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**Widows and Daughters: Austrian Business
Women and Their Status in Family Firms in the
19th and 20th Centuries**

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Women's status in family firms and economic citizenship

An ever growing number of publications deal with women who possessed a business or who were active in family enterprises, thereby adding valuable insights into earlier research on working class women and the gendered marking of the economic range. Recently, doubts have been expressed that the research on self-employed women – questioning the idea of separate spheres and the private-public-divide and thus underlining the active role of women in the economic life – overemphasizes the extent of the economic independence of women.¹

The fact that the term 'family firm' has become a prominent analytical tool in business history could certainly be interpreted as a path to overemphasizing women's economic power, because attention often is given to the very active participation of women in family businesses, whereas the discrimination of women within the family unit seems to be widely ignored. The term 'economic citizenship',² defined as the right to participate in the economic life of a society, could correct these deficits by readdressing the attention to the subject and her/his role within the family business. Examining the gendered individual rights regarding participation and control within the fictitious family unit could lead to a more distinct view of women in family firms and thereby balance the weakness of the term 'family business'.

While there is a clearly defined era when political citizenship was awarded to woman, economic citizenship is, by far, a more complex matter. Different judicial systems (such as industrial law, trade regulations, commercial law, family law, laws of inheritance etc.) restricted women's rights and their economic participation. The disadvantages within this range are firmly interconnected with the economic, social and cultural system of a country or a region and they are woven around the powerful paradigm of a sex-neutral economy. Not only were (married) women and men enfranchised with economic citizenship at different times, we also need to differentiate between women according to their social status. Class, family status and

¹ Alastair Owens, Making Some Provisions for the Contingencies to which their Sex is Particularly Liable: Women and Investment in Early Nineteenth-century England, in: Robert Beachy/Béatrice Craig/Alastair Owens (Eds.), *Women, Business and Finance in Nineteenth-century Europe: Rethinking Separate Spheres*, Oxford – New York Berg 2006, pp. 20-35, p. 22

² Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America*, Oxford Oxford University Press 2001. And her article: Gender Identity: Right to Work and the Idea of Economic Citizenship, in: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 46, 1996, pp. 411-426

cultural traditions are all crucial categories in determining the range of the category gender with regard to the effects on economic activities.

Crucial for the setting, amendment and use of legal rules, which support or obstruct women's economic citizenship, is the hegemonic concept on how economics have to function in a society. These discourses are always gendered, because gender – defined as a constructed category – is a core element of the identity formation of every economic participant and the economic system itself. Prejudice against the status of women in a society, their economic, social and cultural tasks form the framework within which women become economically active.

Although the structure of the family in the 18th and 19th centuries naturally was a patriarchal one, in which wives were subjected to their husbands, the roles ascribed to women in family firms were flexible because the point of reference for gendered role definitions and women's tasks was the economic success of the company and not the concept of femininity. The ideology of the exclusion of women from the profit-oriented sphere was a pervasive discourse in the 19th century. However, it was not without internal contradictions and ambivalences.

For an analysis of women's economic citizenship the legal framework must be questioned in regard with the construction of masculine and feminine gender identities in economics: Did the national rules for trades and commerce support or work against the ideologies of a gendered division of labour? Economically active women used the space opened up by the discrepancies between different judicial systems, because the position of woman in family laws differed from their position in the commercial laws or trade regulations. Furthermore, the local interpretation of these laws, within the regional traditions of what was seen as suitable for women, stipulated in which ways women were allowed to participate or carry on family firms. Throughout the paper, I will stress the ways in which law and the economic development of women in industry, trade and commerce were interconnected, and how Austria's comparatively liberal legal system permitted women to enter the market place but ultimately contributed to an economic gender gap.³

It is important to differentiate between family enterprises and to not simply establish continuities between family firms of the bourgeois elite in the 18th century

³ The paper based on empirical research on business women in fin de siècle Vienna registered at the Viennese Commercial Court, on Austrian business women after WWII, on members of the First Network of Female Entrepreneurs in Austria, and on an analysis of census data. See Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann, *Businesswomen in Austria*, in: Beachy / Craig / Owens (Eds.): *Women, Business and Finance in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, pp. 110–125.

and the family firms of the petit bourgeoisie in the 19th century.⁴ It is also necessary to contextualise the term “family firm”, because the term “family business” receives its meaning only in a specific historical and regional context.

For a long time small enterprises in crafts, trades and commerce were determined by the legal regulations and social obligations of the guilds in Austria, and it was only after the decline of the guilds that the family gained influence, establishing a new social order. In Austria this newly created small size family business was also legally implemented insofar as wives of small business owners were legally obliged by the Austrian Civil Code of 1812 to work without payment in the family business.

Whether this obligation can be actually interpreted to be a cooperation in the family business or even as a potential source of empowerment for women from the middle classes, is questionable. It is possible that in countries like France⁵, where marriage laws did not stipulate the separation of property in the marriage as a norm and where, therefore the cooperation of the woman in the family firm had a different legal foundation than in Austria, husbands and wives formed a cooperation in the family firm that was not to the disadvantage of women. In Austria women in family businesses were economically strongly disadvantaged due to the fact of the separation of property during the marriage and the obligation to assist in the enterprise of the husband without payment and without getting a share of the economic gains during the marriage or after the husband’s death.

