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9 April 2019

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/101452/>
MPRA Paper No. 101452, posted 07 Jul 2020 07:05 UTC

This is an '**Original Manuscript**' of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in Social History on 17 Oct 2019, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2019.1656929>

The article can be cited as:

Carry van Lieshout, Harry Smith, Piero Montebruno & Robert J. Bennett (2019) Female entrepreneurship: business, marriage and motherhood in England and Wales, 1851–1911, *Social History*, 44:4, 440-468, DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2019.1656929

Female Entrepreneurship: Business, Marriage and Motherhood in England and Wales, 1851-1911

In the past decade a thriving literature on female entrepreneurship in Victorian Britain has emerged.¹ The second half of the nineteenth century has long been seen as the period during which the division of private and public spheres solidified, with women withdrawing from business to become homemakers, constrained by laws of coverture and social conventions.² However, it is increasingly recognized that the division of spheres misrepresented the nature of female economic activity; in reality many women had to, and did, participate in the labour market, as business proprietors as well as waged workers.³ Part of this misconception derived from a gendered understanding of the concepts of work and entrepreneurship.⁴ As a result of masculinized understandings of entrepreneurship, male entrepreneurs seem more visible in the historiographies

¹ Key works include: H. Barker, *The business of women: female enterprise and urban development in Northern England, 1760-1830* (Oxford, 2006); A.C. Kay, *Foundations of female entrepreneurship. Enterprise, home and household in London, c. 1800-1870*. (Abingdon, 2009); J. Aston, *Female entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century England. Engagement in the urban economy* (London, 2016); J. Burnette, *Gender, work and wages in industrial revolution Britain* (Cambridge, 2008); B. Craig, *Women and business since 1500. Invisible presences in Europe and North America?* (Bedford, 2016).

² L. Davidoff, and C. Hall, *Family fortunes* (revised edition, Abingdon, 2002); S.O. Rose, *Limited livelihoods. Gender and class in nineteenth-century England* (Berkeley, 1992).

³ X. You, 'The missing half: female employment in Victorian England and Wales', in L. Shaw-Taylor, A. Cockerill, M. Satchell, eds., *The Online Historical Atlas of Occupational Structure and Population Geography in England and Wales 1600-2011* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁴ B. Craig, R. Beachy, and A. Owens, 'Introduction', in R. Beachy, B. Craig and A. Owens, eds., *Women business and finance in nineteenth-century Europe* (Oxford, 2006), 1-19; E. Hamilton, 'The discourse of entrepreneurial masculinities (and femininities)', *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 25 (2013), 90-99.

of the industrial revolution, with women who ran businesses portrayed as eking out a living from micro-enterprises.⁵ This ignores two important points: first, despite the focus on large industrialists or merchants, the vast majority of male businesses were also small. Secondly, entrepreneurship is not constrained to large, successful, or innovative businesses. Running a small business as a sole proprietor required entrepreneurial skills such as anticipating demand and supply, client acquisition and management, book keeping, and most importantly, responsibility for the enterprise and bearing its risks.

This paper, therefore, follows an inclusive approach to entrepreneurship, including both employers and sole proprietors working on ‘own account’. This is possible by using, for the first time, the full individual census records to provide an overview of the population of female business proprietors in England and Wales between 1851 and 1911. This paper examines their numbers, the sectors in which they were most prominent, and the impact of age, marriage, and motherhood on entrepreneurial activity. As we will show, the level of female entrepreneurship considerably exceeded current estimates in the literature, showing that women comprised a far higher proportion of the business population than previously argued. Considering the limitations of the census enumeration of female occupations, the true number of female business proprietors was likely to have been even higher, which offers a new perspective of what it meant to be a business proprietor in Victorian Britain.

The paper is structured as follows: the first two sections discuss the data; first, the issues regarding census enumeration of female occupational data are addressed, second, the method of identifying proprietors and the database which underlies this study. Next, we present the numbers, sectors and trends of female entrepreneurship between 1851 and 1911, before examining the most

⁵ Craig, *op. cit.*, 1

common businesses for women in more detail. Finally, we use a model to examine the effects of marriage and of having small children on women's participation in business. This article shows that women's entrepreneurship was profoundly shaped by their economic and demographic context. The choice to start a business was available to women in this period, but it was a choice many were forced to make because of difficulties of accessing waged labour, or out of necessity, driven by a need to survive, by seeking added income to support a family. This was less often about risk-taking, innovation or other factors that have characterized previous discussions of the heroic nature of entrepreneurship. The small-scale, uncertain, often necessity-driven entrepreneurship of women shared much in common with the majority of male businesses in this period and was more characteristic of Victorian and Edwardian business proprietorship than the male-dominated, large-scale entrepreneurship discussed in much case-study focused business history.

Women's work and the census

Locating female entrepreneurship is extremely source-dependent, and there are significant variations in how the contents of each source reflected the actual activities of women.⁶ Many women's business activities have been obscured because they took place within the same space as their domestic activities and were seen as an extension of these.⁷ Other businesses were occasional and irregular: married women took in laundry if their spouses were unemployed, becoming self-

⁶ J. Humphries and C. Sarasúa, 'Off the record: reconstructing women's labor force participation in the European Past, *Feminist Economics*, 18 (2012), 39-67.

⁷ S. Horrell and J. Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male breadwinner family, 1790-1865', *Economic History Review*, XLVIII (1995), 89-117.

employed subsistence entrepreneurs during slack periods in the male seasonal labour cycle.⁸ Many women advertised their business through trade cards or were listed in trade directories, but equally cultural values regarding women and the public sphere led to others relying on word-of-mouth as a way of attracting custom, making these businesswomen less visible in the historical record.⁹ This paper draws on the newly available individual-level electronic census data (I-CeM) for England and Wales in order to examine the population of female entrepreneurs in more detail.¹⁰ Census data were captured at the household level and include individual demographic details of the complete population of England and Wales; its electronic version allows fuller evaluations than previously possible.¹¹ Here we use age, marital status, number and age of children, as well as the role of any spouse to examine the role of the life cycle and family in women's business activities, aspects that, due to source limitations, have often been dealt with in a limited manner in recent case studies.

The issue of the recording of women's work in the census has been the subject of much debate. Recent and ongoing re-evaluations of the enumeration of women suggest that it was more accurate than often assumed, however, several problems remain.¹² The census collected household information via individuals' relationship to their 'head of household'. Heads were predominantly male, and married women were rarely heads if their husband was present. In addition, the census enumerators who copied the schedules into the Census Enumerator Books (CEB), the General

⁸ P.E. Malcolmson, *English laundresses. A social history, 1850-1930* (Chicago, 1986), 15.

⁹ Kay, *op. cit.*, 54-82.

¹⁰ K. Schürer, E. Higgs, A.M. Reid, and E.M. Garrett, *Integrated Census Microdata, 1851-1911, version 2*, (2016) [data collection]. UK Data Service, SN: 7481, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-1>; enhanced; E. Higgs, C. Jones, K. Schürer and A. Wilkinson, *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) Guide*, 2nd ed. (Colchester: Department of History, University of Essex, 2015).

¹¹ See e.g. K. Schürer and J. Day, 'Migration to London and the development of the north-south divide, 1851-1911', *Social History* 44 (2019), 26-56.

¹² A good historiography of this issue can be found in E. Higgs and A. Wilkinson, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Victorian Censuses Revisited', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), 17-38.

