continental equivalents. By contrast, single women existed as legal individuals in their own right.<sup>19</sup> Even where women were able to subvert legal obstacles, familial expectations created barriers to

<sup>15</sup> Of particular note is the work of Josephine Maltby and Janette Rutterford. See, for example, their "She Possessed Her Own Fortune: Women Investors from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Early Twentieth Century," *Business History* 48, no. 2 (2006): 220–53. Research published in "Women, Accounting and Investment," a special issue of *Accounting, Business, and Financial History* 16, no. 2 (2006), edited by Maltby and Rutterford, indicates recent progress in investigating women's roles as accountants and investors during the eighteenth as well as the nineteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, *Working Life*, 35; Christine Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen in Eighteenth Century England," in *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England: On the Town*, eds. Rosemary Sweet and Penelope Lane (Aldershot, 2003), 35, 109.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Prior, "Women and the Urban Economy," in *Women in English Society*, ed. Mary Prior (London, 1985), 108; Robert Beachy, Béatrice Craig, and Alastair Owens, "Introduction," in *Women, Business, and Finance in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Rethinking Separate Spheres*, eds. Robert Beachy, Béatrice Craig, and Alastair Owens (Oxford, 2006), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Shani D'Cruze, "To Acquaint the Ladies: Women Traders in Colchester, c.1750–c.1800," *Local Historian* 17, no. 1 (1986): 158; Penelope Lane, "Women, Property, and Inheritance: Wealth Creation and Income Generation in Small English Towns, 1750–1835," in *Urban Fortunes: Property and Inheritance in the Town, 1700–1900*, eds. Jon Stobart and Alastair Owens (Aldershot, 2000), 180–88. Elizabeth Sanderson shows how in eighteenth-century urban Scotland, especially Edinburgh, women operated in the same world as their male counterparts. Women were part of the great web of credit and stood in for husbands who were away. *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh* (Basingstoke, 1996), 168.

<sup>19</sup> Amy Erickson, "Coverture and Capitalism," *History Workshop Journal* 59 (Spring, 2005): 1 and 8.

their effective business activity.<sup>20</sup> The *feme sole* trader, for example, was expected to put her husband's or male relative's interest first. It was assumed that the family had the primary claim to profits made by women, thus limiting business expansion; men, meanwhile, were free to use their profits for business development or for pleasure.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the notion of profit had gender dimensions. Single women who chose to use their capital to support the family or other business were more likely to receive a return on their loans rather than a share in the profits, which typically operated to their disadvantage, both in financial terms and with respect to their authority within the business.<sup>22</sup>

In much of the preindustrial period, women's access to business and trading opportunities was intermittently limited by guild restrictions or by local custom.<sup>23</sup> These constraints faded during the eighteenth century, only to be replaced by a body of thought that presented women as less rational and progressive than men. Thus, in a culture where women's work was increasingly defined as less valuable than men's, women's opportunities to do business were reduced.<sup>24</sup> Deborah Valenze shows how women were displaced in the business of dairying by men, whose methods were considered to be more rational. Elizabeth Kowalski-Wallace observes more generally that the "discursive displacement of the feminine from business was matched by the displacement of actual women from the world of business."<sup>25</sup> Other historians cite misogynist R. Campbell, who denigrated every profession in which women were involved, even the main sites of women's business in the eighteenth century: millineries and dressmaking establishments.<sup>26</sup>

In such a climate, it is remarkable that women entered the world of business at all, but they did. Eighteenth-century directories and insurance records indicate the extent of businesses handled by women, mainly spinsters and widows. These formal records indicate that women's businesses tended to serve the interests of other women. Thus, for example, they retailed a wide range of women's clothes to all social groups; they provided services of a domestic nature; and they facilitated networks of

<sup>20</sup> Margot Finn, "Women, Consumption, and Coverture in England, c.1760–1860," *Historical Journal* 39, no. 3 (1996): 719.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, 1996), 139, 141–42.

<sup>22</sup> Bridget Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England, 1660–1850* (New Haven, 2001), 44.

<sup>23</sup> Prior, "Women and the Urban Economy," 103.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1996), 115.

<sup>25</sup> Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (New York, 1995), 48; Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 113.

<sup>26</sup> R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (1747); D'Cruze, "To Acquaint the Ladies," 159; Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 119–20; Prior, "Women and the Urban Economy," 93–120.

credit and loans.<sup>27</sup> The less thoroughly recorded businesses of married women may have been small and informal, but they were more numerous than is typically assumed.<sup>28</sup> It was common for several women to run a joint enterprise, partly to compensate for the small quantities of capital that each possessed and partly to protect their gains from men if they were married or subsequently wed.<sup>29</sup> Other pioneering work demonstrates that women acquired and demonstrated managerial and organizational skills within charitable institutions and mutual societies.<sup>30</sup> In their study of Manchester, Hannah Barker and Karen Harvey uncover a diversity of female trading interests, mainly within the burgeoning service sector. Women operated as pawnbrokers, drapers, booksellers, and circulating-library owners; they ran lodging houses, inns, and coffee houses; and they sold timber, earthenware, and medicines. Women's presence in a wide range of distributive businesses made them ideal intermediaries between new industries and services and the consumer. Also, by providing spaces where merchants and industrialists would meet and negotiate, female-run businesses were at the center of expanding economic activity.<sup>31</sup>

Recent research, therefore, indicates that women, irrespective of marital status, made a substantial, distinctive contribution to the world of business, and married women in particular enjoyed more economic status than the literature on coverture would suggest.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, during the eighteenth century, the limitations imposed on women by law and ideology had a marked impact on their businesses, which tended to be fewer and smaller than men's and more likely to be in the service industries.<sup>33</sup>

In the nineteenth century, when the structural changes associated with industrialization spread from manufacturing to the service industries, the notion of separate spheres for women's enterprise became entrenched. British industrialization beginning later in the eighteenth century sustained a segregated labor market, in which women were treated

<sup>27</sup> Lemire, "Petty Pawns and Informal Lending"; Beverly Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice, and Social Politics in England, c.1600–1900* (Manchester, U.K., 2006), 44–47.