The legal framework for Austrian businesswomen

The Austrian Civil Code of 1812 was the most progressive of its time, securing women a high degree of economic independence, which they had enjoyed in many territories of the Austrian monarchy since the late middle ages. Unlike most of the German states, in Austria there was no fundamental guardianship of men over women. An unmarried woman was an independent legal actor who could manage

⁴ Josef Ehmer, *The Artisan Family in Nineteenth-Century Austria: Embourgeoisement of the petite bourgeoisie?* In: Geoffrey Crossick/Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (Eds.), *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, London, Methuen 1984, pp. 195-218. Josef Ehmer, *Family and business among master artisans and entrepreneurs. The case of nineteenth-century Vienna*, in: *The History of the Family. An International Quarterly* 6 (2001), pp. 187–202

⁵ See Béatrice Craig, *Patrons mauvais genre: femme et entreprises à Tourcoing au XIXe siècle*, in: *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 34, 2001, pp. 331–354, Béatrice Craig, *Where have All the Businesswomen Gone ? Images and Reality in the Life of Nineteenth-century Middle-class Women in Northern France*, in: Beachy / Craig / Owens (Eds.), *Women, Business and Finance in Nineteenth-century Europe*, pp. 52–66.

her possessions by herself and was capable of suing or being sued. As in other countries, a married woman was subjected to her husband who functioned as head of the family. But in Austria a wife was clearly in a better position with regard to her economic opportunities. In contrast to the French Civil Code and most of the German legal systems, the Austrian Civil Code conferred married women full legal rights, apart from those of their husbands. In addition, Austrian women retained rights to their property when they married. Despite personal legal subjection to her husband (with regard to herself and matters of mutual concern), a wife did not hand over her property to her husband when she married.⁶

Due to this protection of female property (the so-called *Gütertrennung* or 'separation of goods', which allowed both marriage partners to control their respective property), married Austrian women had a much better starting point when they wanted to become active in business.

While the Austrian Civil Code did a reasonable job of protecting the property of married women, the 1812 law also subordinated wives to the judgment and control of their husbands. First, the Civil Code presumed that any property gains made during marriage represented the husband's effort.⁷ The Civil Code also assumed that the husband would manage his wife's property, although the wife or her parents could easily protest this arrangement. A wife was also denied the right to work outside her own household if her husband so insisted.

In contrast, the wives of farmers and small businessmen in trades, crafts, and food services were actually obliged to assist in their husbands' businesses without payment, as far as it was customary for that kind of business and compatible with the duties of housekeeping and childrearing.⁸ But if the wife of a farmer or a businessman was not formally a co-owner of the business, she could not ask for compensation for her contribution in the event of divorce. This law pertained to

⁶ For the legal status of women in Germany see Robert Beachy, *Women Without Gender: Commerce, Exchange, and the Erosion of Female Guardianship in Germany, 1680-1830*, in: D. R. Green / Alastair Owens (Eds.): *Family Welfare: Gender, Property and Inheritance since the Seventeenth Century*, Westport (Praeger) 2004, pp. 195–216.

⁷ The so-called *praesumptio muciana* in section 1237 of the Civil Code, see § 1237 ABGB.

⁸ The reform of the Austrian Civil Code in the 1970's gave these regulations a gender-neutral formulation, before 1975 the obligation to assist in a spouse's business affected only wives. The right to compensation was only set down in law in 1978. See *Bundesgesetz vom 1. Juli 1975 über die persönlichen Rechtswirkungen der Ehe*, BGBl. 1975/412 and *Eherechtsänderungsgesetz 1978*, BGBl. 1978/280. see Erika Weinzierl and K. R. Stadler (Eds.), *Geschichte der Familienrechtsgesetzgebung in Österreich (= Justiz und Zeitgeschichte)*, Wien (Geyer Edition) 1979. Oskar Lehner, *Familie – Recht – Politik. Die Entwicklung des österreichischen Familienrechtes im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Linz (Trauner) 1987.

women who ran a business outright while their husbands were absent, due, for example, to military service. In a far-reaching decision, the Supreme Court of Austria ruled in 1924 that a wife who managed the business of a husband who had been engaged in military service during World War I did not have a right to payment. The case of the woman who took her ex-husband to court because she wanted compensation for this work was dismissed. “The plaintiff”, according to the Court, “has only managed the business of the defendant in the interest of the family during his temporary absence due to military service...”.⁹ Thus a wife’s contributions to the family business were as little compensated as housework.

Clearly the Austrian Civil Code protected the material goods of the upper classes, including those of married women. But it also disadvantaged petit bourgeois wives; women from the lower social orders who entered marriage with little or no property often had legal obligations to assist their husbands but without compensation. Thus the working class and petit bourgeois women of those countries that established joint property after marriage had a clear advantage over their Austrian counterparts. According to the French Civil Code, for example, a widow or divorced woman had a legitimate claim to the property acquired during marriage. In the event of divorce, a French woman could demand the capital that had accrued through her own work contribution in the family business.¹⁰ This was not the case in Austria, unless the married couple had established a marriage contract.

Table: Wives as business partners in Vienna and its suburbs, 1869¹¹

	Percentage of wives as partners in business	
	Vienna	Suburbs of Vienna
Dairy owners	92.4	83.3
Victuallers	82.8	81.1
Artificial-flower makers	81.3	71.4
Innkeepers	80.6	79.6
Seamstresses	78.7	23.6
Coffee-house owners	76.6	79.1
Second-hand-goods dealers	75.4	74.9
Umbrella makers	73.6	68.4

⁹ See OGH 29.4.1924, SZ 6/164.