Record Office (GRO) clerks who processed and tabulated the information, and the officials who issued the instructions were almost exclusively male.¹³ Against a background of gender relations in the Victorian age, it has been argued that preconceptions of a women's place in society biased the instructions, the responses, and the enumeration of women in the census.¹⁴ As a result, women's work is often considered to be under-represented, with married women's work particularly under-enumerated. More recently, this view has been challenged with the findings that in areas where many women were enumerated as working, such as in the Lancashire textile factories, this included high numbers of married women.¹⁵ Also, as Higgs has pointed out, many of the usually cited issues with women's enumeration relate to published tables which edited the census responses, which disappear when working with the original CEBs.¹⁶ Scholars who have performed nominal linking with other records of female economic activity, using trade directories or wage records of employees in a mill, show that the original CEBs include the vast majority of the women.¹⁷

While this offers confidence in using I-CeM data, which is derived from original CEBs and for 1911 from householder's original responses, some caveats still apply. Several studies show that the CEBs are an accurate source for women's full-time and regular employment, but that the census did not record seasonal, irregular or part-time work.¹⁸ While this holds for men as well, it

¹³ *ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ E. Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth-century Censuses', *History Workshop Journal* 23, (1987), 59-80.

¹⁵ J. McKay, 'Married women and work in nineteenth-century Lancashire: the evidence of the 1851 and 1861 census reports', in N. Goose, ed., *Women's work in Industrial England: regional and local perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), 164-181; L. Shaw-Taylor, 'Diverse experiences: the geography of adult female employment in the England and the 1851 census' in *ibid.*, 29-50; M. Anderson, 'What can the mid-Victorian censuses tell us about variations in married women's employment?', *Local Populations Studies*, 62 (1999), 9-30.

¹⁶ Higgs and Wilkinson, *op.cit.*, 22.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 27; McGeevor, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ McGeevor, *op.cit.*; Shaw-Taylor, *op.cit.*

is likely that women, and married women in particular, would have been more heavily affected.¹⁹ Another issue particularly pertinent to the study of female entrepreneurship concerns women's contribution to running small home-based businesses, where the production of goods and services was naturally part of the household setting. Here, wives and other female family acted as co-workers or *de facto* partners, but were less frequently recorded as such in surviving records.

In addition, there were several inconsistencies between the censuses over the period of study. First, the questions asked by the census was not worded consistently. For instance, the 1861 instructions read that 'WOMEN AND CHILDREN to be entered according to the above Instructions', namely the instructions for men, and 'The occupations of those who are regularly employed from home, or who follow any business at home, to be distinctly recorded.'²⁰ In 1891 this specific instruction was much more limited, just stating that 'the occupation of women and children, if any, are to be stated as well as those of men'.²¹ In 1901 the gender-specific instruction had disappeared completely, and when it re-appeared in 1911 the instruction was directed at 'women engaged in any business or profession, including women regularly engaged in assisting relatives in trade or business'.²²

Second, there was a change in the proportion of women for whom the occupation field was left blank. For single women, this hovered between 20 and 25 per cent of the population – a trend that remained remarkably constant over the census years. Married women, on the other hand, showed inconsistencies between the early censuses and the later censuses. In the 1851-1881 censuses, the occupation field of 70 per cent of married women was left blank, as opposed to 85 to 90 per cent in the 1891-1911 censuses. Widows, finally, showed a more gradual increase of

¹⁹ Higgs and Wilkinson, *op.cit.*, 20.

²⁰ Instructions for filling up the columns headed 'profession or occupation', Census of England and Wales 1861.

²¹ Instructions for filling up the columns headed 'profession or occupation', Census of England and Wales 1891.

²² Instructions for filling up the columns headed 'profession or occupation', Census of England and Wales 1911.

blank records: where in 1861 around 30 per cent of widows over the age of 60 had a blank occupation field, this rose to 40 per cent by 1891 and almost 50 per cent by 1911. The increase in non-recorded occupations between 1881 and 1891 is also evident, albeit to a lesser degree, in older men. There are no obvious reasons why there was such a sudden increase in blank occupations for certain groups, but it is likely that the new census question on employment status introduced in 1891 – whether someone was an employer, own-account proprietor, or worker – sharpened perceptions on what an ‘occupation’ meant. People who had a less defined occupation or worked part-time may have elected to not fill out the occupation question, something which would be more common in ever-married women and older men, and less common for single women and younger men.

A final issue relates to changes in the enumeration of married women. Here the wife’s work can be hidden under the occupational descriptor of their husband, for instance ‘carpenter’s wife’, which was used as much as a social status descriptor as an occupational title. While a proportion of these were partners in the household business, others were not economically active. These proportions varied by enumerator; some enumerators reported every married woman as ‘- wife’, some only gave the description to a fraction of married women.²³ In addition, there was considerable variation of women thus enumerated between the censuses, with 1891 and 1901 having far fewer ‘- wives’ than the other years. In the absence of a way to reliably distinguish between genuinely economically active women and those who were enumerated as a social status, and without a possibility to adjust for them in 1891 and 1901, they have been removed from the economically active population in the following analysis. While we acknowledge this removes a number of married women who would have been active partners in their family firm, the variation

²³ X., You, ‘Women’s employment in England and Wales, 1851-1911’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2014), 191-218.

of reporting between and within censuses makes this necessary to avoid distortions. It should therefore be recognized that the number of married businesswomen in the following analysis represent a minimum.

Despite these issues with the census, as Higgs and Wilkinson argue, this should not invalidate its use.²⁴ Those who criticize the use of the census for the study of female occupations often recommend other sources; for entrepreneurship this is usually trade directories. However, directories suffer from similar omissions, particularly with regard to married women and, as this paper will show, identify lower numbers of female entrepreneurs than the census data. In addition, there is reason to believe the enumeration of entrepreneurs in census data was better than the enumeration of workers.²⁵ For instance, a lodging-house proprietor, even if only requiring a few hours activity a day, was more likely to be enumerated than a woman spending a similar number of hours working in a family member's business if and when required. The census data reveals a larger sample of female business proprietors than found in other sources, and allows us to define entrepreneurship for women on comparable terms to men: as proprietors of their own business of any size. Despite the known issues, particularly regarding the occupations of married women, as a source on business proprietorship the electronic census data are unrivalled.

Locating businesses in the census

As the census was aimed at counting individuals rather than businesses, the I-CeM data require extensive manipulation in order to extract all entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship was reported in

²⁴ Higgs and Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, 34.

²⁵ Shaw-Taylor, *op. cit.*, 30.

different ways. The 1851 to 1881 censuses asked employers to report their workforce size. After 1881 this question was discontinued and the 1891 to 1911 censuses asked respondents to indicate whether they were workers, employed others, or worked on their own account, allowing us to identify the self-reporting business-owning population. However, not everyone responded to this question, and the data have to be weighted to take account of the non-responses. Table 1 shows the number of employers, broken down by gender, who responded by stating their workforce in 1851, 1861 and 1881, and those who self-reported as employers in 1891, 1901, and 1911, weighted for non-response.²⁶

Table 1: Employers by gender

	All employers			Non-farm employers only		
	F	M	%F	F	M	%F
1851	14,740	185,135	7.4	4,488	82,943	5.1
1861	12,814	162,146	7.3	4,200	73,544	5.4
1881	11,647	170,798	6.4	4,468	92,975	4.6
1891	67,361	513,309	11.6	60,536	379,837	13.7
1901	61,613	527,613	10.5	49,073	405,073	10.8
1911	100,015	641,709	13.5	86,356	503,966	14.6

Source: I-CeM.

