Gendering the Company: A Critical Perspective on German Business History

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Abstract:
In this short essay, we discuss the opportunities for German business history if it takes gender seriously as a category of inquiry and point out why historical gender research should focus more on the company as a social arena. We argue that business history should integrate gender as an analytical category and draw on methods of social and cultural history. We seek to encourage innovative research projects that explore the potential of gender – produced by social practices, values, norms and moral concepts – as an analytical category for business history. Likewise we are interested in exploring how historical gender studies might develop when they move to the social arena of the company as a field of investigation.

The frustrating absence of gender in business history

Over the past decade, gender has become a central dimension of political debates about women's equality in economic life, gender-related career obstacles (glass ceiling), the gender pay gap or sexualized power structures in the professional world (#metoo). While it has served as an analytical category in social and cultural history for decades (Scott 1986; Bock 1988; Hagemann & Quataert 2008; Scott 2010; Heinsohn & Kemper 2012), the category of gender has so far left only minor traces in business history. Based on an analysis of the publications in the journal *Business History,* Mills and Williams (2021) conclude there was an "enduring neglect of a women's business history". Less than 2% of the essays published there in the last 20 years deal with women, gender or gender relations (1.8% of the articles, 1.5% of the book reviews). The record for the discipline's two other major journals, *Business History Review* and *Enterprise & Society*, is little different; however, both published special issues on the topic two decades ago.[1]

Our findings for German business history are similar.[2] 1.7% of the articles published in the last 30 years (1992-2021) in the *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte and Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte* deal in some way with gender issues

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1 For BHR cf. Scranton (1998). The introduction by Angel Kwolek-Folland (2001) in the special issues of Enterprise & Society is a very readable contribution to a business history in a gender perspective.

2 Special thanks go to Lino Wehrheim for research in his database, which enabled us to identify the essays. Buchner et al. (2020) and Wehrheim et al. (2021) provide insights into the respective project on quantifying historical research (University of Regensburg).

in the context of work and business, mostly related to the social history of women's employment. It looks even bleaker for the more narrowly defined journals in the field. The *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte* has published five articles (Löther 1991; Neugebauer 1999; Eifert 2005; Scheepers 2009; Leicht & Werner 2013); only one article in the *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* deals with firms and family (Schäfer 2008).

This cursory overview of journal articles does not do justice to the attention that many business historians have paid to women entrepreneurs and managers, gender relations in companies and discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation. Excellent monographs and edited volumes have been published in the last 30 years, especially in the UK and the US (e.g. Kwolek-Folland 1994; Gamber 1997; Kwolek-Folland 1998; Yeager 1999; Smith 2005; Barker 2006; Phillips 2006; Bishop 2015; Popp 2015; Aston 2016; Barker 2017; Aston & Bishop 2020). Female German business historians have also focused on similar issues (see below). However, this work has barely found its way into the relevant journals in the field and has had a little impact on the mainstream of business history.

During the 1980s, this development had not been expectable. At that time, the historian Stefan Bajohr had programmatically entitled his dissertation that dealt with the history of women's workforce participation "The Half of the Factory" *("Die Hälfte der Fabrik"*, Bajohr 1979). Equally, women's history had grown into an independent field of research in the USA (Lerner 1976; Zemon Davis 1976; Bridenthal & Koonz 1977) and West Germany (Hausen 1976; Frevert 1986; Bock 1988; Daniel 1989; Wunder 2004). A seminal essay by Joan W. Scott (1986) in the *American Historical Review* acted as a catalyst; a new journal, *Gender & History*, was founded in 1989 and opened with an introductory essay by the German historian Gisela Bock (1989), who had just been appointed professor at Bielefeld University.