¹⁰ Ursula Vogel, Gleichheit und Herrschaft in der ehelichen Vertragsgesellschaft, in: Ute Gerhard (Ed.), *Frauen in der Geschichte des Rechts. Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, München (Beck) 1997, pp. 265–292.

¹¹ Source: Census data of 1869.

Trades regulations

Women who held a formal licence for a trade or craft fell into three categories: Firstly, women could exercise a trade or craft because they had been trained to become fully qualified tradeswomen (“Meisterinnen”). Until the introduction of the trade regulations in 1859, which declared equal rights between the sexes with regard to access to trades, women were excluded from most guilds. After the trade regulations of 1859 had established free access to trades, women were strongly disadvantaged by the politics of the guilds which restricted women’s businesses to “female” areas.

Secondly, women could be owners of a real estate that formally included the licence for a craft or trade. These licenses (“Radizierte Gewerbe”) were legally seen as part of the real estate, not as an individual person’s possession, and therefore they were for sale and women could buy or inherit these licenses together with the real estate.

Thirdly, women could operate their deceased husband’s businesses and continue as a widow’s business. The majority of women, who were active in trades and crafts in the 19th century, were widows. These widows were forced to hire a managing director or a proxy to run the business. Against the intentions of the guilds, which wanted to decide whom the widow should hire as a proxy, the law stated that it was the widow’s choice. In fact, the continuation of a widow’s business was restricted to successful businesses: only widows who inherited successful enterprises were able to pay for the required proxy. Continuing as a small-scale retailer which did not require a proxy, was limited by law to successful businesses. If a commercial enterprises was indebted at the owner’s death the widow was not allowed to continue the business of her deceased husband as a widow’s business.

Influenced by a widespread liberalism, the Trades Regulations of 1859, enacted 1 May 1860 and effective until 1973, set the basis for the free exercise of self-employed trades, regardless of gender. As a general rule, before 1859 a majority of the guilds had not been accessible to women.¹² But section four of the new trade law addressed this explicitly, stating that ‘Gender does not constitute a difference in

¹² For a gendered view on the Trades Regulations see Helene Herda, *Der Zugang von Frauen zum Gewerbe. Eine Analyse der rechtlichen Rahmenbedingungen von 1859 bis heute*, in Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann / Regine Bendl (Eds.), *Unternehmerinnen: Geschichte und Gegenwart selbständiger Erwerbsarbeit von Frauen*, Wien (Lang) 2000, pp. 135–160.

regard to access to trades.’ With satisfaction of all legal prerequisites, including the attainment of majority status¹³, every man *and* woman could run his or her own business. In theory, at least, the new law realized freedom of trade for women. With the exception of a few branches—fourteen trades were subject to obligatory regulation because of their pronounced public interest—it was only necessary to register in order to carry on a trade. What was important here was not the protection of those who already practiced a trade but the idea of promoting entrepreneurial spirit.

These progressive principles were soon undercut, however, by amendments in 1883 and 1907, which reflected the new anti-liberal political pressures of Vienna’s petit bourgeoisie. Already with the worsening economic situation after the 1873 stock market crash the government abandoned liberal economic policies. Influenced by the rising Christian-Social Party, the 1883 Trades Regulation amendment made it more difficult to gain entry to a trade and attempted to limit competition. While not containing any passages that explicitly discriminated against women, the amendment was still biased in the way that it complicated women’s access to trade. To limit the competition of newcomers, proof of qualification now had to be produced for certain trades, which required formal training in one of the newly founded trade schools or practice with a master.¹⁴ Women could not easily find a master with whom to train, however, nor were they accepted into the trade schools, which were placed under the direction of the guilds after 1883. With the exception of those trades specifically practised by women—including dressmakers and seamstresses, hat-makers, manufacturers of artificial flowers, or plumage makers—women were effectively excluded from most crafts.¹⁵

The 1907 amendment continued this illiberal tendency by establishing new requirements for many fields of the retail industry (including trade in assorted dry goods, colonial wares, delicacies, drugs and spices). Aspiring shopkeepers now had to undergo vocational training for a minimum of five years before they could obtain proof of qualification, and only then could they become independent. The apprentice’s diploma could be substituted with a certificate from a trade school or *Handelsakademie*, but very few of these admitted women. Since access to wholesale

¹³ In 1919 the age of majority was reduced from 25 to 22.

¹⁴ RGBl. 1883/39.

¹⁵ Helene Herda, *Recht und Rechtswirklichkeit für Unternehmerinnen und gewerbetreibende Frauen von 1859 bis heute*, in: Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann (Ed.), *Auf dem Weg zur Beletage. Frauen in der Wirtschaft*, Wien (Sonderzahl) 1997, pp. 111-143, 117.

trades was not limited, the large number of small female shopkeepers were affected disproportionately.¹⁶ Here we can see how the discrimination against women resulted from the increased division of labour and a form of restrictive professionalization.

The number of women practicing a trade nevertheless increased. This growth was concentrated, however, within the very few professions that were regarded as typically female. The trade law promoted this development by introducing special provisions for those trades traditionally run by women, and thus access to the typical 'female' trades was made easier. While the 'male' crafts were increasingly protected from outside competition (including that posed by women), women competed freely with other women in the 'female' trades. With easy access to certain 'female' trades, Austrian legislation acknowledged a woman's right to gainful employment, but at the same time refused to make fundamental changes that would promote equal opportunities for women, namely by opening the educational system. Destitute women who wanted to work as dressmakers did not have to show proof of school attendance or of a successfully completed apprenticeship (which was paid for by the apprentice). They could start their own business without having to meet these formal requirements as long as they opened a store in which neither apprentices nor journeymen were employed.