It is obvious from the discontinuity between 1881 and 1891 that there were different levels of response to each census instruction, and that this was affected by gender. There were several aspects to this. Firstly, the 1851-1881 census respondents reported their workforces in line with two instructions: one was specifically targeted at farmers, who were asked to report their acreage and their number of labourers. The second instruction asked ‘masters’ in trades, manufactures or other business to report their workforce. Not all employers considered themselves masters, and there were separate instructions for certain professions, which made it ambiguous whether they

²⁶ 1871 occupational data is currently unavailable in I-CeM.

were supposed to respond to this question. The imbalance between reported employees and the number of self-reported workers indicates that not all employers followed the instruction. In addition, the language used in the ‘master’ instruction was gendered, and far fewer women responded to this compared to the instruction for farmers, which had much higher female response levels. Finally, the 1851-1881 censuses only explicitly identified employers, while women who ran businesses mostly did so on own account. The breakdown of employment status in the later censuses shows that the majority of businesses, both male and female-run, were own account, but women were most active in sectors where this was particularly the case, such as maker-dealing, personal services and small-scale retail.

For these reasons, this paper adjusts the early censuses to align them with the later census questions. This adjustment uses all responses of employers and masters/mistresses, and supplements them by using the correlates for Employer/Worker/Own Account data from the later censuses, applied to the economically active people in the early censuses. This supplements the extracted employers and own account with the most likely proprietors that are distinguished from workers based on their sector, location, sex, age, and position in the household. A full discussion of the extraction, supplementation, and weighting methods deployed to create the database of business proprietors is available as a Working Paper.²⁷

Female entrepreneurship

Table 2 shows the numbers of male and female entrepreneurs 1851-1911. Both male and female numbers for 1851, 1861 and 1881 are based on extracted and supplementation data, while 1891, 1901 and 1911 are based on weighted real responses. The proportion of female entrepreneurs

²⁷ Hidden for peer-review

remains fairly constant at just under or around 30 per cent of the total business-owning population. The drop in 1911 mirrors an overall drop of the self-employed business-owning population, mainly due to increasing mechanisation of maker-dealer activity and business concentration.²⁸ Despite the undercounts of married women, these numbers are substantially higher than most previous estimates of female entrepreneurship in Britain, which estimate female businesses at between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of the total.²⁹

Table 2. Entrepreneurs by gender.

	Employers		Own-Account		Total Entrepreneurs		% F Entrepreneurs
	F	M	F	M	F	M	
1851	52,681	390,193	267,640	431,360	320,321	821,553	28.1
1861	57,213	395,972	292,143	418,651	349,356	814,623	30.0
1881	66,224	469,586	387,539	565,917	453,763	1,035,503	30.5
1891	67,361	513,309	414,604	651,512	481,965	1,164,821	29.3
1901	61,613	527,613	469,221	758,899	530,833	1,286,513	29.2
1911	100,015	641,709	402,051	735,673	502,065	1,377,382	26.7

Source: I-CeM. 1851-1881 are based on the extracted and supplemented data; 1891-1911 on weighted real responses.

Much of the recent scholarship on female entrepreneurship in Britain has been based on urban case studies, mainly using trade directories and insurance records. We have tested selected locations, which show that compared to the census, directories systematically under-record married women, women in certain sectors, and multiple entrepreneurs in a single household. In addition, many trade directories only stated an initial rather than full name, which prevents identification of gender. Burnette's work on mid-nineteenth-century trade directories in Birmingham shows that while 11.8 per cent were identifiably female, another 8.9 per cent were

²⁸ R.J. Bennett, H. Smith, and P. Monteburmo, 'The population of non-corporate business proprietors in England and Wales 1891-1911, *Business History*, early online access, 2019.

²⁹ Craig, *op. cit.*, 99-100.

gender unknown, meaning that the potential population of listed women could be over 20 per cent.³⁰ These differences explain why Aston's estimates of female entrepreneurship in Birmingham and Leeds based on directories, ranging between 3.3 per cent and 8.2 per cent, are so much lower than the census, where 26 per cent and 35 per cent of entrepreneurs were female; although the trends in female entrepreneurship she gives match those based on census data.³¹ Fire insurance records, as used by Kay in her study on female entrepreneurs in nineteenth-century London, have their own inherent bias in that businesses with higher capital needs were more likely to be insured, and businesses taking place at home with few additional business assets are less visible in policies. The type of business often run by men falls in this first category, while women ran enterprises of the second kind, which explains Kay's estimate that women were not likely to account for more than 10 per cent of total businesses.³² In addition, some trades would have been more vulnerable to fire, and be more likely to appear in the records. For instance, chandlers appear in Kay's top 10 businesses for both men and women, but do not even make the top 100 of entrepreneurial occupations in the census.³³

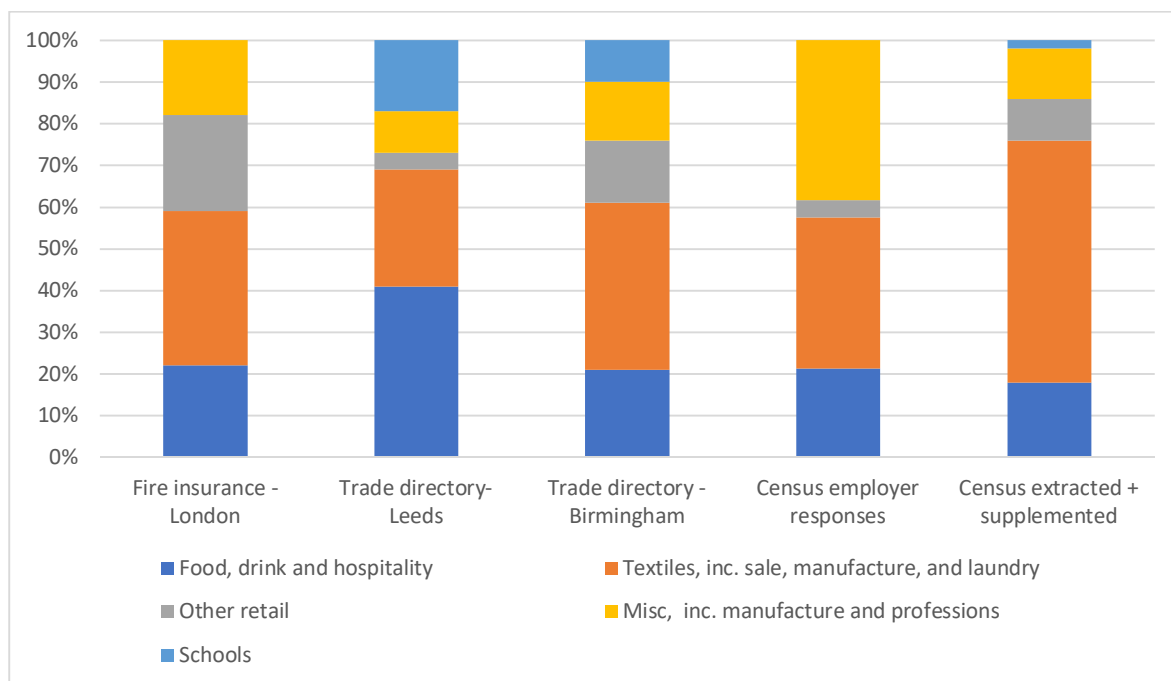
Figure 1: sector breakdowns comparing different sources.

³⁰ Burnette, *op. cit.*, 32.

³¹ Aston, *op. cit.*, 67.

³² Kay, *op. cit.*, 52.

³³ *ibid.*, 46-7.



Source: Fire insurance records for London (N=202) based on Kay, 2009; Trade directories for Leeds (N=307) and Birmingham (N=1,046) based on Aston, 2015; Census employer responses excluding farmers (N= 2,037); census extraction and supplementation (N=151,975). Census urban only, all for 1851.