Gender history emerged as a critical scholarly perspective on history in the 1970s and 1980s in the context of social and cultural history and the feminist movement. Its protagonists focused on men, women and children, on ideas, norms and values of the family. They addressed the interconnectedness of categories of inequality such as gender, class and race in modern society (today, one would say: intersectional categories). In Germany, a research infrastructure with centres, professorships and chairs for women's and gender history emerged in the 1990s, which helped to anchor the study of gender in the historical sciences (Allen 1996; Schaser & Schnicke 2013; Bock 2014a; Hagemann 2016). Two edited volumes published by Karin Hausen (2012) and Gisela Bock (2014b) still provide valuable insights into the respective conceptual developments. Since then, praxeological approaches that examine how gender is 'produced' have complemented this research perspective (West & Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1993, 2004). In addition to studying the construction of gender through social interactions, historical research now focuses on corporeality and the body (Butler 1993; Möhring 2004; Bourdieu 2005; Bluma & Uhl 2012), the construction of masculinities (Connell 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Martschukat & Stieglitz 2018 [2005]), and, particularly in American business history, the gendered products of industrial production (cf. "Boys and their toys", Horowitz 2002).

Institutionalized German business history, however, continued to neglect gender history's critical approach to gender relations in the context of power, the economy and politics (cf. Berghoff 2004: 253). Women in the workplace and women entrepreneurs remain largely unconsidered in the discipline's journals,[3] although women business historians have studied women entrepreneurs empirically and conceptually. Their work has been published in biographical monographs (Reinelt & Kruse 1984; Probst 1985; Ecker-Ertle 1998; Kraus 2001; Wörner-Heil 2004), in anthologies (Hlawatschek 1985; Deixler-Hübner 2000; Schmidt 2002; Eifert 2004; Lepp 2007; van de Kerkhof 2014, 2016, 2017), cultural studies journals (Bandhauer-Schöffmann 2002; Lepp 2007), or journals that focus on gender studies (Eifert 2007).

We understand business history not as a discipline defined by specific academic methods (cf. Pierenkemper 2000) but as a "field" in which scholars pursuing different research approaches move, cooperate and compete with each other, constantly redefining the content and scope of the field. Conferences, business history journals and their review sections define the academic field to which this essay refers ("institutionalised business history"). Our actors are those business historians who publish in these journals, refer to them intensively, publish business history monographs and participate in business history conferences.

We do not consider this short essay a fully fledged analysis of the reasons for the absence of women, women entrepreneurs, gender relations or different constructions of masculinity and femininity in German business history. However, we want to point to opportunities for a business history that takes gender seriously as a category of inquiry and propose that historical gender research should focus more on business and companies as social arenas. We argue that business history should take gender seriously as an analytical category and implement methods of social and cultural history. We want to encourage research projects and alliances that explore the potential of a business history that uses gender – produced by social practices, values, norms and moral concepts – as a central category of inquiry. Also, we are interested in tracing how historical gender studies might develop when moving into the social arena of the company as a field of investigation (for helpful introductions in German, see Bock 1988; Heinsohn & Kemper 2012; Opitz-Belakhal 2018 [2005]).

We explore this perspective in more depth at the end of our contribution. In the first part of the piece, however, we will briefly elaborate our argument culminating in four observations regarding the absence of gender and the 'normalisation' of masculinity in German business history. The second part of the paper serves to discuss in more detail a couple of thematic fields – "women entrepreneurs and managers" and "female work" – as cases in point for the opportunities that arise when business history adopts a gendered perspective.

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[3] Even social-historical topics appear less frequently in the 2000s than in the 1970s and 1980s in *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* and *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte*.

(1) Since the beginning of the discipline, academic research and teaching in economic, social and business history has been almost exclusively carried out by men, who, according to Hartmut Berghoff (2004: 253), had little interest in complementing the dominant view of men as entrepreneurs. Also, few female professors have been appointed since the 1970s in the field of business history even though the number of female professors has increased recently.

(2) German business history tends to focus on large industrial companies where men dominate management and work, while sectors in which women are particularly present, such as care work trade, tourism or crafts, are mostly addressed from a social history perspective. This gap is broadenend by the fact that only meager archival sources survived and firms are often incorporated as private limited companes (*"Gesellschaft mit beschränk, ter Haftung"*, GmBH), which do not have to report to the public.