Widow's businesses

A final and critical legal context for considering the economic agency of women was the law of inheritance and a widow's right to run the business of her deceased husband. According to the inheritance law of the 1812 Civil Code, a spouse could not lay claim to the property of a deceased partner, unless the partners had established joint property in a marriage contract. Aside from her children, the widow was left only with lifelong usufruct to a share from the inheritance. And since the Civil Code established the wife's obligation to assist in her husband's business, the inheritance law tended to discriminate against woman. Husbands could legally deny inheritances for their future widows even if they had helped to increase the family's property during the marriage. Only with the partial amendment of the Civil Code in 1914 were spousal inheritance rights extended; at that point the spouse inherited a quarter

¹⁶ RGBl. 1907/26.

and—if the marriage had remained childless—half of the inheritance, if not indicated otherwise by a will.¹⁷

The widow's right to continue to run the business of her deceased husband (in order to support herself and her children) had been established by the late Middle Ages. This had been considered a necessary measure since a widow was not a blood relation of her husband and therefore not eligible to inherit his property. But the widow's right had differed from guild to guild and was generally limited: widows were allowed to fill in until their sons could take over, or else a deadline was set by which time they had to remarry. In the trade regulations of 1859, widow's rights were consistently regulated and they were allowed to continue to run the business of deceased husbands. The amendment of 1883 limited this right to the 'duration of widowhood', and this prohibition on remarriage remained in effect until 1973.¹⁸

Many businessmen also stipulated in their wills that the widow's inheritance be contingent on her not remarrying. This can be viewed in part as an effort to secure the children's material interest over and against that of the widowed mother. This meant of course that many who chose not to remain single not only lost their right to continue directing a family business but also sacrificed substantial family assets. In effect, a married woman might be required by law to contribute to her husband's business but denied the right to assume control after his death or even claim the portion she contributed.

Even more vulnerable to disinheritance than widows were daughters. In order to ease the transmission of a firm, the family property was often given to an oldest son. The exclusion of younger children affected primarily daughters, who were rarely considered worthy firm directors, and tended to receive smaller inheritances anyway. One strategy for unmarried daughters was to confer a share in the firm, though generally without signing privileges (or rights of active participation). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, women began to wage legal battles to secure their shares of a family patrimony or to gain access to a particular profession.

¹⁷ Cf. Oskar Lehner, *Familie - Recht – Politik*, pp. 83, 99.

¹⁸ In the same year, the discrimination against widowers was eliminated. Until that time, widowers were not allowed to continue to run the business of their deceased wives.

Table: Marital status of self-employed women in industry, trades and commerce in Austria, 1890–1910¹⁹

	Unmarried		Married		Widowed/Divorced	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1890	92,708	41.65	48,298	21.70	81,572	36.65
1900	107,846	41.41	71,664	27.51	80,944	31.08
1910	164,762	40.76	124,676	30.85	114,749	28.39

Number of business women

Affiliation to the economic elite and widowhood characterized women's economic status during the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century. As in other European countries, women in the Austrian monarchy proved their entrepreneurial abilities in all economic sectors. They led mining enterprises, were wholesalers and bank owners. These economic activities of women from the elite were concentrated in economic sectors, which were not subjected to the regulation of the guilds and were by no means confined to specific areas. The city directories of Vienna registered annually the local companies and also issued data about the company owners. The findings for the years 1819 and 1828 show that between 12% and 14.5% of the wholesale firms, which operated at that time were usually also financial brokers, registered women as owners, co-owners or as a person with full signing powers within the firm.²⁰

In 1869, when the first comprehensive census of Vienna was carried out, the percentage of woman within in self-employed in crafts, trades and commerce in Vienna was 18% and rose to 34% in 1890. In Austria, there was by no means a "disappearing" of women in business during the 19th century. However, in Austria women in large-scale enterprises were also an exception during in the 19th century.

The decrease in the numbers of women in large enterprises, which differed widely in Europe depending on regional traditions, should not be see as a general enforcement of the ideology of separate spheres according to the ideas of true

¹⁹ Source: Census data of 1890, 1900 and 1910. This includes the leaseholds and the persons who carried out domestic services as self-employed.

²⁰ Anton Redl (Ed.), *Handlungs Gremien und Fabricken Adressen Buch der Haupt- und Residenzstadt Wien*, Wien.

womanhood and manhood. The fact that in the 19th century some Viennese women of the elite still continued to be active in large scale enterprises and, furthermore, the fact that during the 19th century middle class women started to be business women contradicted the idea that role models of true womanhood fully determined the experiences of women.

Starting in the mid-19th century Viennese women from the middle and lower classes opened businesses, usually in branches, which were seen as conforming with the idea of femininity. These women interpreted the discourses on true womanhood not as a retreat to the hearth but as a licence to be active in the developing "women's branches".

The impact of the rapid growth of Vienna²¹ promoted the entry of women into the worlds of business and commerce and increased the relative number of women among Vienna's self-employed crafts and business people. By 1890 women constituted just under 34 per cent of those self-employed in Vienna's industry, trades, and commerce, and this percentage rose slightly to just over to 35 per cent by 1910.

Table: Self-employed women and men in industry, trades and commerce in Vienna²²

	All	Male	Female	% Female
1869	61,110	50,031	11,079	18.12
1890	96,108	63,506	32,602	33.92
1910	120,771	78,405	42,366	35.08

Starting from 1869, the censuses of the Habsburg monarchy were characterised by exact data collection, also with regard to woman's work. The data of the census in the year 1910 offers particularly exact figures on business women because the chamber of commerce in Upper Austria had requested their members to accurately register wives participating in family businesses. Therefore, more detailed data is available for the fin de siècle period than for the 1950's and 1960's.