The differences between the sources can be compared for 1851. Figure 1 displays the 1851 results by source type for six broad sectors that were created by Kay, and adapted by Aston.³⁴ The census occupations have been grouped in the same manner for this chart in order to compare results; in the rest of this paper, a different sector classification is used. In order to make results comparable, the census results have been restricted to urban locations only. Two census estimates are given. First, census employer responses for non-farmers who responded to the ‘masters’ instruction. Second, the extracted and supplemented data estimates which include all female entrepreneurs: employers and own-account proprietors. The employers responding to the census instruction show similar proportions of female entrepreneurs in food and textiles as the fire insurance records and the Birmingham trade directory. There were far fewer non-textile retailers

³⁴ *ibid.*, appendix.

identifying themselves as employers in the census, and considerably more miscellaneous, which is not surprising as these include all non-textile manufacturers and the respondents answered a question aimed at manufacturers. Non-textile retail was low in the census respondents because most of these businesses were run by own-account proprietors. There were almost no school employers; most of whom would have been own-account proprietors. The extracted and supplemented data, on the other hand, has a considerably larger proportion of textile entrepreneurs than any other source. As evident from the non-supplemented data employment-type breakdowns in the 1891-1911 censuses, many of the trades included in textiles were run on an own-account basis, and it is clear that these were not picked up early census responses, and were also largely absent from the trade directories and fire insurance records. London's fire insurance records show that 15 per cent of female entrepreneurs were dressmakers or milliners, however, in the censuses they consistently accounted for well over 30 per cent of female entrepreneurs.³⁵ Laundresses did not even appear in the 10 most common occupations in the insurance records, but consistently accounted for 10-15 per cent of female entrepreneurs in the census. Finally, farmers are also strongly affected by source. Trade directories were generally urban in nature and farmers were rarely listed, thus omitting a large category of entrepreneurs. The farming sector's size meant that female farm entrepreneurs, while comprising only a small proportion of all farm entrepreneurs, still amounted to a considerable part of the female business population. The urban focus inherent in the use of trade directories obscures this important sector.

International studies based on census records more closely match our estimates. In Canada, the 1901 census showed 30 per cent of business proprietors were women.³⁶ In Belgium, census data between 1880 and 1910 showed that 34 per cent of businesses were female, while German

³⁵ *ibid.*, 46.

³⁶ When including boarding house keepers. Craig, *op. cit.*, 101.

official statistics showed around 25 per cent female businesses between 1882 and 1907.³⁷ In addition, if we look at the population of shareholders in England and Wales, who effectively owned part of an incorporated business, we find similar proportions of female involvement as in the census. Female shareholding in a range of businesses rose from 24 per cent to 34 per cent between the 1880s and the 1910s, while similar numbers were found for shareholders in various banks.³⁸

Table 3: percentage female entrepreneurship by sector.

Sector	1851	1861	1881	1891	1901	1911
Farming	9	9	9	8	8	8
Mining	10	10	7	4	3	6
Construction	2	3	2	1	1	2
Manufacturing	25	27	22	14	12	16
Maker-dealing	49	56	59	57	60	56
Retail	29	27	29	25	25	24
Transport	6	5	3	3	3	3
Professional & business services	6	6	6	2	2	5
Personal services	66	69	63	62	55	45
Agricultural produce processing & dealing	9	9	7	8	7	8
Food sales	22	23	22	23	26	21
Refreshment	33	33	38	41	39	55
Finance & commerce	7	6	9	2	3	4

Source: see table 2.

While the overall female entrepreneurship share hovered around the 30 per cent mark, there were vast differences between sectors. Table 3 shows the percentage of female entrepreneurs as part of the business population by 13 sectors over six census years between 1851 and 1911. In several sectors, female participation was consistently low: construction, transport, professional and

³⁷ *ibid.*, 118, 122.

³⁸ J. Rutterford, D.R. Green, J. Maltby, and A. Owens, 'Who comprised the national of shareholder? Gender and investment in Great Britain, c. 1870-1935', *Economic History Review*, 64 (2011), 157-187, table 4; J.D. Turner, 'Wider share ownership?: investors in English and Welsh bank shares', *Economic History Review*, 62 (2009), 167-192.

business services, mining, finance and commerce, farming and agricultural produce processing and dealing were male-dominated sectors, regardless of who the workers were. In personal services and maker-dealing, on the other hand, women constituted the majority of entrepreneurs for most census years. They also formed a significant minority in refreshment, retail, food sales and manufacturing.

Within these broad categories, there was further variation. The high proportion of women in personal services was mainly caused by the large numbers of laundresses, a trade that was over 90 per cent female. Other personal services occupations were much more male-dominated; hairdressing, for instance, was over 95 per cent male. Even the most 'masculine' industries such as construction were not uniformly male, and included some small occupations in which female entrepreneurs were common, such as whitewashing, where almost a quarter of entrepreneurs was female. Retail is often considered a sector that employed many women, however, it was a diverse sector that offered female entrepreneurs opportunities in some, but not all sub-sectors. Most women were, unsurprisingly, concentrated in clothing-related retail, but general shopkeeping, hawking, stationers and artificial flower shops were often headed by women as well. Textile raw materials, on the other hand, were often sold by men, as were skins, leather and metal. Food sales saw a similar divide between male and female occupations, with butchers being over 90 per cent male, while confectioners were predominantly female. An example of an extreme gender split can be found within the refreshment sector, where women made up almost 90 per cent of all lodging-house keepers, but less than 20 per cent of inn and hotel keepers.

Compared to men, businesswomen engaged in a much more limited field of occupations. In the census, the two most feminized sub-sectors, clothing manufacturing and personal services, together accounted for over half of all female entrepreneurs. Kay's study of female

entrepreneurship in mid-nineteenth century London found that around 15 per cent of businesswomen ran businesses in the more ‘masculine’ production trades, which included the non-retail manufacturing trades outside textiles and food.³⁹ In the census, however, non-retail female entrepreneurs not in textile or food-related sectors comprised no more than three per cent of their total. This difference is, once again, explained through the difference in data sources: some of these masculine trades had higher capital needs, and were more likely to obtain an insurance policy, whereas some of the main female occupations, dressmaking and laundry, required little capital.

Table 4: top 10 occupations for female entrepreneurs by census years and their percentage of total female entrepreneurs for that year.

1851	1861	1881	1891	1901	1911
Dressmaker	Dressmaker	Dressmaker	Dressmaker	Dressmaker	Dressmaker
Laundress	Laundress	Laundress	Laundress	Laundress	Lodging/ boarding house keeper
Farmer	Farmer	Lodging/ boarding house keeper	Lodging/ boarding house keeper	Lodging/ boarding house keeper	Laundress
Milliner	Shirtmaker/ Seamstress	Shirtmaker/ Seamstress	Grocer	Grocer	Shopkeeper
Shirtmaker/ Seamstress	Lodging/ boarding house keeper	Farmer	Farmer	Farmer	Farmer
Lodging/ boarding house keeper	Grocer	Grocer	Shirtmaker/ Seamstress	Schoolmistre ss	Grocer
Grocer	Straw plait manufacture	Shopkeeper	Milliner	Confectioner	Schoolmistre ss
Shopkeeper	Milliner	Hawker/ huckster	Hawker/ huckster	Shirtmaker/ Seamstress	Confectioner
Straw plait manufacture	Shopkeeper	Milliner	Shopkeeper	Music teacher	Music teacher

³⁹ Kay, *op. cit.*, 43.

Innkeeper	Innkeeper	Innkeeper	Schoolmistress	Innkeeper	Milliner
71%	73%	71%	72%	73%	69%

Source: as table 2.