(3) In business history, the increasing separation of "productive work" (men) and "care work/reproductive work" (women) in the 19th century, appears mainly as a product of industrial modernisation. Largely unaffected by Karin Hausen's (1976) and Ute Frevert's (1986) work on the emergences of separate spheres in the 19th century contributing to the formation of bourgeois notions of the family, many authors still interpret the institutional safeguards that accompanied this segregation as external to business and primarily brought about by political processes.[4] Examples would be different legal regulations for men and (married) women, social debates ("double earners"), remuneration ("low wage groups") or "images" of women ("motherhood", "part-time work" and "sideline employment"). Gender research, on the other hand, examines the same processes as a socio-economic construction and reproduction of gender relations in which many social and economic actors, including companies, are involved.

(4) New approaches to a critical history of business within the framework of the *Arbeitskreis für kritische Unternehmens- und Industriegeschichte* (AKKU), such as "Micropolitics in the Company" (Lauschke & Welskopp 1994) and "Companies as Social Organisations" (Plumpe 1998), have unfortunately also overlooked the critical potential of a gendered perspective. In addition, studies that focused on the "economic core" of the firm (following Pierenkemper 1999, 2000; Borscheid 2001) have tended to neglect power and gender relations.

We do not question the focus on companies as economic actors; it is crucial for the further development, scholarliness as well as international and interdisciplinary appeal of business history. However, actual companies are not production functions as in microeconomic models, but rather "social organisations" shaped by power and influential actors in society. It is still relevant to analyse companies (their owners, their managers, their structures and activities, etc.) within the framework of their economic activities and their scope for action. Studying companies detached from their specific function within the capitalist order, business history would lose its critical potential (Reckendrees 2004: 288-289). Strangely enough, also this perspective has not helped to strengthen the gender perspective.

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[4] One of the exceptions is Berghoff, who points to the bourgeois family ideal that emerged in the 19th century (2004: 252-253).

Dominant approaches to business history seem to unintentionally contribute to reproducing existing gender relations. They rarely address power relations, gender roles, notions of the entrepreneur and the manager (in German, both are usually presented in exclusively male form *"der Unternehmer"* or "*der Manager"*) inside and outside of the company), or the contribution of companies to the social construction of femininities and masculinities (see, however, marketing history below). This essay aims to stimulate reflection on such unintended consequences and how they might be avoided. Approaches and questions from gender history, a constructive reception and "appropriation" of cultural history (as a method, not as a segment) and a rethinking of labour history (and history of technology) could contribute to overcoming existing limitations in the field of business history. A first step for German "*Unternehmensgeschichte"* would be to borrow from the American concept of *business history* and focus on business life rather than just corporate history, and to study internal processes, production, management, organisation, work, the products or services, internal and external communication, suppliers and customers, interactions between firms and society, culture, the environment, etc. – without neglecting the economic functions of firms.

The production and reproduction of gender relations does not only occur in or via companies. Nevertheless, they are arenas for negotiation and they are actors, regardless of their size or the respective industrial branch they represent. This is one reason the history of companies should move beyond its concentration on large corporations. More systematic inclusion of small firms, crafts, trade, gastronomy, tourism, the care industry, hospitals, cultural enterprises, professional sports and football companies, the self-employed, agencies, the professions and many other areas (cf. Gamber 1997; Gamber 1998; Kwolek-Folland 2007) would embrace a wider variety of gender relations and arrangements produced by and in companies, especially since women make up a large part of the actors in some of these economic sectors.

In what follows, we outline some areas that seem appropriate to discuss and demonstrate the value of a gendered perspective on business history. We see our contribution as an unfinished draft for discussion, inviting further reflection and perhaps contradiction.