<sup>28</sup> Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 134.

<sup>29</sup> Such enterprises were often located in provisioning and other services that were deemed compatible with a familial or domestic role. *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Nicola Reader, "Female Friendly Societies, 1780–1850," Ph.D. diss., University of Leeds, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen in Eighteenth-Century England," 109; Hannah Barker and Karen Harvey, "Women Entrepreneurs and Urban Expansion: Manchester, 1760–1820," in *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England: On the Town*, eds. Rosemary Sweet and Penelope Lane (Aldershot, U.K., 2003), 115, 129.

<sup>32</sup> Finn, "Women, Consumption, and Coverture," 706.

<sup>33</sup> Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 146.

as less valuable workers and relegated to distinct occupational categories.<sup>34</sup> Women's formal employment, as indicated in census returns, was concentrated in the service sector, especially in domestic and personal services, which they dominated. A range of evidence suggests that as married women became excluded from the labor market, their informal, often self-employed work gravitated to the service industries.<sup>35</sup>

Labor-market segregation was mirrored in business activity. During the period of industrialization and through the nineteenth century, social definitions of gender favored males in business as well as in the labor market. Women were not only perceived as being less rational and valuable than men, as they had been in the eighteenth century for ideological and cultural reasons, but they were also pressed more forcefully to remain in a tightly defined "private" sphere. In the field of business history, British historians have reproduced the "strong sexual segregation of the world of business," duplicating the contemporary strictures on women's entry into the "public world of trade and commerce, [which stipulated that they could participate] as long as their activities reinforced rather than undermined gender stereotypes."<sup>36</sup>

During the nineteenth century, constructions of femininity and masculinity and the distinct realms of influence based on gender appeared to be at their strongest. The concept of separate spheres is no longer uncritically accepted by gender historians, but during that century it influenced both how contemporaries understood appropriate business roles and how business historians have analyzed the gender-based distinctions that existed in business ever since.<sup>37</sup>

Recent work on nineteenth-century business and financial transactions, however, offers a powerful corrective to the contemporary propaganda that women were risk averse, poor decision-makers, and isolated

<sup>34</sup> Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender, and Industrialisation in Britain, 1700–1870* (Basingstoke, 2000), 51–71.

<sup>35</sup> B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750–1970* (London, 1975), 163. Edward Higgs's careful analysis of the nineteenth-century census suggests, however, that the number of domestic servants was exaggerated by the census, while the number of female agricultural workers was understated. See Edward Higgs, "Women, Occupations, and Work in Nineteenth-century Censuses," *History Workshop Journal* 23 (Spring, 1987): 59–80, esp. 76. It is possible that as many as one-third of all women workers were not counted in the occupational categories. See, for example, Angela V. John, ed., *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England, 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1986), 36–37. See also Honeyman, *Women, Gender, and Industrialisation*, 143–44.

<sup>36</sup> This tendency is criticized by Beachy, Craig, and Owens, eds., *Women, Business, and Finance*, 7–8, 10.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, 1998); Alison C. Kay, "Retailing, Respectability, and the Independent Woman in Nineteenth-Century London," in *Women, Business, and Finance*, eds. Beachy, Craig, and Owens, 152–66.

from business networks.<sup>38</sup> Although married women were constrained by the coverture until the 1870s, spinsters and widows were legally permitted to hold assets and practice business in the same way as men.<sup>39</sup> Recent research on women's management of their investments, an important component of the service industries, demonstrates that they were more involved in such activity than was previously assumed. For example, there is increasing evidence that women both established and used credit networks in early industrial England.<sup>40</sup> Women often spread their financial risks by engaging in a variety of income-earning and wealth-creating activities, such as starting and preserving businesses and investing in real estate.<sup>41</sup> Women invested in public and private enterprise to surprising degree.<sup>42</sup> Nineteenth-century corporate and personal records demonstrate women's confidence in their financial judgment and their success with their investments for the purposes of obtaining income, achieving capital growth, or maintaining a share in the family business.<sup>43</sup> In her study of canal and railway-company investors in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sarah Hudson found that women had distinctly different attitudes toward risk-taking than some, though not all, male investors. Some men were, as predicted, risk

<sup>38</sup> An example of the traditional view is Philip L. Cottrell, *Industrial Finance, 1830–1914: The Finance and Organization of English Manufacturing Industry* (London, 1980), 96. This author has recently produced a collaborative revision: Lucy Newton and Philip Cottrell, "Female Investors in the First English and Welsh Commercial Joint-Stock Banks," *Accounting, Business, and Financial History* 16, no. 2 (2006): 315–40.