Table 4 shows the top 10 occupations by census year, based on the most detailed level of occupational coding available in I-CeM. These occupations together consistently accounted for around 70 per cent of female entrepreneurs. Some trades remained important throughout the period: dressmakers consistently came out on top with the related clothing manufacturing occupations milliner and shirtmaker/seamstress listed in the top 10 in most years. Laundresses were also prominent, while grocers, innkeepers, and shopkeepers also consistently made the top 10. Other sectors were subject to some change: the straw plait manufacture industry, in the top 10 in 1851 and 1861, collapsed towards the end of the century, and accounted for less than 0.1 per cent of female entrepreneurs by 1901. The decreasing importance of agriculture to the British economy during this time can be seen in the decline of farming, dropping from third most common occupation to sixth. Education, as schoolmistresses or music teachers, appeared in the top 10 in the second half of the census period, highlighting the increased feasibility of setting up schooling or private tuition as an entrepreneurial choice for women. Lodging-house keeping increased in importance over time, and while some of this was driven by changing definition of what constituted a lodging house, the trend is clear.⁴⁰

Key female businesses

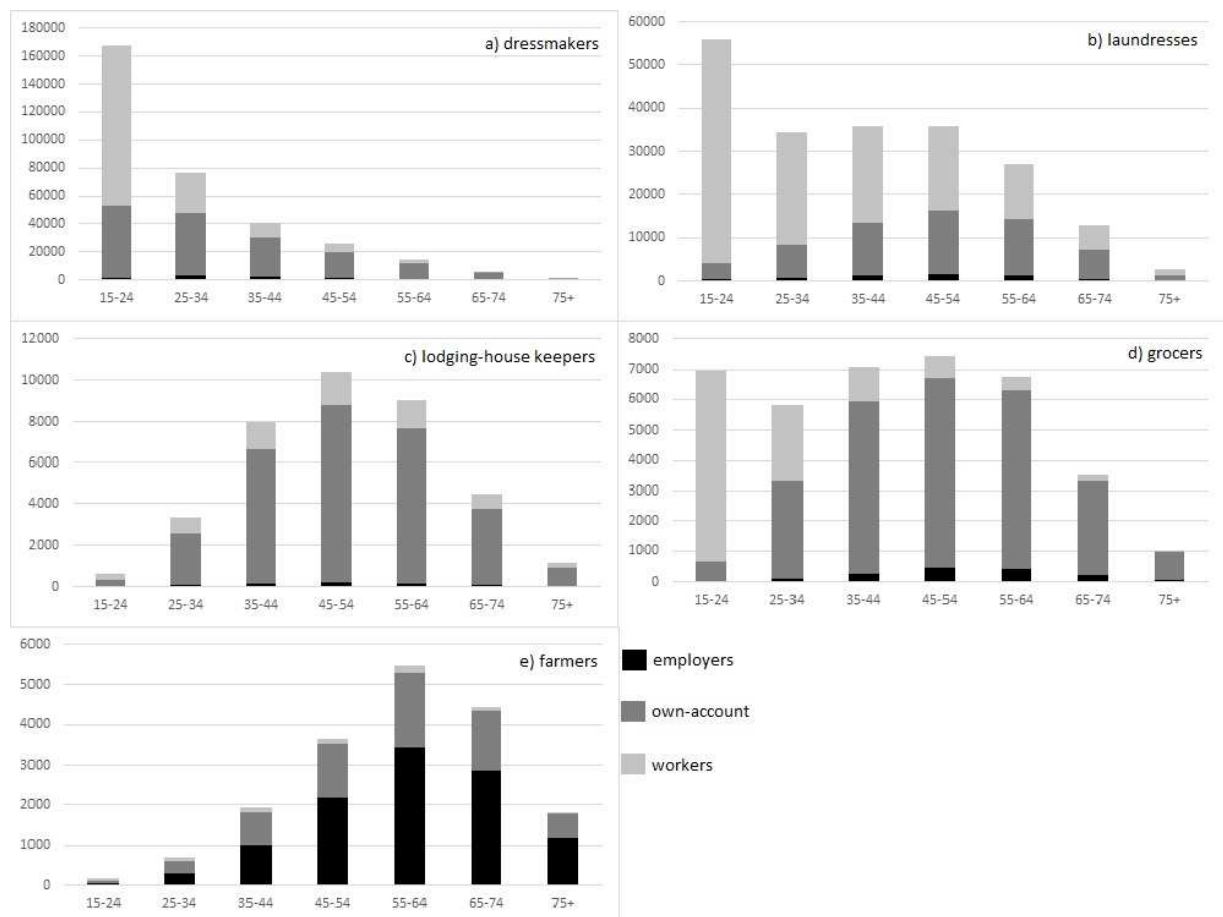
⁴⁰ P.P. LXXVIII (1913), p. cxviii.

Since female work and entrepreneurship were so skewed towards a few occupations, the demographics of these key occupations drove much of the trends. It is therefore necessary to pick out the specific driving forces for different groups of women, which reveal their varied experience of entrepreneurial life in Victorian Britain. Figure 2 contrasts employment type over the course of the life cycle for the main occupations of female businesses. The data is based on 1901, a year which has explicit recording of employer status, and is the most accurate employment status information before the decline in self-employed businesses in 1911; however, other years show very similar breakdowns. Dressmakers display a demography dominated by young workers, but also sustaining many women throughout their lives. Contrast this with lodging-house keepers where very few women were either young or workers. This industry was dominated by women at mid-life, the vast majority working on their own account with substantial numbers of women still running lodging houses at advanced age. Both laundresses and female grocers show a peak at the youngest group, with a large proportion of workers, followed by a decline in the 25-34 age group before a gradual rise in numbers again, driven by increasing entrepreneurship. The young workers who were likely employed in a family business, dropped out of the economically active upon marriage, before re-entering as businesswomen in their own right. Farmers, finally, display a demography also seen by female entrepreneurs in the 'traditionally masculine' industries: very small numbers of workers and young people, and a large proportion of employers at higher age. This was mainly driven by widows, who continued a business after their spouse died.

Of the other top 10 occupations, those that were in the same sectors often followed similar trends. Not surprisingly, milliners were similar to dressmakers, although their entrepreneurship rates were much lower: overall 77 per cent of milliners were workers, versus only 49 per cent of dressmakers. This difference was particularly stark in the youngest age groups, with only 10 per

cent of young milliners being entrepreneurs, while over 30 per cent of dressmakers ran their own business at the same age. Seamstresses and shirtmakers were even less entrepreneurial at a young age; while their overall percentage of workers was the same as for milliners, only three per cent of seamstresses in the youngest age band were not workers.

Figure 2: Employment types for women in 10-yr age bands in key occupations, 1901



Source: I-CeM.

Dressmaking therefore stands out as a trade that allowed women to set up their own business from a young age, even compared to other parts of the clothes-making sector. As Booth

pointed out, little capital was required to set up a dressmaking business.⁴¹ However, the trade varied from London society showrooms to smaller establishments where clients brought in fabrics or department store dresses for alteration, and had different associated start-up costs.⁴² As a sub-sector, it increased in importance between 1851 and 1901 in offering women business opportunities. In 1901, at its peak, well over 70 per cent of dressmakers aged over 35 ran their own business, while for the younger, only single women under 25 were more likely to be workers rather than entrepreneurs. The dressmaking industry declined in 1911. The reasons for this are complex, and can be found in a combination of the availability of sewing machines at home, leading to a rise in amateur dressmaking for the family; new organisation systems that transformed dressmaking from a craft into a more industrialized system; and the rise of the department store.⁴³ It should be noted that milliners, whose craft could not be easily mechanized, did not experience a similar drop in 1911.

Of the main female occupations, dressmaking was most dominated by never-married women, and a career in dressmaking allowed a single woman some independence – 13 per cent of single entrepreneur dressmakers were heads of households, while only three per cent of worker dressmakers headed their own household. This opportunity of an independent life was deemed one of the more compelling reasons to choose a dressmaking apprenticeship over other occupation options, as indicated by the introduction of an 1843 *Guide to Trade* for dressmaking, which also mentioned that a dressmaker would be able to have a house of her own.⁴⁴ Both employer and own-

⁴¹ C. Booth, *Life and labour of the people in London Vol III* (London, 1902), 48.