The woman-discriminating collection criteria applied in the censuses of 1951 and 1961 did not count the widows, who ran businesses, resulting in data that cannot

²¹ The city's 1869 population of 842,951 (including the suburbs which were only incorporated in 1890) had reached 1.6 million by 1900, and exceeded 2 million by 1910.

²² Source: Census data of 1869, 1890, 1910.

possibly be meaningful. The data collected by the business census carried out in 1964 shows that approx. a third of all business owners, co-owners and leaseholders were women, thus correcting the census results of 1961.

Table: Self-employed in Austria, 1951–1991²³

Year	Men	Women	Women in %
1951	110,700	(20,900)	(16%)
1961	73,500	(16,100)	(18%)
1971	156,500	66,600	30%
1981	144,100	71,700	33%
1991	146,600	64,300	30%

The percentage of women among the self employed persons (data of the census) as well as the percentage of women who owned, co-owned and ran a business (data of the business census) basically stayed the same over this period of time: If we compare the percentage of business women in industry, crafts and trades from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1970s, we see that approx. one third of the business people were female.

Business in the line with ideologies of true womanhood

In two laws introduced in the years 1830 and 1835, the Austrian government made a special point to enforce a political program to facilitate access to occupations for women “in such fields for which the female sex was most suited to the work.”²⁴ At the beginning of the 19th century single and married women were allowed to exercise so-called “unlicensed or free” trades that were not under the control of the guilds, such as small-scale trade related to finery, straw hats, textile and fashion goods, socks, threads, edgings, crochet work etc., small-scale trade with food, and the production and repair of women’s and children’s dresses – as long as women had no employees because the employment of workers required a regular licence from the guilds and a formal training.²⁵

²³ Census data. The decrease in the numbers of the self-employed at the end of the 1950’s is a result of the introduction of an old-age pension for self-employed persons in 1958, thereby allowing old-aged business people to retire.

²⁴ Hofkammerdekret vom 20. Juli 1830 und 1. Juni 1835.

²⁵ Franz Joseph Schopf, *Das österreichische Frauenrecht. Eine praktische Darstellung aller rechte und Pflichten*, Pest (verlag von Gustav Heckenast) 1857, p. 175.

Typical professions for self-employed women in Vienna in 1869

In Vienna	M	W	%
Laundry	108	850	88.7
Milliner's shops	106	525	83.2
Sewing and shirt-making	270	854	76.0
Tobacco stores	114	342	75.0
Artificial flower making	119	130	52.2
In the suburbs	M	W	%
Laundry	123	396	76.3
Milliner's shops	4	83	95.4
Sewing and shirt-making	61	180	74.7
Tobacco stores	63	78	55.3
Artificial flower making	21	28	57.1
Poultry shops	55	99	64.3

As a general comprehensive explanation the separate-spheres-model has been dropped but it still remains, nevertheless, a helpful analytical tool for explaining the development of segmented business fields for women starting from mid-19th century in Vienna. In the field of fashion – involving activities such as sewing, tailoring, embroidery production, millinery, production of feathers, artificial flowers and other products for hats – women could turn their so-called "female" characteristics into a business outside the sphere of domesticity.

The marketing of these fashion products was often based originally on non-profit-oriented initiatives of bourgeois women's associations or of individual women, which turned ideas about femininity into occupations and business ideas, thereby creating economic independence for women in "segmented business spheres"²⁶. In the Austrian monarchy, the state also supported the development of a "female economy" wherein both the producers and the customers were female.²⁷

The small-scale production and the small-scale trade with fashion goods and luxury goods opened up new possibilities for women of the middle classes. Although the majority of women working in this niche economy stayed on a level of penny capitalism, some ambitious women could make more than just a living.

²⁶ Joan W. Scott, Comment: Conceptualizing Gender in American Business History, in: *Business History Review*, Vol. 72, 1998, pp. 242-249.

²⁷ See for Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy. The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860–1930*, Urbana-Chicago 1997. Dies., *A Gendered Enterprise: Placing Nineteenth-Century Businesswomen in History*, in: *Business History Review* 72, Summer 1998, pp. 188-218. The Austrian government supported the production of embroidery.

The increase in the numbers of business women who operated their small firms in accordance with the ideology of true womanhood is a remarkable development.

Furthermore, the occupation census of the Habsburger monarchy shows that the segregation of female and male vocational fields had been increasing since the mid-19th century making women's and men's occupations even more distinct from one another. In 1910, nearly half of approximately 42,000 self-employed women in Vienna were seamstresses, sewers or owned small businesses for the repair and cleaning of clothes. A similar concentration of textile and fashion occupations can be found throughout the whole Austrian monarchy, where in 1910 a total of 78,905 women were self-employed, that is to say 30.74% of all self-employed. 53.78% of these women were active in the fields of production and cleaning of clothes and textiles.²⁸

The absolute and relative increase of self-employed women reflected the increasing divergence between male and female trades. Although some women were active in practically all business sectors, the vast majority were engaged in traditional women's branches or in fields that had emerged from the impact of rapid and disruptive industrialization.²⁹ One of these sectors was the clothing industry, which traditionally employed a large number of women. Vienna's self-employed seamstresses and seamstresses were often married, petit bourgeois women who worked as small sub-contractors from home. Sometimes they employed helpers and extra seamstresses, but the size of their operations declined significantly in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The small self-employed women in Vienna's garment industry characterized the majority of Vienna's female business owners at the beginning of the twentieth century. Drawn from the 1910 census data, the main professions for self-employed women were tailoring and dressmaking (6,696 women or 15.80 per cent of all self-employed workers), sewing and shirt-making (6,345 women or 14.97 per cent), followed by the retailing of food and beverages (5,689 or 13.43 per cent), and laundry and clothing repair services (5,445 women or 12.85 per cent). In aggregate, of 42,366 self-employed women, 21,692 (51.20 per cent) or over half owned tailoring,

²⁸ Census of 1910 published in 1916. See *Berufsstatistik nach den Ergebnissen der Volkszählung 1910*. Wien 1916.