<sup>39</sup> The passage of the Married Women's Property Acts finally overturned the practice of coverture, whereby a husband controlled his wife's property during marriage.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life*, esp. chs. 2 and 3; also "Petty Pawns and Informal Lending"; Judith Spicksley, "Was the Single Woman Really Marginal? Lending and Information Networks in Seventeenth-Century England," paper delivered to the workshop of the Women's Committee of the Economic History Society, 2003; and Alison Parkinson Kay, "A Respectable Business: Women and Self-employment in Nineteenth-Century London," paper delivered to the Economic History Society Conference, Durham, Apr. 2003. Alastair Owens has also contributed to this area of historical enquiry. See "Making Some Provision for the Contingencies to which Their Sex is Particularly Liable": Women and Investment in Early Nineteenth-Century England," in *Women, Business, and Finance*, eds. Beachy, Craig, and Owens, 20–35; and D. R. Green and Alastair Owens, "Gentlewomanly Capitalism? Spinsters, Widows and Wealth Holding in England and Wales c.1800–1860," *Economic History Review* 56, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>41</sup> Lane, "Women, Property, and Inheritance," 194.

<sup>42</sup> Owens, "Making Some Provision," esp. 23–33; Mark Freeman, Robin Pearson, and James Taylor, in "A Doe in the City": Women Shareholders in Eighteenth- and Early-Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Accounting Business, and Financial History* 16, no. 2 (2006): 281–82, demonstrate a growing proportion of women shareholders as well as more positive attitudes toward them after 1850. See also Claire Swan, "Independent Women or Desperate Housewives: Female Investors within the Scottish Investment Trust Movement," paper delivered to the fourteenth International Economic History Conference, sess. 83, Helsinki, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Janette Rutterford and Josephine Maltby, "The Widow, the Clergyman and the Reckless": Women Investors in England, 1830–1914," *Feminist Economics* 12, no. 1 (2006): 111–38. See also Maltby and Rutterford, "She Possessed Her Own Fortune," 220–53, esp. 242–46.

seekers, while others were risk averse. Women, on the other hand, were risk seeking during the early stages of canal projects but risk averse when investing in operating companies.<sup>44</sup>

Such work negates the relevance of separate spheres, not simply as an analytical model but also as a description of nineteenth-century social and business arrangements.<sup>45</sup> Among the alternatives offered are those of R. J. Morris, who concludes from his study of the gendered contributions to family enterprise that not only did women play a critical role in sustaining family business networks but also that gender relations, while asymmetrical and sometimes tense, “had a dynamic impact on the relationships of property and the flows of capital.”<sup>46</sup> His research indicates that men and women did not always behave differently, and that some strategies used by women were “in practice female preferences rather than limited to women.”<sup>47</sup> Robert Beachy, Béatrice Craig, and Alastair Owens propose replacing the concept of separate spheres with the idea of a range of social formations and economic arrangements, enabling women to operate variously in “separate,” “segmented,” and “joint” spheres.<sup>48</sup> Women of means were not isolated in British business; they may have experienced subordination, but they also enjoyed some autonomy and, through active investment, supported their own businesses.<sup>49</sup>

Less wealthy women operated in spheres of service activity that were more conventionally “female,” where financial and social barriers to entry were lower. Women were often found operating at the interface of making and selling. Evidence suggests that a large segment of women’s business during the nineteenth century was in women’s clothing and millinery, naturally serving a female market.<sup>50</sup> Retailing of a more general kind also attracted female enterprise, yet this was not fully recognized

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Hudson, “Attitudes to Investment Risk among West Midland Canal and Railway Company Investors, 1760–1850” (Ph.D. diss., University of Warwick, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700–1850* (Woodbridge, U.K., 2006), robustly challenges the metaphor of separate spheres and concludes that, despite barriers, constraints, disabilities, and unrealistic expectations, women formed a “significant part” of the expanding economy, and that there was greater cooperation between men and women than the model implies (261).

<sup>46</sup> R. J. Morris, *Men, Women, and Property in England, 1780–1870: A Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Classes* (Cambridge, 2005), 28, 233.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>48</sup> Beachy, Craig, and Owens, “Introduction,” *Women, Business, and Finance*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Owens, “Making Some Provision,” 22. This is consistent with Morris’s notion of assertive subordination.

<sup>50</sup> “Introduction,” in *Fashion and Famine: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Beth Harris (Aldershot, U.K., 2005); Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, “The Economic Role of Middle Class Women in Victorian Glasgow,” *Women’s History Review* 9, no. 4 (2000): 799; Stana Nenadic, “The Social Shaping of Business Behaviour in the Nineteenth-Century Women’s Garment Trades,” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (1998): 625–46.

by contemporaries. In her study of business behavior in the women's garment trades of nineteenth-century Edinburgh, for example, Stana Nenadic argues that women's establishments were ignored by commentators at the time, not because they were small or transient, but because their owners failed to put profits first. Many of these businesses were at least as concerned with "nonutilitarian satisfactions" and the provision of services.<sup>51</sup>

While business historians have assumed that women held marginal positions in the world of business, recent research casts doubt on this assumption. Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair's study of middle-class women in Victorian Glasgow, for example, reveals that almost 25 percent of businesses in the city's main shopping street were female run. Among these were dining rooms, coffeehouses, and teashops, as well as millinery and dressmaking concerns.<sup>52</sup> Research on other urban centers confirms that as women imaginatively transcended their disadvantages, they moved close to mainstream activity.<sup>53</sup> Nineteenth-century British urban development generated extensive opportunities for women to participate in the service sector, especially in food, drink, lodging, entertainment, printing, bookselling, and ownership of circulating libraries.<sup>54</sup>

Research confirms women's ability to identify and seize business opportunities but also warns against exaggerating their independence to the neglect of their very real subordination. A substantial proportion of women's enterprise at least partly conformed to socially determined positions.<sup>55</sup> Yet although women were relegated to a secondary position in the world of work during the nineteenth century, there is growing evidence that they constituted far more than the "hidden investment" of family business.<sup>56</sup> The assumption that women were marginalized, or excluded, from the world of business, must be reconsidered.<sup>57</sup>

As Britain became a mature industrial economy, it underwent structural change leading to substantial growth of the service sector, an outcome that has been reinforced by more recent global trends. Through-

<sup>51</sup> Nenadic, "The Social Shaping of Business Behaviour," 627.