⁴² P. Ingram, 'British provincial dressmakers in the nineteenth century' (Ph.D. thesis, De Montfort University, 2000), 90-94.

⁴³ W. Gamber, *The female economy. The millinery and dressmaking trades, 1860-1930* (Chicago, 1997), 158-228; S. Nenadic, 'The social shaping of business behaviour in the nineteenth-century women's garment trades', *Journal of Social History*, 31 (1998), 625-645.

⁴⁴ Anon., *The Guide to Trade, The Dress-maker, and the Milliner* (London, 1843), 5, 6.

account dressmakers under the age of 35 were slightly more likely to be married than worker dressmakers, a difference that almost disappeared in the older age bands. Clearly, for young dressmakers, marriage either enabled them to set up their own business, or made it more difficult to work for someone else.

Laundry work was considered a lower-class occupation and often seen as one of the sweated trades.⁴⁵ Booth noted the large proportion of laundresses that were married women, and indeed, in contrast to dressmakers, laundresses were the group of female entrepreneurs most likely to have been married.⁴⁶ Laundry workers were reported by their employers to often be the main wage earner, who supported their families when their husbands were (temporarily) out of work.⁴⁷ Marriage was even more common for business-owning laundresses than for workers; however, entrepreneurial laundresses had a similar domestic set-up as workers and were predominantly married to general labourers, agricultural labourers, or those active in the building trades. Running a laundry business was evidently a strong opportunity for a married woman from an early age. It required little additional skill and equipment beyond what was already needed for the household, and the work could be fitted into the domestic routine, was often available all year round, and offered a degree of flexibility. Laundry proprietors were said to often complain about the unpunctual and irregular hours worked by their employees, who worked around their home duties.⁴⁸ Setting up a small business therefore, would allow a woman to maintain these hours without having to negotiate with employers. Female-run laundry businesses were particularly concentrated in places containing many temporary residents, such as spa towns, sea resorts, ports, and university towns. Areas with the highest proportions of female-run laundries by population

⁴⁵ Malcolmson, *op.cit.*, 5.

⁴⁶ C. Booth, *Life and labour of the people in London Vol IV* (London, 1902), 266.

⁴⁷ Malcolmson, *op.cit.*, 13.

⁴⁸ Booth, *Life and labour IV, op.cit.*, 266.

included Poole, Bath, and Cambridge. While London has been identified as an area with many laundresses as well, it was less entrepreneurial for this trade, with higher proportions of worker laundresses. This higher visibility of employee laundresses in the metropole may have contributed to the image of laundresses as one of the sweated trades, obscuring its important role offering women entrepreneurial opportunities.⁴⁹

The occupation most dominated by women proprietors, however, with almost no workers, was lodging-house keeping. As a profession lodging-house keeping accounted for between four and six per cent of female entrepreneurs over the period, mainly own account, with a rise to eight per cent in 1911. In contrast to laundresses, it was mainly an occupation for women who lived without a man. Lodging-house keeping had some of the highest rates of young widows (those under the age of 35), and the second highest rate of never-marrieds after the dressmakers. In addition, it had some of the highest rates of women married with an absent spouse. This was a slightly ambiguous term. While in many cases it indicated a married woman whose husband was at a different location on census night, for instance on business or family visits, it also included single or separated women who claimed married status as a mark of respectability. Indeed, lodging-house keeping was seen as way for women to earn a living without compromising social status, and was associated with domesticity and providing moral guidance.

Grocers made up between three and five per cent of all female entrepreneurs, and their characteristics reveal some of the largest differences between entrepreneurs and workers. Female grocery proprietors were much more likely to be married, and while the most numerous occupation of their husbands was also grocer, usually indicating a *de facto* partnership, there were substantial numbers of female grocers married to farmers, coal merchants, and other food sales occupations.

⁴⁹ S.C. Blackburn, "No necessary connection with homework': gender and sweated labour, 1840-1909', *Social History* 22 (1997), 269-285

Further indication of the importance of the family as a source of labour and/or partnership, is the fact that employer grocers were more likely to be widowed than own-account grocers, indicating that a grocery could not be run alone and after the death of one spouse the remaining one had to employ help.

Farming was, while consistently appearing in the top ten female entrepreneurial occupations, a very male-dominated trade. Over 90 per cent of farming entrepreneurs were male, and it was the major entrepreneurial occupation for men throughout the period. However, a lot of female involvement in farming was hidden due to census questions asking that farmers' family members be returned as 'farmer's son' or 'farmer's daughter', even if they worked on the farm.⁵⁰ Numerous wives of farmers were returned as 'farmer's wife'. It is clear, however, that many were actively involved in the farm: married male farmers with small farms were more likely to be own account rather than an employer, since they could rely on occasional labour from their household.⁵¹ In addition, very few of the female entrepreneurial farmers were married, unlike the grocers. Female farmers displayed a pattern usually observed in male-dominated trades: mostly older, and often widowed. In addition, the majority of female farm employers had farm workers living in their household. It seems probable that they had been involved in the farm business throughout most of their marriage and continued to run their late husband's business. Many were widowed from a young age: almost 40 per cent of female employer farmers were widowed by the age of 35.

One aspect that the main entrepreneurial occupations for women had in common is that they could be performed using the home as the workplace. The ideology of domesticity and its relation to female roles extended its reach to what was considered respectable work for a woman. Since both waged work and entrepreneurship were seen as male, women who participated in the

⁵⁰ Instructions for filling up the columns headed 'profession or occupation', Census of England and Wales 1851.

⁵¹ Hidden for peer-review

labour market either as workers or business proprietors were already operating to some extent outside their supposed sphere.⁵² In many ways this was mitigated by certain trades being considered feminine or respectable, either by operating trades that were mainly for women by women, such as dressmaking, or by connecting to the female domain of the private sphere.⁵³ Of the main sectors in which women ran businesses in Victorian Britain, laundry and lodging-house keeping relied on skills that were used in the household as well, and while dressmaking was a skilled job with an apprenticeship, most women were taught basic sewing skills and it was seen as an acceptable pursuit for a woman. Another aspect of trying to maintain a separation of spheres, at least physically, was working or running a business from the private sphere of the home. The 1901 and 1911 censuses included a question on whether an individual worked at home. **Table 5** shows the proportion of men and women working at home in 1901, indicating that women were more than twice as likely to work as proprietors at home than men.

Table 5: Percentage working at home by gender and employment type, 1901

	Employer	Own-account	Worker
Female	48.5	75.0	7.2
Male	22.3	45.6	2.2

Source: I-CeM.

The possibility of working at home was largely sector dependent, with the majority of entrepreneurs in maker-dealing, personal services, food sales and refreshment working in the same place they lived – sectors which overlapped with those in which female entrepreneurial rates were highest. The lowest rates for either gender can be found in the mining and quarrying sector, again showing the relation between masculinity and working outside the household, while feminine work was performed indoors. In addition, there were stark differences between employment types.

⁵² Craig et al, *op.cit.*, 7.

⁵³ See e.g. Kay, *op.cit.*, 14; Gamber, *op.cit.*, 30.

Workers of both sexes were least likely to work where they lived, while the majority of female own-account business proprietors worked at home. Dressmakers and laundresses in particular had very high rates of working at home, at close to 90 per cent.