²⁹ See Josef Ehmer, *Familienstruktur und Arbeitsorganisation im frühindustriellen Wien*, Wien (Verlag für Geschichte und Politik) 1980.

needlework, and laundry businesses, 13,441 (31.72 per cent) were in retailing, and 2,195 women (5.18 per cent) ran pubs and restaurants. Almost 83 per cent of all self-employed women appeared in only two vocational categories, and more than 92 per cent appeared in only four. The rest were distributed among 19 other categories of professions.

Table: Viennese trades with the greatest number of self-employed women in 1910, and the average number of employees, collaborating family members, and domestic servants³⁰

	Males	Females	%	Employees per self-employed person	Collaborating family members	Domestic servants
Tailoring	8,800	6,697	43.21	2.93	0.03	0.10
Sewing and shirt-making	480	6,345	92.97	2.05	0.03	0.08
Retailing of food and beverages	3,467	5,754	62.4	0.95	0.16	0.26
Cleaning and repair of laundry and clothing	812	5,446	87.02	1.32	0.05	0.07
Grocery	4,812	2,701	35.95	0.27	0.26	0.28
Restaurants and Inns	3,639	1,731	32.23	4.44	0.30	0.48
Millinery, plumage and artificial flower production	300	1,461	82.96	4.93	0.06	0.20
Production of embroidery, crochet and lace work	146	1,023	87.51	2.85	0.04	0.15
Trade with Materials and Products of Textile Industry	2,223	1,108	33.36	4.70	0.09	0.96
Door-to-door sale, Hawking	1,438	941	39.55	0.04	0.01	0.03

The trade regulations favoured this development of an ever-increasing discrepancy between male and female businesses with an amendment to the trade regulations of 1859. Contrary to the general tendency of making access to trades and crafts more difficult by asking for proof of qualification and introducing certificates of competency and vocational training, the amendment of 1883 introduced specific "women's professions" whereby access was facilitated and the otherwise required proof of training in the craft was not mandatory. From 1883 to 1907, the local trade authorities defined which trades were "women's trades" within their regional traditions; in 1907, the crafts to which women had easier access, because they were

³⁰ Source: 1910 population census (including leaseholds). Employees included white- and blue-collar workers, apprentices and day-labourers. Comparison with the first census in 1869 is limited given the changes in occupation categories.

seen as women's professions, were specified on a national level: embroidery with gold, silver and pearls, production of dresses for women and children, hat-making, as well as the production of plumage and artificial flowers for fashionable hats, were officially counted as being women's professions.³¹

The majority of the Viennese business women did not oppose the ideology of gendered business fields but creatively found occupation possibilities, where the society did not see contradictions between business and femininity. Women, who protested against this classification were rare exceptions. In the years 1893/94 Mathilde Tischler, who wanted to take over her father's painting and decorating business in Vienna, fought against the painter and decorators' guild which rejected her as a member of the guild stating "that female painters had never existed in Austria and that only men were entitled to operate in this trade."³² A few years later, a young female watch-maker who had been trained in her father's business tried to get a licence from the watch-makers' guild to run the business herself.

Both daughters faced similar difficulties in the process of taking over their fathers' businesses showing just how extraordinary their intentions to run a business in a field that was regarded as being reserved for men, were. Here, the difference between widows and daughters is a striking one, whereas widows were allowed to run the business of their deceased husbands as long as they stayed unmarried and hired a proxy to actually run the business, daughters were excluded. In fact, the discrimination of the daughters was not a discrimination by the Austrian civil code or the trade regulations but by the membership requirements of the guilds who at that time – supported by the Catholic conservative Party – had gained influence again and had put in place requirements for training and access to crafts and trades that contradicted the liberal intentions of the trade regulations of 1859.

In her complaint against the exclusion from the painting and decorating business Mathilde Tischler referred to the contradiction between the training regulations set up by the guilds and civil law. In an auto-biographical account, she wrote that she had checked the civil code book and had not found a section "which pointed out that women may not operate in a painting and decorating trade."³³

³¹ For the amendments see Reichsgesetzblatt 1883/39 und RGBl. 1907/26. Helene Herda, Recht und Rechtswirklichkeit für Unternehmerinnen und gewerbetreibende Frauen von 1859 bis heute, in: Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann (Ed.), Auf dem Weg zur Beletage, Wien 1997, pp. 111-143.

³² Mathilde Schwarzmann-Tischler, Der Weg, wie ich Anstreicher-Meisterin wurde, in: Der Bund, 1. Jg., Nr. 3, Februar 1906, p. 5.

³³ Ibid.