Gender and Business History. Possible areas of research

Large areas of women's labor force participation – as employees, self-employed, managers or entrepreneurs - are still uncharted territory. Despite a few contemporary overviews and historical studies (Gerhard 1999; Herda 2000 on Austria), we still lack a comprehensive studies on the formal and informal institutions that have regulated and often restricted women's entrepreneurial activity and employment. To this end, it would be helpful to examine the trade regulations, trade laws, the German Civil Code (BGB) and its amendments (Endell 1915 [!]) as well as other regulations (for the early 20th century, see Meder et al. 2010, esp. 745-757). For the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic, several studies charted the protection of women workers and its effects (Wischermann 1991; Schmitt 1995; Hausen 1999). However, women's access to education, the regulation of women's work in the single trades and industries or the exclusion of married women, similar to the

"celibacy requirement" for female teachers in Nazi Germany, also need to be taken into account.[5] Family law and tax law are further independent areas (Deixler-Hübner 2000 for Austria; Wersig 2013). The focus should be not only on formal analysis but also on lawmaking and legal practices, political negotiation processes and the actors, their interests and values (this would also include, for example, the legal enforcement of the principle of equal pay). We assume that the density of regulations and the formal exclusion of women from the labor market increased during the 19th century. Some mechanisms of gendered exclusion (i.e. limited access to self-employment for women) were abolished at the beginning of the 20th century; in the field of work, rules banning women's work persisted well into the 1950s and 1970s. This process is by no means completed.

Starting point: Companies – women entrepreneurs & managers

> *"If one wants to sketch in a few strokes the general habitus of the ideal entrepreneur, you have to say: They are men (not women!) – endowed above all with an extraordinary vitality, from which springs an above-average drive for activity, a passionate love of work, an irrepressible lust for power. [...] Men with a pronounced intellectual-voluntary aptitude, with a poorly developed emotional and spiritual life. [...] Men – hewn with an axe. Smart men."* (Sombart 1909: 747-748)

What today may seem an ironic exaggeration is Sombart's own summary of his main argument on the ideal type of the entrepreneur. Given the current discussions about the low representation of women on the boards of large German corporations, it is reasonable to assume that Sombart's "smart men" (Lepp 2007) or Schumpeter's "whole blokes" (Bandhauer-Schöffmann 2002; Schmidt 2002) are not the faded ghosts of male fantasies from the beginning of the 20th century. They continue to shape the media image of "the entrepreneur" (Tegtmeier & Petersen 2016).[6] However, even around 1900, there were not only male but also women entrepreneurs – and their share in economic life may have been more significant than it is today.

The term entrepreneur here refers to the ownership and management of businesses. According to the 1907 business census – probably the only German national survey distinguishing between "male" and "female" owners – women-owned 25.3% of industrial and 25.7% of commercial firms. 1/3 of the 2.2 million firms had "female owners". Their share was exceptionally high in the textile industry (48.1% of 130,000), the clothing industry (45.4% of 677,600) and the cleaning industry (59.2% of 121,400); women also owned 1/3 of the 213,500 restaurants and inns (Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich, 1910: 64-67).

In 1961, the statistically recorded number of women entrepreneurs was significantly lower than half a century ago. Women ran around 60,000 firms with five or more employees. Of

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[5] The field is immense and includes women's access to vocational training, universities, business associations and more. There is a large body of research on the access of girls and young women to education, but the situation is different for the regulation of women's work at the level of trades and industries.

[6] In the revised and translated 4th ed. of the *Theorie der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung* (Theory of Economic Development, 1934) Schumpeter dispensed with the archaic masculinity topoi of the first edition (1911) more strongly emphasizing the function of "the entrepreneur", still being male, though; the word "woman" does not appear once in the new edition (Schumpeter 1987).

the 24,300 firms with more than ten employees, 1.8% were run by women, 40% registered in trade, 27% in manufacturing and 25% in services (Hartmann 1968: 12). Since then, the proportion of women seems to have increased again. According to an estimate by the *Institut für Mittelstandsforschung* (IMF), the proportion of "women-owned firms", understood as 'family businesses run by women'[7], was 18.5% of all 3.1 million German firms subject to VAT in 2006. Most of these were small firms with an annual turnover of less than €1 million. Of large family firms (over €50 million annual turnover), 9.6% were women-owned. However, family firms account for only 3.2% of all large companies, 66% of which are management-led and therefore do not fall into the "family firm" category.