<sup>52</sup> Gordon and Nair, "The Economic Role of Middle-Class Women," 799–800. This study also shows how women were able to surmount legal and social constraints to achieve both economic autonomy and influence.

<sup>53</sup> Women have occasionally owned manufacturing or productive enterprises, but typically as part of an inheritance.

<sup>54</sup> Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen," 90–92.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Leonore Davidoff, "The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century England," in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. Sandra Burman (London, 1979), 64–97.

<sup>56</sup> This was a theme in Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987), challenged by, among others, Lane, "Women, Property, and Inheritance," 194.

<sup>57</sup> See David R. Green, "Independent Women, Wealth, and Wills in Nineteenth-Century London," in *Urban Fortunes*, eds. Stobart and Owens, 221.

Table 1  
Full-Time and Part-Time Employees in  
the Service Industries by Gender

Year	Women Full Time (000)	Men Full Time (000)	Women Part Time (000)	Men Part Time (000)	Total (000)	Women Part Time (%)	
						As % of All Part Time in Services	As % of All Women in Services
1971	3,418	5,261	2,206	473	11,358	82	40
1978	3,691	5,492	3,117	578	12,878	84	46
1981	3,740	5,461	3,294	597	13,091	85	47

Source: *Labour Market Trends*, Central Statistical Office, 1984, p. 63.

out the twentieth century, and especially after the Second World War, women became more active in the service sector as their participation in the labor market increased.<sup>58</sup> Between 1911 and 1951, the proportion of women in the labor force, while growing in absolute numbers from sixteen million to twenty-three million, remained constant at just under 30 percent.<sup>59</sup> Since the mid-1950s, the proportion of women in the workforce has risen substantially. Much of that growth has been due to married women, whose participation rate increased from 26 percent in 1951 to 71 percent in 1991.<sup>60</sup>

The apparent convergence of men and women in paid work disguises the considerable differences in the nature of their contribution to economic activity.<sup>61</sup> For example, since the Second World War, most of the increase in female employment, especially in the service sector, has been in part-time, rather than full-time, jobs.<sup>62</sup> Although the number of male part-time workers shot up between 1951 and 1971, the number of female part-time employees was much higher. Table 1 shows the

<sup>58</sup> The censuses of the first half of the twentieth century show that as the early importance of domestic service declined, women moved into such other service activities as clerical work, insurance and banking, distribution and public administration.

<sup>59</sup> Census of Population of England and Wales, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1951.

<sup>60</sup> Sylvia Walby, *Gender Transformations* (London, 1997), 27. Married women's activity rate is now almost as high as that of single women.

<sup>61</sup> Equal Opportunities Commission, "Women and Men in Britain: The Labour Market," (Manchester, U.K., 2000), 1.

<sup>62</sup> Currently, women constitute 82 percent of the part-time workforce. This figure is among the highest in Europe. See "Gender and the Labour Market in the European Union," *Equal Opportunities Review* 129 (May 2004): 20; Catherine Hakim, "The Myth of Rising Female Employment," *Work, Employment, and Society* 7, no. 1 (1993): 114; Michael Webb, "Sex and Gender in the Labour Market," in *Sex Differences in Britain*, eds. Ivan Reid and Erica Stratta (Aldershot, U.K., 1989, 2nd ed.), 134. Webb also makes the point that much part-time work is also temporary; "Sex and Gender," 144.

*Table 2*  
 Employment by Gender and Sector, United Kingdom,  
 1956–97 (in percent)

Date	Industry		Total	Services		Total
	Female	Male		Female	Male	
1956	38.4	54.5	49.1	60.0	39.3	46.3
1962	34.5	53.3	47.0	62.9	40.4	48.2
1968	31.2	53.0	45.2	67.0	42.6	51.3
1974	27.5	51.4	42.2	71.0	45.0	55.0
1980	22.5	47.8	37.6	76.5	48.7	59.9
1986	18.9	45.4	34.1	80.0	51.5	63.7
1992	16.1	41.3	30.0	82.8	55.6	67.8
1997	13.2	38.1	26.9	85.8	59.4	71.3

Source: Figures are derived from *Labour Force Statistics*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998.

importance of services in the continuation of this trend between 1971 and 1981. Whether the work was full- or part-time, women continued to be paid less than men, in spite of legislation imposing equality that was implemented in the 1970s.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, although the social construction of gender weakened over the course of the twentieth century as perceptions of male and female roles converged, paid labor is still considered a less critical factor in the shaping of women's identities. Nevertheless, although labor-market segmentation persists, structural changes within the British economy, especially the expansion of the service industries, appear to have stimulated female employment rates.<sup>64</sup>

The figures in Table 2 indicate that, since the mid-1950s, service-sector jobs have consistently outpaced jobs in manufacturing for both women and men, although more so for women. By the end of the twentieth century, 86 percent of employed women and 60 percent of employed men worked in the service sector. Table 3 demonstrates the heterogeneity of the service industries and indicates the gendered distribution of workers among groups within the sector. Female employees outnumbered men in all sectors except "banking, finance and insurance," where the proportions were roughly even. Between 1984 and 1998, the distribution of men and women among the component elements of the service sector changed little, with the exception of women's

<sup>63</sup> Walby, *Gender Transformations*, 31; Christine Craig, Elizabeth Garnsey, and Jill Rubery, "Women's Pay in Informal Payments Systems," *Department of Employment Gazette* 91 (Apr. 1983): 146.

