

Women in Business: A Historical Perspective

Women in Business Today

Carole Black	President and CEO of Lifetime Entertainment Services, the top-ranked cable network in prime time.
Oprah Winfrey	Host of the nation's best-rated talk show for sixteen years and head of Harpo Inc., which generates spin-off products such as <i>O</i> , The Oprah Magazine.
Margaret C. Whitman	The internet entrepreneur who transformed eBay, Inc., from a web flea market to a global merchandising force with \$13 billion in sales.
Abigail Johnson	President of the mutual fund division of Fidelity Investments.
Carly Fiorina	At the helm of Hewlett Packard at a crucial juncture in its development.
Martha Stewart	Maven of domestic advice and head of Omni Multimedia Inc.

The names of these highly successful female executives are familiar to many Americans who cruise the web, shop at K-Mart, or read the Wall Street Journal. These women are frequently the subjects of media scrutiny. Their visibility serves to many as proof of women's achievements in corporate America during the twenty-first century.

Why Study the Past

Many of today's female entrepreneurs are so successful that it is easy to assume high-profile businesswomen in a variety of fields have always been a feature of the American economy. This has not always been so. Examining the past enables us to put the accomplishments of women like Martha Stewart in perspective, allowing us to see what is unique about their experiences and what threads tie them to women who lived long ago. By studying history, we can learn that the accomplishments of today's outstanding businesswomen owe much to the groundwork of earlier generations of female entrepreneurs and workers. From history, we can also learn how businesswomen have always struggled with the unique challenges presented by socially determined gender roles, which have both created opportunities for women's advancement and limited their growth as professionals.

The Cult of Domesticity

For many decades, women's roles in business and in the workforce were defined by cultural notions about women's appropriate role in society. The "cult of domesticity" that shaped American thought beginning in the early nineteenth century dictated that women's proper place was the home. The tenets of the cult of domesticity held that women could best serve the political and social needs of the republic by dedicating their energies to the creation of healthful and nurturing households. Good homes managed by loving mothers would function as havens from a hard world for sons and husbands and as training grounds for daughters who would perpetuate the tradition of responsible motherhood. This set of beliefs was powerful, and its tentacles not only wrapped about the domestic sphere but also extended into the public realm.

In the public arena, the idea of domesticity shaped popular perceptions about what types of jobs and occupations were proper for women who needed or wanted to work outside of the home or the family farm. This set of beliefs, along with the influence of British common law, also had a profound impact on laws governing married women's access to property. Combined, these factors limited venues for female entrepreneurship and dictated that women were suited for certain pursuits or jobs more than others. The themes of domesticity, mothering, and nurturing reigned supreme in female-dominated enterprise. By the mid to late nineteenth century women began to dominate businesses and professions dedicated to the preparation and serving of food; to the manufacture, sale, and care of clothing; and to care-giving jobs such as librarianship, midwifery, nursing, and social work. Women excelled in fields such as dressmaking, hat making, and retailing consumer goods. They also dominated service-oriented areas such as dining and catering. While nineteenth-century female job-seekers found windows of opportunity, those openings were circumscribed by a distinctive set of social expectations about what behavior befitted women in American society.

1880's-1920's

The decades between the 1880s and the 1920s witnessed a tremendous boom in women's participation in business as both entrepreneurs and workers. This period is often associated with the rise of big business, which helped to transform the United States into one of the world's most vibrant economies. This half century saw the founding or expansion of large firms in agriculture, chemicals, and petroleum such as Armour, International Harvester, DuPont, and Standard Oil of New Jersey (Exxon); the introduction of national retailers like Sears Roebuck and F. W. Woolworth & Company; and the birth and growth of technology-oriented service companies such as AT&T and the Pennsylvania Railroad. At the same time, federal, state, and local governments also expanded.

The changes wrought by the rise of big business, industrialization, and urbanization helped to redefine women's place in American business. Most notably, evermore women began to work outside of the home, where they still found that society's expectations about gendered behavior to be a mighty influence. For the most part, women found jobs as "helpmates" of various types. They worked as laborers in workshops and factories, as clerks in burgeoning bureaucracies, and as salesgirls or departmental supervisors in retailing establishments, including urban department stores.

To be sure, some women ventured into management by establishing their own companies, but most of these enterprises still fell within the purview of the woman's sphere. Many of these firms concentrated on making and selling products for the home or for personal adornment. Along these lines, Madame C. J. Walker and Estee Lauder established lucrative cosmetics companies that made beauty products for black and white consumers, respectively.

In Pursuit of Equity

The last sixty years have witnessed revolutionary changes in the status of women in business. Between the end of World War II in 1945 and 1995, women entered the workforce in still larger numbers. More significantly, bit by bit some woman also began to assume managerial positions in American corporations that operated around the world. The watershed moment was the 1970s, when female entrepreneurship was invigorated by the feminist movement and national legislation that encouraged equal opportunity. By the late 1980s, women owned half of all American businesses. By 1989, they accounted for more than a third of MBAs earned in the United States in a single year. A decade later, the number of American companies owned or controlled by women had grown dramatically. By then, three American women headed companies with earnings that exceeded \$1 billion.

Today's superstar business executives, from Carole Black to Martha Stewart, have benefited greatly from the changes of the last five decades. Many have waged battles against the so-called glass ceiling and other barriers to advancement, and they have succeeded. Yet, it is important to note that many of these prominent women have, like generations before them, focused their careers in areas that are considered "feminine." Martha Stewart most obviously waves the banner of domesticity. But women like Black, Winfrey, and Whitman have also followed this familiar path by building companies that bring entertainment into the home or that retail consumer products, including household goods. In this subtle way, the ideology of domesticity and its attendant prescription for gender role still exerts an influence in the twenty-first century.

Exploring the Past: Opportunities for Studying Women in Business

This web page presents the history of four women who succeeded in American business during the mid to late twentieth century. In many respects, each of these women -- Dorothy Shaver, Freda Diamond, Brownie Wise, and Estelle Ellis -- was extraordinary and exceptional. Each achieved a degree of visibility in their fields enjoyed by few other women while earning a lucrative living. At the same time, each woman's career typified the experience of many businesswomen during the past fifty years. Each of the four carved a niche for herself by working within the parameters set by society for her gender at the time.

The legacy of the cult of domesticity -- broadly defined to include the management of the home and attention to women's personal appearance -- cast a long shadow over each woman's choices, strategies, and tactics. In an executive capacity at the department store Lord & Taylor, Dorothy Shaver rose to the top of American retailing between the 1920s and the 1950s through a concerted effort to upgrade women's fashions. A well-regarded consultant industrial designer, Freda Diamond dedicated her life to the advancement of American taste by designing mass-market furnishings for the postwar home. In the 1950s, sales executive Brownie Wise accumulated a personal fortune and

made Tupperware into a household name by capitalizing on well-established traditions of women's social networks to create Tupperware Home Parties. Marketing pioneer Estelle Ellis helped postwar magazine publishers, and many other clients, to understand the changing economic roles and personal aspirations of girls and women.

--Regina Blaszczyk, Assistant Professor of History and American Studies, Boston University