These figures suggest that a considerable percentage of registered businesses in Germany were owned and arguably managed by women throughout the 20th century and before, and that this proportion may have been more significant before the First World War than it is today. There is considerable evidence that women's self-employment declined after the Great Depression and only began to rise again from the 1960s onwards.[8]

Women entrepreneurs have been largely neglected in research so far, but they have not gone unnoticed. However, only a few repeatedly discussed women serve as examples. For the early period of industrialisation, these are often the ironworks owners Catharina Loth and Catharina Sophia Krämer (Saarland), the mining entrepreneur Christiane Englerth (Aachen), the merchant Helene Amalie Krupp (Essen), the hammer mill owner Louisa Catherina Harkort (Hagen) and the ironworks entrepreneur Christiane Fürstin von der Osten-Sacken (Upper Silesia). Sometimes, the publisher and bookseller Anna Vandenhoek (18th century), the cloth manufacturer Elisabeth Dilthey (Siegerland) and the paper manufacturers Julie and Maria Zanders are also mentioned (cf. Hlawatschek 1985; Schmidt 2002; Berghoff 2004: 252-269; Lepp 2007, who refers to numerous empirical studies). In heavy industry, the number of women entrepreneurs may have decreased in the second half of the 19th century. For high industrialisation, only one woman is usually mentioned, Sofie Henschel. Prominent women entrepreneurs of the 20th century were mainly involved in the manufacture of household products, such as Melitta Benz (coffee filters), Margarete Steiff (stuffed animals) or Käthe Kruse (dolls). A notable exception is Irene Kärcher and her cleaning equipment company (van de Kerkhof 2016). Many of these women "inherited" the companies from their husbands and carried them on, is often said in the literature thus tending to obscure their achievements and making them forgotten.[9]

The number of women entrepreneurs is likely to have been legion, but how can business history track them down, and how can this literature be evaluated from a gender perspective?[10] We propose to bring these women back into business history through social-

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[7] The IMF definition is based on combined ownership and management of family members.

[8] According to the statistics for the FRG, the share of women among the self-employed (excl. agriculture) rose from 8.8% in 1960, to 26.4% in 1989 and 27.7% in 2004 (calculated from *Statistisches Jahrbuch* 1962: 144; 1990: 98-99; 2005: 82-83). Since 2006, the statistics include contributing family members; taking this into account, the share of women was 33.3% in 2018 (*Statistisches Jahrbuch* 2020: 362).

[9] See also Eifert (2004).

[10] A systematic survey of the literature, including contributions hidden in anthologies, Magister and Magistra theses and local history studies, would be useful.

historical methods, as Alison Kay (2009) does through an analysis of fire insurance contracts or Jennifer Aston (2016) through research on divorce proceedings in 19th century England.[11] Although the German archival records for the 19th century are undoubtedly less comprehensive due to war losses and more difficult to assess because of the decentralised archival landscape, extensive printed materials such as daily newspapers (advertisements) or address books are available. Based on such serial data analysis, prosopographical methods and micro-historical approaches based on diaries and correspondence provide paths to unearth women's business activities.[12] In addition, gender relations have been studied in sociological research since the 1960s (Hartmann & Hornung 1965; Hartmann 1968). These works deserve to be re-read and re-evaluated.[13]