<sup>64</sup> Which mirror those taking place in other advanced economies.

Table 3  
 Employees in Service Industry Group by Gender in  
 the United Kingdom (in thousands)

Date	DHR <sup>a</sup>		BFI <sup>b</sup>		PAEH <sup>c</sup>		Other Services		Total Services	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
1984	2,303 (57) <sup>d</sup>	1,718 (43)	1,057 (49)	1,117 (51)	3,086 (64)	1,751 (36)	590 (54)	498 (46)	7,299 (54)	6,116 (46)
1998	2,520 (54)	2,131 (46)	1,611 (48)	1,735 (52)	4,313 (69)	1,917 (31)	670 (54)	560 (46)	9,520 (56)	7,476 (44)

Source: *Labour Force Survey, Historical Supplement*, Office of National Statistics, spring quarters, 1984–98.

<sup>a</sup> DHR: distribution, hotels and restaurants.

<sup>b</sup> BFI: banking, finance, insurance.

<sup>c</sup> PAEH: public administration, education and health.

<sup>d</sup> Parentheses indicate numbers in percent.

proportionate gain in “public administration, education and health.”<sup>65</sup> Men outnumber women as managers, executives, and company directors, even in sectors where female employees predominate.<sup>66</sup>

Studies of twentieth-century female entrepreneurship and women’s business remain inadequate in terms of depth and utility.<sup>67</sup> Women’s historians, who have expanded our knowledge of women and business before the twentieth century, have been less enthusiastic about exploring the more recent period.<sup>68</sup> Women’s enterprise, measured in terms of either female self-employment or the establishment and/or management of well-known, large, and successful businesses, continues to be

<sup>65</sup> “Trends in Female Employment,” *Equal Opportunities Review* 112 (Dec. 2002): 22. In 1982, Ann Oakley observed that “more than half of employed women in Britain work in three service industries: the distributive trades (shops, mail order, warehouse)—17 percent; ‘professional and scientific’ (typists, secretaries, teachers and nurses)—23 percent; ‘miscellaneous services’ (laundries, catering, drycleaners) —12 percent.” Ann Oakley, *Subject Women* (New York, 1982), 151. In April 2005 an Equal Opportunity Commission report stated that 1 percent of construction workers were female, and 1 percent of child-care workers were male.

<sup>66</sup> Data from Office of National Statistics, *Labour Force Survey*, spring 2001, shows a correlation between the proportion of women employed and the proportion of women managers in a sector, but in only one case, that of “health and social work,” did women managers comprise more than 50 percent of the total.

<sup>67</sup> Cynthia Forson and Mustafa Ozbilgin, “‘Dotcom’ Women Entrepreneurs in the U.K.,” University of Hertfordshire Business School, Employment Studies Paper 40, 2002, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Some of the important recent and current research on women and investment, however, bridges the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See, for example, the work of Josephine Maltby and Janette Rutterford cited above. The major project funded by the Economic and Social Regional Council (ESRC) on women investors in England and Wales, 1870–1930, promises to provide new evidence on women’s financial activity. This will be especially valuable for the early twentieth century, where existing work is very thin indeed. Ali-son Kay is the senior researcher for this interdisciplinary project.

distributed throughout the economy but is overwhelmingly in the service sector. Today, similar to the situation a century ago, prominent British businesswomen, such as Anita Roddick, Lynee Franks, Kanya King, and Safia Minney, work in retailing, publishing, public relations, and entertainment; smaller-scale businesses, gauged partly through data on self-employment, are also concentrated in the service industries.<sup>69</sup>

It might be expected that the twentieth-century growth of service-sector employment and the associated increase in female participation would offer new opportunities for female self-employment.<sup>70</sup> Statistical data on female self-employment constitute the most robust form of evidence we have of the distribution of business activity according to gender. However, what does “self-employment” mean? It may well represent substantial business or entrepreneurial activity, but it could equally refer to subcontracted employment. At the same time, the term “woman entrepreneur” can apply “equally to someone who has started a one-woman business, to someone who is a principal in a family business or partnership, to someone who is a shareholder in a publicly held company which she runs.”<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, scholars of female entrepreneurship agree that self-employment is a suitable proxy for women’s business, so I will use it with caution here.<sup>72</sup>

Self-employment, which represents only a portion of business enterprise, but since the 1980s an increasingly important one, indicates the extent to which men and women sought opportunities outside of formal employment. For women it provided an escape from the unequal opportunities in the labor market at all levels.<sup>73</sup> Table 4 indicates both

<sup>69</sup> *The Lady's Who's Who: Who's Who for British Women: A List of Names of Those Women Who Play a Prominent Part in Society, Arts, the Professions, Business etc.*, published for the first, and seemingly the only, time in 1939 in London, devoted a small section to women in business. A significant proportion of businesswomen were classed as dog and rare-cattle breeders.

<sup>70</sup> Self-employment and small- and medium-sized business are closely related, since most owners of small enterprises are self-employed. Ferry de Goey, “Economic Structure and Self-employment during the Twentieth Century,” paper delivered to the EBHA conference, Barcelona, 16–18 Sept. 2004, 2. De Goey argues that business historians have so far neglected small- and medium-sized business; but despite the importance of women in this sector, he proceeds to refer to the entrepreneur as male.

<sup>71</sup> “Women Entrepreneurs in Small and Medium Enterprises,” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Proceedings, 1998, 19. This could apply equally to men.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Sara Carter and Tom Cannon, “Female Entrepreneurs: A Study of Female Business Owners, Their Motivations, Experiences and Strategies for Success,” Department of Employment, Research Paper 65, 1988, 1–50.