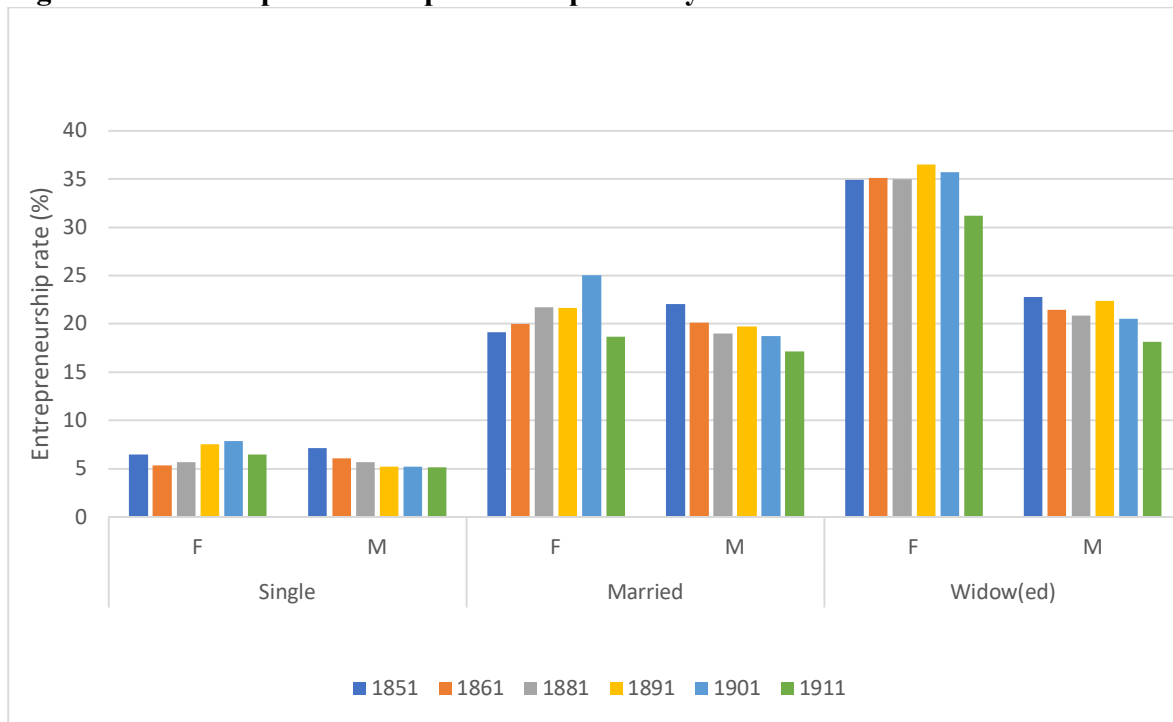
Marriage and motherhood

The discussion of the key sectors for female entrepreneurship suggests the role different stages of life played in business development. Morris has placed the family at the centre of his discussion of the middle class property cycle.⁵⁴ This argued that young adults moved from earning income and loan repayment to entrepreneurial capital during the early stages of family formation, increasingly accumulating assets within the family during later adulthood, to transfer to rentier forms of income to provide for old age as well as dependent family members. For women this life cycle is particularly linked to demographic events, particularly marriage, having children, and widowhood.⁵⁵ Figure 3 shows entrepreneurship rates by marital status for both women and men. Since entrepreneurship interacts between gender and marital status a logistic regression for these variables is used to test the different marginal effects of gender and marriage in table 6, based on 1901. The coefficients in this table refer to the probability of an economically active person being an entrepreneur for each of these variables against the base category of married men.

⁵⁴ 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, 2007), 148.

⁵⁵ Davidoff and Hall, *op. cit.*, 198-228.

Figure 3: Gender-specific entrepreneurship rates by marital status



Source: as table 2.

Table 6. Logit estimates of correlates of entrepreneurship (employer or own account), 1901

	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	z
Male#Single	-0.54*	0.00	-163.86
Male#Widowed	-0.32*	0.00	-73.54
Female#Single	-0.01*	0.00	-3.41
Female#Married	0.58*	0.00	152.22
Female#Widowed	0.63*	0.00	170.75
_cons	-5.28*	0.01	-650.21

N=13,012,627. * Z significant at 0.05 of greater. Source: I-CeM.

Both the raw entrepreneurship rates (figure 3) as well as the logit (table 6) indicate that women had a higher rate of entrepreneurship than men. This is explained by the greater

accessibility of wage labour for men, which made proprietorship a less attractive option.⁵⁶ Marriage increased entrepreneurship rates for both men and women, but particularly for women. While large numbers of single women had recorded occupations in the census, they were predominantly wage labourers in sectors that offered no opportunity for entrepreneurship, such as domestic service and textile factories. Many of them dropped out of the observed economically active after marriage and the arrival of children, but those who remained were significantly more entrepreneurial than married men, who remained in the waged labour market. For men, death of a spouse reduced the probability of being an entrepreneur. For women however, widowhood increased entrepreneurship considerably.

Hence, while marriage played an important role in removing women from the labour force, it had a very different association with their levels of entrepreneurship. This has not been previously so fully recognised. It indicates that marriage offered a clear advantage for entrepreneurship; however, there are several aspects to this. Part could result from better census enumeration of married female proprietors compared to married female workers, but this is likely to explain only a small part of the difference. A more important role lies in the more limited opportunities for married women in terms of waged work, as certain professions, such as teaching, placed limitations on married women's employment.⁵⁷ In addition, marriage brought with it added resources, it could provide access to new social networks, capital, or potential labour, which all made starting a business easier. On the other hand, additional costs incurred after marriage, and particularly after the arrival of children, could provide an incentive for one or both of the couple

⁵⁶ See e.g. S.O. Rose, 'Gender antagonism and class conflict: exclusionary strategies of male trade unionists in nineteenth-century Britain', *Social History* 13 (1988), 191-208.

⁵⁷ Burnette, *op. cit.*, 277-288.

to start their own business. Finally, as marriage and a business both required certain levels of capital, a proprietor might have delayed both until a later point in their life cycle.

Married people who were at home with their spouse on census night can be investigated jointly to assess the occupational behaviour of couples. Table 7 shows the employment statuses of the husbands of all economically active women in 1901. This reveals that for all groups of economically active women it was most likely that their husband was a worker. However, while over 90 per cent of worker women were married to worker men, the marriage behaviour of entrepreneurial women was more varied, with both employer and own-account women being more likely to marry within a group whose employment type matched their own. This presence of dual-entrepreneurship marriages has previously been identified for eighteenth-century London, and while some constitute partnerships, for instance a married couple of grocers, in many other cases these were two people running separate businesses.⁵⁸

Table 7. Employment status of married women’s husbands, 1901

Female EA	Husband			
	Non-EA	Employer	Own-account	Worker
Employer	3.7	38.1	8.2	50.0
Own-account	2.4	3.5	24.7	69.5
Worker	1.4	2.4	5.0	91.1

Source: I-CeM.

A small percentage of women had husbands who were not economically active (non-EA) – implying an inversion of the male-breadwinner/female homemaker ideology. While this did not make the women sole breadwinners of their household – there could have been contributing children or parents – the fact this dynamic was more than twice as likely if the woman was an employer rather than a worker points to the possibility that her business was able to support both

⁵⁸ A. Erickson, ‘Married women’s occupations in eighteenth-century London’, *Continuity & Change*, 23 (2008), 267-307.

spouses. Additionally, in the majority of married female entrepreneurs' households, the women were more entrepreneurial than the men, with 50 per cent of employer women, accounting for almost 3,000 women, supporting a worker husband. Over two-thirds of these were comprised of laundresses and dressmakers or milliners. The differences in the spouses' occupations between these key groups of female employers reveal a lot about their status in society: while the most common occupations for spouses of employing laundresses included general labourers, agricultural labourers, gardeners, and construction workers, the husbands of employer dressmakers and milliners were generally clerks, company agents, drapers and shoemakers.