Perhaps even more important than the study of women entrepreneurs is the role of women in business management (Berghoff 2004: 253-256). Their role was often only internally known and not presented in public; these women appear as 'family helpers' in statistics. Since the beginnings of industrialisation, women have tended to remain in the background, even when involved in running companies like Sofie Henschel. The analysis of the spousal relationships seems to be a possible starting point to determine more precisely the role of women in the management of firms. Andrew Popp and Robin Holt have shown what such analyses might look like (Holt & Popp 2013; Popp & Holt 2013a, b). They are interested in emotions, but studying the relationships between spouses also sheds light on the crucial role of the wife in business. In many cases, correspondence between male entrepreneurs and their wives shows that during the 18th and 19th centuries many women ran the domestic business while their partners were away on long business trips that sometimes lasted several months. For the 20th century, soldier's letters may be another source type, as many male entrepreneurs had to leave the company management to their wives during the both World Wars and then continued to counsel (or even control their wives) in business matters (Reddemann 1996; Werner 2018).

Why should we study women entrepreneurs? Certainly not just to list more individual cases, although we need examples and quantitative analyses to better assess women's importance in the German economy. Unfortunately, Sombart's "smart men" and Schumpeter's "whole blokes" have pushed them out of business history to such an extent that "the entrepreneur" appears quite naturally as a man in the whole academic field (e.g. *Tradition. Zeitschrift für Unternehmerbiographie, Sic!*). A gendered perspective would inevitably open up a view of neglected industries such as textiles or clothing,[14] which 1907 ranked third and fifth in the employment statistics after trade and construction.[15] In

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[11] For sources and approaches from other countries cf. Hafter (2001); Johannes (2006); Niederacher (2012); Escobar Andrae (2017); van Lieshout et al. (2019); Martínez-Rodríguez (2020); Schütz (2020).

[12] For this reason, archival research should also include museums and local collections.

[13] A starting point for identifying literature is Alemann (2015). For business history suggestions from the US: Hornstein (2002); Mandell (2014); Pfefferman and De Vries (2015); Lieberman (2016), for Black Women Studies Garrett-Scott (2016); Boyd (2020).

[14] See also Craig (2001).

[15] Mio. employees in 1907 (% share of women): trade 2.1 (38.4%), construction 1.6 (1.3%), clothing 1.3 (47.5%), machinery 1.1 (4.8%), textiles 1.1 (51.3%), Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich (1910: 64-67).

addition, if we embark on an analysis of gender relations in business, this also raises the question of whether women manage and run companies differently from men (Eifert 2005) and whether they provide better career opportunities for other women or reduce the *gender pay gap.* However, due to the limited availability of annual reports of firms organised as partnerships, we can only compare the effects of possibly different management methods for the recent past as such studies will require *oral history* methods. Whatever the results, the questions are essential. We can use the critical potential of business history to intervene in social debates and challenge historically rooted gender stereotypes: Women lead and manage, shape and form, found and established firms – but despite today's formal guaranty of equal rights, unequal opportunities persist.

Focusing on female managers, similar questions arise. Still, they may be even harder to track down, unless they acted as board members or enjoyed procuration and thus figure in the commercial register. Here, as in many other areas, large-scale digitalisation projects (daily newspapers, commercial registers, address books, court decisions, etc.) will greatly facilitate the analysis of gender relations. For women managers, visibility and the availability of sources greatly improve with the expansion of women's representation in professional and industrial organisations in the 1980s and 1990s, similar to the interest groups (and formalised networks) of women entrepreneurs that have been increasingly established since the 1980s. Christiane Eifert (2011) has presented a pioneering study for the early period of the Federal Republic. However, an in-depth analysis of emerging networks and women's groups in the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, has yet to be undertaken. In any case, the president of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), Fritz Berg, was wrong when he dismissed the "Association of Women Entrepreneurs" (VdU), founded in 1954, as an "after-effect of the war" that would "disappear from the scene in a few years" (Berghoff 2004: 266).