<sup>73</sup> Simon Deakin has argued that the distinction between employment and self-employment took the entire first half of the twentieth century to emerge and be settled. See “The Evolution of the Employment Relationship,” paper delivered at the International Labor Organisation symposium, Jan. 2002, 2. Goffee and Scace argue that, for women, setting up a small business reflected dissatisfaction with and “rejection of the exploitative nature of the capitalist work process and the labour market.” Robert Goffee and Richard Scace, *Women in Charge: The Experiences of Female Entrepreneurs* (London, 1985), 37. See also, Marilyn J.

Table 4  
 Percentage of Self-Employed Workers,  
 United Kingdom, 1956–2001

Year	Self-Employed		Female Self-Employed	
	As % of Total Active	Female <sup>a</sup>	As % of Female Active	As % of Self-Employed
1956	7.5	332	4.1	19
1961	7.2	333	3.9	19
1966	6.6	365	4.0	22
1971	8.4	402	4.6	20
1976	8.0	384	4.0	20
1981	8.9	420	4.3	20
1986	13.2	688	8.0	25
1991	14.7	817	8.7	24
1996	14.6	824	8.5	25
2001	12.2	821	—	25

Sources: Figures derived from *Labour Force Statistics*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2002; *Labour Force Survey*, Office of National Statistics, 1956–2002.

<sup>a</sup>In thousands.

the growth in the rate of self employment in Britain since the mid-1950s, particularly during the 1980s when unemployment was high, and the magnitude of women’s share, which rose from 20 percent to 25 percent of the total.<sup>74</sup> Such a rate of growth, however impressive, has not been sustained, and the proportion of British self-employed women lags well behind other advanced economies, especially the United States.<sup>75</sup>

The evidence displayed in Table 5 demonstrates a correlation between women’s employment and self-employment in both trends and

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Davidson and Cary L. Cooper, “European Women in Business and Management: An Overview,” in *European Women in Business and Management*, eds. Davidson and Cooper (London, 1993), 13; and Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe and Colleen Wedderburn-Tate, “The United Kingdom,” in *European Women in Business and Management*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Davidson and Cooper, “Overview,” 13. There was a doubling in the number of self-employed women, while the total number of self-employed rose by only 60 percent. Such gains were sometimes perceived at the time as the result of high levels of unemployment and the search for alternative means of support. Sara Carter and Tom Cannon also emphasize the particular problems faced by female entrepreneurs when setting up and sustaining business, in “Women in Business,” *Department of Employment Gazette* 96 (Oct. 1988): 570. See also Sara Carter and Tom Cannon, *Women as Entrepreneurs: A Study of Female Business Owners, Their Motivations, Experiences, and Strategies for Success* (New York, 1992). The number of women entering self-employment rose by 70 percent between 1981 and 1987. See Alimo-Metcalfe and Wedderburn-Tate, “United Kingdom,” 25.

<sup>75</sup> It also indicates a small percentage decline both before and after this period of rapid growth.

*Table 5*  
**Self-Employed by Service Industry Group  
 and by Gender (in thousands)**

Year	DHR <sup>a</sup>		BFI <sup>b</sup>		PAEH <sup>c</sup>		Other Services		Total Services	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
1984	266 (33) <sup>d</sup>	533 (67)	72 (24)	222 (76)	73 (49)	76 (51)	117 (50)	119 (50)	541 (34)	1071 (66)
1998	198 (31)	441 (69)	147 (25)	441 (75)	193 (63)	113 (37)	182 (50)	182 (50)	741 (35)	1362 (65)

Source: *Labour Force Survey, Historical Supplement*, Office of National Statistics, spring quarters, 1984–98.

<sup>a</sup>DHR: distribution, hotels and restaurants.

<sup>b</sup>BFI: banking, finance, insurance.

<sup>c</sup>PAEH: public administration, education and health.

<sup>d</sup>Parentheses indicate numbers in percent.

sectoral distribution.<sup>76</sup> In 1986, 84 percent of self-employed women worked in the service sector; almost half were active in the “distribution, hotels and restaurant” group. This was also the sector in which men predominated, relative both to women and to other groups within the service industries. By 1998, 90 percent of self-employed women were active in the service sector, and their distribution among the component groups was more even. Much of the growth over this period occurred in public administration, education, and health, both in absolute numbers and compared with the activity of men.<sup>77</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, therefore, self-employed women had become more visible, but they had made only small inroads into fields dominated by men.

Sylvia Walby has argued that much of the self-employment growth in the 1990s was in the knowledge economy, including finance, real estate, and community, social, and personal services.<sup>78</sup> Examples of female

<sup>76</sup> Carter and Cannon, *Women as Entrepreneurs*, 8. Men also tended to establish businesses in activities in which they had previously been employed. Alimo-Metcalfe and Wedderburn-Tate, “United Kingdom,” 28.

<sup>77</sup> In 1986 when approximately half of women self-employed in services were located in the distribution, hotels, and restaurants (DHR) group, only 30 percent of employed women could be found there, whereas 45 percent of women employed in services worked in the public administration, education, and health (PAEH) group, where only 16 percent of self-employed women were occupied. The 1998 figures indicate more correspondence, especially in DHR where the percentages were around 25 percent for each. Forty-five percent of employees worked in PAEH, and the proportion of self-employed women in that group had risen to 25 percent.