Discourses on business and gender

Historical analyses on discourses concerning women and work focussed particularly on female workers, showing that in the 19th century political economics, as a newly established science, influenced laws to protect female workers and thereby shaped working conditions for women. Under the assumption that the home was the place for women and factory work was a society-threatening development, female workers were seen as a potential thread for the moral, social and economic rules of society and condemned as “prostitutes.” This assumption of true “natural” gender relation structured discourses and the perception of economic activities of business women as well.³⁴

Discourses on gender and business did not draw on the rhetorical figure of the prostitute, who endangered the order of the social body, but on the difference of production and consumption classifying all bourgeois women as consumers or, even worse, lavish squanderers.

For Jean Gustave Courcelle Seneuil – the famous writer of an early theory of business management - the "properly-arranged home" was the basis of all business success and business failure generally began with "disorder" in the home. In the "Manuel des Affaires, ou Traité théoretique pratique des Entreprises industrialist, commerciales et et agricoles" published in 1856, he even established a psychology of nations and people based on the nature of their households. He stated that particularly successful businessmen came from countries, known for orderly families and homes.³⁵

This discourse on housewives knowing their place in the well-ordered home and on uncontrolled luxury needs of women as a threat to business success reshaped the ideas about women and business in the 19th century and set the limitations for economic citizenship of women.

³⁴ Joan W. Scott, „L’ouvrière! Mot impie, sordide...’: Women Workers in the Discourse of the French Political Economy, 1840-1860, in: Dies., *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York Columbia Press 1988, pp. 139-163. Joan W. Scott, *The Woman Worker in the Nineteenth Century*, in: Geneviève Fraisse/Michelle Perrot (Eds.), *A History of Women*, Vol. 4: *Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 399-426. On the discourse on female workers and their experiences see Kathleen Canning, *Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience*, in: *Signs* 19, No. 2, Winter 1994, pp. 368-404.

³⁵ Jean Gustave Courcelle-Seneuil, *Theorie und Praxis des Geschäftsbetriebs in Ackerbau, Gewerbe und Handel*. Stuttgart 1868. (German translation of *Manuel des Affaires, ou Traité théoretique et pratique des Entreprises industrielles, commerciales et agricoles*. Paris 1856), pp. 29-30.

The rhetorical figure of the female worker as a prostitute marking economic citizenship for working-class women, as well as the rhetorical figure of the woman as a consumer and lavish person are both part of a discourse that created the framework for a gendered perception and an interpretation of economic changes in the 19th century. Both discourses are grounded in economic realities – female workers were part of the misery of the working class and women had a core function in the household and the family business. In the family business of the 18th and 19th centuries, the essential role of women is reflected in the fears of the lavish wives. In the mid-19th century, when the gendered division between male production and female consumption was widely standardized in economic theory, the figure of the lavish woman acquired new meaning, and now came to represent women's exclusion from the sphere of production. The rhetorical figure of a lavish woman and her potential to ruin a business man, is no longer set in the context of an integrated family economy but in the context of a new idea of economics where production and consumption are separated.

With the rhetorical figure of the lavish woman, a form of human behaviour is interpreted in gendered ways and used as a gendered marker for economic fields. Werner Sombart placed lavish women addicted to luxury at the centre of his theory about the emergence of capitalism and stated that expenditure for luxury items, that the mistresses of rich aristocrats spent, marked the beginning of capitalism.³⁶ However, he excluded all women from entrepreneurship and he wrote summing up the characteristics of entrepreneurs: "They are men, not women!"³⁷ Likewise, Joseph Schumpeter conceived the innovative entrepreneur as a superior male in terms of a Darwinist ranking.³⁸

For a business history which attempts to bring culture back into business history, it is interesting to analyse how the concepts of masculinity and femininity

³⁶ Werner Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus*, München–Leipzig 1913.

³⁷ Werner Sombart, *Der kapitalistische Unternehmer*, in: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, XXIX. Band, 1909, pp. 689–758, hier p. 740.

³⁸ Josef A. Schumpeter, *Theorie der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung*. 1. Auflage, Leipzig 1912, 2nd edition München 1926. For more details on the notion of the entrepreneur see Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann, *Innovation und Männlichkeit. Schumpeters Unternehmer – ein österreichisches Muster?* In: Rupert Pichler (Ed.), *Innovationsmuster in der österreichischen Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Innsbruck 2003, pp. 103–118. Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann, *Unternehmerisches Handeln als Projektionsfläche moderner Männlichkeit. Eine Analyse des Schrifttums zum Unternehmer seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, in: Lemke, Meike / Ruhe, Cornelia / Woelki, Marion / Ziegler, Béatrice (Eds.): *Genus Oeconomicum. Ökonomie – Macht – Geschlechterverhältnisse*, Konstanz 2006 (Universitätsverlag Konstanz), pp. 63–76. Dorothea Schmidt, *Im Schatten der „großen Männer“*. Zur unterbelichteten Rolle der Unternehmerinnen in der deutschen Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, in: Friederike Maier (Ed.), *Gender Matters*, Berlin 2002, pp. 211-229.

along with the dichotomy of the sexes were deeply ingrained into economic thinking on entrepreneurial behaviour. At the beginning of the 20th century the process of defining the term entrepreneur as the male alpha type man and the marking of production as male in opposition of consumption as female was firmly established in the field of economics. The linking of masculinity and entrepreneurship, which has existed in different forms since theories about the entrepreneurial characteristics were formulated, structured experiences for women and limited their economic citizenship.