Furthermore, German business history could benefit from cooperation with *entrepreneurship studies*, especially in the field of family businesses, where female-led businesses (see above) form a central part. The *Institut für Mittelstandsforschung* (IMF) in Bonn provides an extensive database and well established connections to family businesses. Exploring this route would require business historians to dare address the recent past and to expand the methodological canon, for example, by using biographical research and *oral history.* We see vast opportunities for collaboration here, as feminist approaches have been introduced into *entrepreneurship studies* with contributions, particularly from German scholars, providing welcome inspirations for historical business studies.[16]

Family businesses (defined by the IMF as family-owned and owner-managed) may be a particularly appropriate area for studying women in business and their role and relevance as managers of firms. On the one hand, it is relatively easy to distinguish between companies run by women and those run by men and thus to create comparable units and

[16] We can only mention a few contributions as examples: (Welter 2004; Brush et al. 2009; Ettl & Welter 2010); Achtenhagen and Welter (2011); (García & Welter 2013; Welter et al. 2014; Cullen et al. 2016; Halberstadt et al. 2016).

groups. On the other hand, it would be possible to investigate what specific opportunities, if any, family firms provide for women and to determine the resistance these women faced.

Starting point: The sphere of work

The analysis of work, work processes, work relations and workplace practices has so far been the domain of social and cultural history, and more recent studies have largely been drawing on the themes and methods of cultural studies. Consequently, we suggest to address the construction of masculinities and femininities in the business world to outline the dimensions of women's payed employment and discuss some starting points for a business history from a gendered perspective.

Construction of masculinities and femininities

Companies are essential sites of socialialization and social interaction, and they play a significant role in the social construction of gender. We can only briefly suggest here that they require systematic study because, on the one hand, companies have been actively involved in shaping heteronormative concepts of sexuality and, on the other hand, they have addressed social and cultural change (especially in the field of marketing). As social sites and sites of economic production, companies have been involved in the transformation of existing norms and values (cf. Weinbaum et al. 2008; Scranton 2014; Heinemann 2018). The study of how homosexuality – and other lived gender identities (LGBTQIA+) – has been dealt with in companies poses a heuristic problem, as little material can be assumed to exist in company archives due to the historical social stigma and reluctant decriminalisation of homosexuality (since 1974). Nevertheless, we consider this perspective highly relevant and suggest, again, to include ego-documents and oral history as new sources. The analysis of companies as sites of the construction and performance of masculinities and femininities may also contribute to closing gaps in the gender history of the FRG and GDR, especially as previous studies have ignored the corporate world (Paulus et al. 2012; Gotto & Seefried 2017; Schwartz 2021).

For future research, it would be useful to examine the production and shaping of masculinities at the workplace applying a long-term perspective (strength, occupational health and safety, the design of social spaces and the workplace, image worlds, the exclusion of homosexuality, etc.) (Lengersdorf & Meuser 2010) – but also the male alliances that continue to dominate business associations (Nordlund Edvinsson 2021). Beyond work, industrial fairs can be revealing objects of study as sites for enacting and performing gender. Not only in the automotive industry but in many industries, sexist clichés accompany the staging of sexualised femininity for advertising and sales purposes, the employment of women as attractive hostesses, and finally prostitution. This appropriation of the female body seems to have emerged mainly in the 20th century.

From a historical perspective, we also need to assess a bundle of questions regarding about the production and enactment of masculinities and femininities in the workplace: Which areas of the company were accessible to women, and for which jobs were they considered suitable (Ansorg 1999; Mecking 2005)? How did this change? What opportunities for promotion did women have? Were they given managerial authority? Sexual harassment,

up to and including physical assault, including rape, was/is part of everyday life in many companies. Was it reported? What action did companies take? What was tolerated? How did women defend themselves, and did they receive support?? Finally, it is relevant to examine the role of gender in management. While sociology has so far been dealing intensely with gender relations (Alemann 2015), this work has not been considered in relevant in historical studies of the social group of managers (Dietz 2020). Thus, gendered perspectives open up multiple avenues of research for business history. Additionally, factors such as gender hierarchies or the absence of gender discrimination also determine the ability of companies to recruit employees, the knowledge and skills potential that companies (could) use and the corporate climate. If the company management does not address these issues, additional costs may arise (Reckendrees 2018: 185).