<sup>78</sup> Sylvia Walby, “Mainstreaming Gender into the Analysis of the New Economy and New Employment Forms,” paper presented to the ESRC seminar on “Gender Mainstreaming, the New Economy, and New Employment Forms,” University of Leeds, 3 Sept. 2004, 24.

enterprise also exist in the rapidly growing technology sectors. Recent research on “dot-com” women entrepreneurs demonstrates that the Internet, a subdivision of the once male-dominated technology sector, has attracted women; female entrepreneurs are exploiting the market by meeting women’s shopping requirements on line.<sup>79</sup> This evidence indicates that self-employment—even when successful—often follows more traditional gender patterns of business engagement.<sup>80</sup>

There appear to be fewer barriers to women entering knowledge-based businesses. Closer inspection, however, suggests a more complex conclusion. The knowledge-based economies rely heavily on new information technologies, not only for communications but also for the creation of new knowledge. Research so far has indicated that women are less involved in the project of collecting and applying information and are more likely to be active in areas such as call centers, where “soft” skills are valued. Thus “women are losing out because, yet again, men have consolidated their positions of control over knowledge and management structures.”<sup>81</sup>

Although British women in the early twenty-first century are operating in new sectors of business, they continue to be handicapped by external constraints and prejudices, and their talents and abilities are often ignored or downplayed.<sup>82</sup> While women encounter fewer formal and legal barriers, the perception of women as “different” or “lesser” in business activity remains as powerful as ever. Women’s business activity, while more likely than men’s to be small scale due to societal constraints, nevertheless makes up a sizeable proportion of total British business activity.<sup>83</sup> Greater attention to such activity would clarify the heterogeneous nature of British business and influence the framework of business history.

Throughout the period of major economic change since the eighteenth century, British women’s businesses have been most visible in the service industries, especially those that provide services, support,

<sup>79</sup> Forson and Ozbilgin, “‘Dotcom’ Women,” 3–4.

<sup>80</sup> Goffee and Scase, *Women in Charge*, 19–21, 143; Forson and Ozbilgin, “‘Dotcom’ Women,” 7; and Alimo-Metcalfe and Wedderburn-Tate, “United Kingdom,” 28.

<sup>81</sup> Susan Durbín, “The Gendering of Knowledge Work in Call Centres,” paper presented to the ESRC seminar, “Gender Mainstreaming, the New Economy and New Employment Forms,” University of Leeds, 3 Sept. 2004, 15–16.

<sup>82</sup> For example, they are taken less seriously than men because of their assumed prioritization of home and family, their assumed emotional rather than rational decision-making, and other discriminatory perceptions. They are thus disadvantaged not only in the workplace but also in business, as banks, for instance are more reluctant to lend to women. Alimo-Metcalfe and Wedderburn-Tate, “United Kingdom,” 28; Carter and Cannon, *Women as Entrepreneurs*, 45–46.

<sup>83</sup> Nenadic, in “The Social Shaping of Business Behaviour,” argues that “the vast majority of businesses in nineteenth century Britain, were small in scale, and unmodernised in their structure and strategy,” 625.

and care for other women. The construction of the service industries as a female sphere is not surprising and has perpetuated the notion that such activity is on the margins of mainstream business activity and thus could safely be ignored by historians of business. However, as the service sector grows in economic significance, such activity will cease to be accurately described as “female.” Gender distinctions in British business are, despite uneven opportunities, becoming blurred.

### Progress and the Future

Despite the failure of mainstream British business history to study issues of gender, practitioners of women’s and gender history have reclaimed much of women’s hidden past and have emphasized the relevance of gender interaction in social and cultural change, most successfully in the context of labor and work in British industrialization. It is now accepted that earlier views of gender were changed by industrialization and, conversely, that the course of industrialization was influenced by the transformation of men’s and women’s roles.<sup>84</sup> This shift in outlook has benefited historians of industry, and, in the same way, it should be a source of opportunity to business historians.

The areas in which an approach that takes gender into account has already proved itself are closely connected to the world of business. The history of women’s businesses has mainly supplemented existing business history. It has not yet transformed the “master” narrative. Nevertheless, reclaiming women’s past is a necessary step toward constructing a history that takes gender into account.

Such an approach to the issues of business history would challenge existing frameworks. Recent research demonstrates how a gendered analysis, especially one that focuses on the construction of gender identities, reveals a good deal about how organizations, businesses, and markets operate, particularly in the service sector. Robert Bennett, for example, explores the marriage bar in the clerical and service sectors, particularly as it was applied in the British Civil Service and at Barclays Bank. He argues that the constraint on married women’s work helped to construct an organizational culture that emphasized middle-class respectability by reinforcing the traditional family form. He suggests that gender and culture should be prioritized in the analysis of British business, and that to maintain a “position in which culture is subservient to economic forces. . . risk[s] a retreat into both functionalism and essentialism.”<sup>85</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, 138–47.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Bennett, “Gendering Cultures in Business and Labour History: Marriage Bars in Clerical Employment,” in *Working Out Gender: Perspectives from Labour History*, ed. Margaret Walsh (Aldershot, U.K., 1999), 204.