In addition to marriage, childbirth was a key event in the female life cycle. Childcare had a well-documented and undeniable impact on a woman's availability to engage in the labour market.⁵⁹ Of the over 300,000 women under 40 married in the two years preceding the 1911 census, 15 per cent were economically active after marriage, but before the arrival of any children. Of those who had a child, only 10 per cent were still recorded with an occupation. In addition, mothers' documented labour force participation rates dropped further with each child that was added to the family. The relationship between motherhood and entrepreneurship is less well researched for this period. Kay noted that just under one-third of her census-linked sample had children below the age of 14 living in their household, but focused mainly on older co-resident children and business succession.⁶⁰

It is possible to take the investigation of the effect of motherhood further by linking parents with their children present in the household. This method only includes a parent's own children; it excludes other children living in a household, and is not able to identify children who spent census

⁵⁹ P. Atkinson, "Isn't it time you were finishing?": Women's labor force participation and childbearing in England, 1860-1920', *Feminist Economics*, 18 (2012), 145-164; Rose, *op. cit.*, 93-100.

⁶⁰ Kay, *op. cit.*, 97-99.

night in a different household from their parent. Table 8 shows multinomial logit estimates of the correlation between entrepreneurship for categories of married women under 45 by number of children under five years old. The base category in this model is married female workers who had no children under five, which means that either they did not have any children (yet), or had older children who had aged out of this group.⁶¹ The table clearly shows that women who had young children were more entrepreneurial than those who had none, a finding that remained consistent across age and occupations. In fact, entrepreneurship rose with the arrival of one child and continued to rise as more children were added to the family, although the significance level of these results is low after the fourth child as the sample size becomes very small.

Table 8: Multinomial regression estimates of entrepreneurship coefficients for married women under 45 by number of children under 5. 1901

Number small children under 5	Entrepreneurship coefficient	Standard Error	z
1	0.11*	0.01	11.03
2	0.25*	0.01	18.13
3	0.42*	0.03	14.32
4	0.47	0.13	3.70
5	1.1	0.59	1.88

N = 346,020. * Z significant at 0.05 of greater. *Source: I-CeM.*

The nature of the census data does not allow testing for causality, and it is likely this pattern conveyed a mix of both demand and supply factors. Part-time work or work with more flexible schedules was difficult to come by. Childcare requirements, which were predominantly left to women, could make it more difficult to comply with fixed wage working patterns, making self-employment and the flexibility to choose one's own hours more desirable. Present-day studies

⁶¹ The former is more likely amongst younger women, while the latter is more likely for older women, although there was always a small proportion who married but never had children.

suggest that flexibility and childcare, in addition to independence and financial factors are key motivations for new mothers starting up new businesses.⁶² Alternatively, having an established business could encourage adding more children, particularly if the business was undertaken at home and could facilitate childcare. As table 5 shows, running a business offered much higher work-at-home opportunities than waged labour. It is likely that a combination of these factors was in play.

There are some important sector differences. At the time of the 1911 census, just under 2,000 dressmakers under the age of 40 had been married for under two years. Slightly less than a quarter of them had had a child. Of those who remained without children, 9 per cent were employers, 54 per cent worked on own account, with the remaining 38 per cent workers. The dressmakers who had had children were more likely to work on own account (67 per cent), but were less likely to be employers, with only 4 per cent employing others. As a whole, dressmakers with children appeared more entrepreneurial with only 30 per cent being workers, but the move away from employing others in favour of being self-employed hints at smaller, and perhaps more precarious, businesses. Laundresses, of which 1,700 had been married in the two years preceding the 1911 census, followed a similar pattern, although over 90 per cent were workers. Like dressmakers however, those who had a child were more likely to be own account rather than employ others. Alongside a wider trend of dropping out of the economically active at the birth of the first child, the small number of women who remained were remarkably entrepreneurial.

Widowhood, finally, had a very positive association with female entrepreneurship. Female entrepreneurship has been characterized as older and widowed women coming into the role of

⁶² K. Richomme-Huet, V. Vial, and d'Andria, A., 'Mumpreneurship: a new concept for an old phenomenon?', *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, 19 (2013), 251-275.

proprietor after the death of her spouse.⁶³ The census data confirm that the difference in average age of male and female entrepreneurs is a good proxy for the level of gendered work of a sector. For instance, in blacksmithing, an extremely male-dominated sector, the age gap between male and female entrepreneurs was consistently over 10 years, implying that women only came into the trade at a higher age. This does not mean that they were less entrepreneurial than ‘self-made’ proprietors such as dressmakers. Many male entrepreneurs would also have benefitted from having family members in the business, and many sons followed older family members into business, whether male or female, and became partners.⁶⁴ Indeed, often these widows remained in business even after their sons were of age. The 1901 census data shows that over 30 per cent of widows who ran a blacksmithing business had sons over the age of 21 who were also recorded as blacksmiths. Similar proportions can be found for widow painters, millers, butchers, and saddlers. Rather than being placeholders, it is likely these widows had been involved as a hidden partner for at least some part of the marriage, and were the ideal person to continue the business, reflecting contributions they had made that had gone unrecorded before.

Conclusion

Many women ran their own businesses during this period, but their choice to do so, and their choices about the kind of business they ran were constrained by a series of factors. Some of these

⁶³ Kay, *op. cit.*, 85.

⁶⁴ See e.g. Barker, *op. cit.*

constraints can be observed in the census data: age, marital status, sector, the choice between employing others and working on one's own account; however, others are invisible, in no small part due to the nature of the census as a source, most notably the impact of cultural norms about gender roles and relations. However, the census data make clear that entrepreneurship was important for many women, and that it was a choice thrust upon them by necessity and the increasingly gendered nature of the waged labour market, while also offering opportunities to those who had entrepreneurial capacity. Their entrepreneurship was thus in many ways similar to that of men: more constrained to specific sectors, but no less valid or interesting for that fact.

More than was the case for men, a woman's life cycle events such as marriage, motherhood and widowhood played an important role in her choice whether to work, the work available to her, and the entrepreneurial choices she could make. While it is often argued that many female entrepreneurs were single or widowed, it is important to note that although both marriage and motherhood often had a negative impact on women's participation in the waged labour market, they were positively associated with business proprietorship. However, female entrepreneurship, as with female labour force participation more generally, was not a uniform experience. Certain demographics clustered in specific trades and, as well as women tending to be found in a relatively smaller number of sectors compared to male entrepreneurs, within those sectors employers and own-account proprietors had strikingly different age, marital status and household profiles. Our understanding of women's enumeration in the census is still continuing to develop, and there are issues that should be kept in mind while interpreting the data. However, the data derived from digital census records is one of the better large-scale sources for female entrepreneurship we have for the nineteenth century; and despite some undercounting of married women it captures a far larger number of female business proprietors than any other source available.

These findings should remind historians that large-scale businesses were the exception in this period, and that most entrepreneurship consisted of men and women running small businesses. The case of female entrepreneurship reveals what is lost when historians focus on large businesses and define entrepreneurship as a heroic activity based around innovation or grand risk-taking, it ignores the majority of people who ran businesses in this period, the factors that shaped their choices to start businesses, and thus restricts our understanding of the structure of the economy in this period. By turning our attention to the women and men who made up the vast majority of business proprietors in this period we gain a fuller understanding of these factors. The analysis based on census data presented in this paper confirms many of the conclusions reached by recent case studies in female entrepreneurship. However, it also shows that these have significantly underestimated the size of the female business proprietor population and its relation to the male one. Women in business were as numerous in the second half of the nineteenth century in England and Wales as they were in North America and Europe, and any decline in numbers began to take place during the early decades of the twentieth century, rather than during the Victorian period.