Typical vocational fields for business women

What does the data on the various different areas of business tell us about the development of women's economic citizenship during the 19th and 20th centuries? Did self-employed women gain access to more professions and overcome the gendered division of the business world? The data collected by the business census of 1964 offers an exact insight into women's and men's businesses. In large cities, women generally had more chances to establish themselves as business women: in 1964, the percentage of woman among business owners, co-owners and leaseholders was 35.48% in Vienna, whereas in Austria overall it was clearly less, with only 30.25%.³⁹

An analysis of the percentage of woman in the groups of professions shows a heavy concentration of woman's work: the top professions for business women in Austria in the 1960's were inn keeping and restaurant business (where women made up 46.61% of all business owners, co-owners and leaseholders) and retail trade (45.38%). Retail trade with 24,451 women and inn keeping and restaurant business with 17,899 women were the two fields in which most women operated their businesses. The fact, that 63.74% of all business women were active in only these two professional categories, indicates a limited access to the economic world of women.

Comparability with earlier census data (from the beginning of the 20th century) is limited since occupations and the rules concerning data collection had changed decisively, turning the statistical categories of occupations and occupational groups into data that is difficult to compare. However, the census data of 1910 indicates that

³⁹ Ergebnisse der nichtlandwirtschaftlichen Betriebszählung 1964, 2. Teil Beiträge zur Österreichischen Statistik, 172. Heft, Wien 1968.

women's share in inn keeping and restaurant business (24.21% of all persons) and in retail trade (30.74%) was lower than in the 1960's. At that time, women's work was still concentrated on the production and the repair of textiles and cloths.

Due to the fact that many women's professions, especially in the fashion business, have vanished, the question about segmented business spheres can hardly be answered in terms of women's share of certain professions, but rather as a concentration of women into a few profession groups. In 1910, 40.82% of all Viennese business women were active in only three professions out of a total of 175. With regard to segmented business spheres for women and men, there is clearly no break in continuity from the beginning of the 20th century until the 1970's.

Girls, who learned a trade in a field that was not regarded as being a woman's profession, were rare exceptions even after the Second World War – usually motivated by the prospect of inheriting a family business especially when there was no longer a male heir.

Size of enterprises

In the 1960's women made up a third of all business people in Austria. Among business people who employed more than 500 employees, women's share was 9.72%, for those who employed 100 until 499 employees women's share was 15.15%, for those who employed 50 to 99 employees their share was 17.77%, and finally for those who employed 10 to 49 employees their share was 21.78%. The percentage of business women (34.11%) who ran a penny capitalism enterprise on their own without any employed help was above average.

The fact that business women in Austria usually ran smaller enterprises, rather than big industrial companies, is underscored by the statistics of industrial production in Austria in 1964. Out of a total of 7,213 industrialists only 1,124 were women resulting in a percentage of just 15.58%.

Tab.: Business owners, co-owners, and leaseholders in Austria in 1964⁴⁰

Number of employees	Number of enterprises	Business owners, co-owners, and leaseholders		
		total	Women	Women in %
total	214,390	219,632	66,435	30.25%
0 employees	85,522	88,114	30,053	34.11%
1 – 4	87,334	88,928	26,977	30.34%
5 – 9	19,827	20,739	4,862	23.44%
10 – 49	17,206	17,761	3,869	21.78%
50 – 99	2,335	2,375	422	17.77%
100 – 499	1,832	1,571	238	15.15%
500 and above	334	144	14	9.72%

With regard to the size of enterprises no reliable comparisons can be made since the business census of 1902 did not collect data on the sex of the business owners. A possibility to gather more concrete data about women's businesses is offered by the files of the commercial court of Vienna, where all companies above a certain size and taxation level payment have had to register since the 1850's. Among these big companies – representing 3 to 4 % of all businesses in industries, crafts and trades in Vienna – women's share was 3 to 4%. In the period from the 1850's to the end of the monarchy, 3 to 4% of the well-to-do businesspeople in Vienna were women.⁴¹

In 1964, among business owners, co-owners and leaseholders of enterprises with more than 50 employees – accounting for approximately 2 % of all enterprises in Austria at that time – approximately 15% were female. We can, therefore, suggest that business women could acquire a better position within the group of entrepreneurs from the 19th to 20th century.

⁴⁰ Business census of 1964.

⁴¹ This analysis is based on the probate records in Vienna City Archives of 52 affluent businesswomen who died between 1898 and 1910 and were registered at the Viennese Civil Court for Commercial Affairs. My sample includes about one-third of all of the extant probate inventories for businesswomen. The number of women's estates registered in the Vienna Commercial Court is very small, only 3 per cent of the total. Since every businessperson above a certain tax limit was required to register at the Commercial Court, these probate records are generally representative of well-to-do entrepreneurs and constitute some 3-5 per cent of all Viennese self-employed people in industry, trades, and commerce. These probate inventories provide assets and liabilities of individual business owners at the time of death and include information on the business venue, the machinery, the workshops, the office equipments and the warehouse stock. See Michael Pammer, *Umfang und Verteilung von Unternehmervermögen in Wien 1852-1913*, in: *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte* Jg. 41, 1996, S. 40–64.

The percentage of women among the business people and their various different areas of business hardly changed from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1970's. However, women-owned and women-operated businesses turned out to be more successful over this period of time.

In the 19th century, two third of the women who ran larger companies registered at the Viennese commercial court were widows, whereas after the Second World War more women founded companies themselves and among the heiresses daughters preceded over widows.

The changed personal characteristics of the business women (women being younger, being founders), the changed public perception of entrepreneurial women fostered by the first network of women entrepreneurs, and the societal modernization contributed to the fact that business women became more and more successful.