Bennett's conclusions are confirmed by research in the service industries. A study of British insurance companies reveals the range of ways in which gender identities were reconstructed over the course of changes to sectors in the British economy from the late-nineteenth to the early-twentieth centuries.<sup>86</sup>

Studies that are compatible with the conceptual apparatus of gender history also offer a challenge to traditional business history. Business culture is a good example, and it is one that has informed U.S. business history for some time. This topic has been of less interest in Britain, where economic concerns continue to take precedence over those of culture. Yet the desire to analyze numbers—while still strong—is being mediated by the recognition that the more qualitative features of business activity must be explored as well. Women in business and women's businesses have been judged as exceptions to male indicators of success, rather than as being "part of the gendered history of economic life."<sup>87</sup> Each business, for example, may have a different "culture," which is determined partly by the gender of its participants.<sup>88</sup> The contribution made by Mary Rose to this area is particularly important. Rose has shown how the human aspect of business, reflected in networks and culture, can illuminate the analysis of business activity.<sup>89</sup> As she demonstrates, the "gender" of business networks, often assumed to be male, turns out to be more complex. R. J. Morris's most recent book, in which he discusses how networks helped to sustain nineteenth-century business, emphasizes the contribution of women to the successful operation of these networks.<sup>90</sup> Rose and others have demonstrated the potential for integrating culture and accounts and have shown how gender analysis can enhance the understanding of business. The construction of gender is also relevant to wider notions of business. For example, in a field such as men's wear, where the gender of the consumer is important, the business historian can learn how notions of masculinity

<sup>86</sup> Ellen Jordan, "The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: The Beginning of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Gender and History* 8, no. 1 (1996): 65–81.

<sup>87</sup> Wendy Gamber, "A Gendered Enterprise: Placing Nineteenth-Century Businesswomen in History," *Business History Review* 72 (Summer 1998): 191.

<sup>88</sup> As Alice Kessler Harris suggests, if "we want to approach a multi-dimensional perspective, we need to be aware of the full range of cultural signals that guided decision making at all levels." "Ideologies and Innovation: Gender Dimensions of Business History," *Business and Economic History* 20, 2nd ser. (1991): 51.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Rose, "Networks, Values and Business," 30; Jonathan Brown and Mary B. Rose, "Introduction," in *Entrepreneurship, Networks, and Modern business*, eds. Brown and Rose (Manchester, U.K., 1993), 1–8; Mary B. Rose, "Beyond Buddenbrooks: The Family Firm and the Management of Succession in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Entrepreneurship, Networks and Modern Business*, 127–43.

<sup>90</sup> For example, Morris, *Men, Women, and Property*, 277–78. This work also demonstrates the fluidity of spheres.

are manipulated to sell goods.<sup>91</sup> Business objectives and performance measures are also products of gender construction. Men, more than women, may be driven by the bottom line; women more than men by issues of community, social justice, and the environment. It would be interesting to discover whether women actually are more active than men in environmentally friendly businesses that are designed to promote global equality and development and serve purposes other than the simple maximizing of profit. The business of Anita Roddick illustrates this point. Her successful Body Shop has been sustained by environmentally friendly practices, and the profits she generated allowed her to pursue development projects. Another example is Safia Minney, who founded Global Village in 1990 and promoted environmental and social-justice issues before launching the Fair Trade company and, in 1997, People Tree, a fashion collection using ecotextiles.<sup>92</sup> Their “feminine” concern for the environment and fair trade has also proved to be good business strategy.

Despite the general recognition that business operates within a changing economic, social, and cultural context, business historians have not fundamentally altered their perspective. Globalization, the changing nature of capitalism, and the growing importance of service industries have imposed consequences on the structure and organization of business that cannot be ignored.

## Conclusion

Business history as a discipline has, in Britain, demonstrated a receptiveness to new ideas, even though individual business historians have resisted taking gender into account.<sup>93</sup> The history of women’s businesses has tended to demonstrate the exceptional nature of female entrepreneurship, suggesting that women are inevitably “different” and can therefore be marginalized and ignored. But a historical approach based on gender, which embraces the activities of both men and women and recognizes their complementary contributions and the ways in which

<sup>91</sup> Katrina Honeyman, *Well Suited: A History of the Leeds Clothing Industry, 1850–1990* (Oxford, 2000); Honeyman, “Following Suit,” 426–46. The female consumer was constructed in a different way, since, for women, consuming or shopping was perceived as an activity consistent with their “nature,” or as accepted behavior.

<sup>92</sup> In a recent *Guardian* interview, Minney said she would like to be remembered as “having helped to tip the balance towards sustainability.” *Guardian Weekend*, 7 Aug. 2004. Also relevant is the notion of “non-utilitarian satisfactions,” identified above in Nenadic’s study of the Edinburgh women’s garment trades. See Nenadic, “The Social Shaping of Business Behaviour,” 627.

<sup>93</sup> For an overview of recent work, see Andrew Popp, “British Business History: A Review of the Periodical Literature for 2002,” *Business History* 46, no. 2 (2004): 156.

their “differences” have been at least partly socially constructed, is more inclusive and thus is to be preferred.<sup>94</sup> Gender relations in business should become an essential part of historical analysis. Given the small numbers of women currently practicing business history in the United Kingdom, not all of whom are convinced of the value of the gendered approach, it is essential that both men and women become more aware of its practicality. Business history should be based on more than economic analysis; consideration of the role of gender sheds light on the operation of business in the past.

In order to make serious progress in this regard, it is necessary to accept certain concepts: that relations between the sexes form an essential component of business activity; that gender differences are powerful shapers of business; and that reshaping business history is a desirable objective that need not be confined to introducing considerations of gender. The new outlook might incorporate the analysis of the nature of labor and work, which are equally necessary to business. Finally, it would draw on the recognition that exploring gender identities, including masculinity, is a valuable pursuit.

<sup>94</sup> During discussion at the Barcelona conference, it was suggested, first, that the distinction I drew between women’s history and gender history may have salience in the British historiographical tradition but may have less relevance elsewhere; and, second, that even if such a distinction can be made, both approaches can contribute, albeit in different ways, to the development of gendered business history. I think it is important to emphasize that I am explicitly discussing gendering business history, not feminizing it. Walsh in “Gendering Endeavours,” believes that business history is becoming more inclusive, 187–95.