Companies contribute indisputably to the production of gender norms and gender roles, especially through marketing and gendered advertising (Gries 2003; Swett 2013; Grout 2020; Røstvik 2020). Yet, these areas have already been comparatively well studied. However, we still know relatively little about the production of these advertisements in companies and advertising agencies. Who was/is responsible for them? What were/are their expectations and goals? At what point do frictions and conflicts arise, for example, when norms and values evoked do not align with sales expectations?

The significance of the male breadwinner model

A pivotal starting point for the analysis of women's employment in the 19th and 20th centuries was Karin Hausen's (1976) observation that the formation of bourgeois ideals ("*Bürgerlichkeit*") and bourgeois family values in the course of the 19th century led to the separation of public and private spheres, of employment and family life, resulting in the emergence of specific "gender characters". Women had to embrace family and reproductive activities, while men assumed the role of the family breadwinner. Since then, the concept of the bourgeois family has largely determined the possibilities and scope of women's employment, providing a powerful frame of reference even even for working class women and their families, as illustrated by the the trade unions' demands regarding working hours and gendered wages (Wischermann 1991; Frese 1995) and the organisation of work in many companies. For example, the proportion of female part-time workers, mostly belittled as earners of a "complementary income" increased significantly in the last third of the 20th century (von Oertzen 1999).

The substantial rise in women's payed employment between the end of the 19th century (around 24.5%) and the present day (about 72%), the increase of female labour during the First and Second World War and under National Socialism are comparatively well researched from an economic and social history perspective (Müller et al. 1983; Daniel 1989; Hachtmann 1993; Rouette 1993; Hachtmann 1996; Maubach 2009; von Hindenburg 2018). Yet, especially in the two German states after 1945 the conceptions of women's work and gender roles differed significantly (Trappe 1995; Budde 1997, 2023; Sachse 2002; Paulus 2017, Neumaier 2022). While the economy of the GDR based on female employment and formal equality, but usually burdened women with the overall responsibility for housekeeping chores, reproduction and child-rearing, a patriarchal family ideal

that assigned women the role of housewife, mother and, at best, "complementary wage earner" prevailed in the FRG. Although the so-called Equal Rights Act of 1957 stipulated that husbands could no longer terminate their wives' employment contracts and decide on marital disputes single-handedly, wives had to arrange any employment in such a way that it did not conflict with their "marital and household duties", thus reinforcing the traditional patriarchal family ideal and the concept of the male breadwinner (Heinemann 2021). It was not until the family law reform of 1976 that a significant change occured. Wives could now work for wage without their husbands' consent; spouses were supposed to agree on the division of labour in marriage and family by mutual consent (which generally perpetuated female responsibility for household and child care). The long-term effects of the patriarchal family and breadwinner model are still tangle in the comparatively low female employment rate in Germany by international standards. Women's wage work has long been characterised by part-time work, lower pay, lower qualification and fewer career opportunities, and the triple shift of wage, domestic and reproductive work. It was only in the 21th century that this pervasive scheme started to slowly disband.

The business implications of the (slow) abandonment of the concept of the male breadwinner (Lewis 2001; Oschmiansky et al. 2020), the idea of the female supplementary income (von Oertzen 1999), and the reconciliation of family and work (Paulus 2017) are relevant for companies,[17] as is the end of the "normal employment contract" since the 1980s (Pierenkemper 2013; Oschmiansky 2020), as manifested in the rise of part-time and atypical employment for both men and women (mini-jobs).

The long history of the male breadwinner model raises several important questions for business history. For example, which companies/industries were the first to abandon the image of women as "second-class" labour and why (Lenger & Süß 2014; Weischer 2014)? The establishment of company day-care centres, family-friendly working hours, equal pay for equal work (Süß 2014) and the entry of women into management positions may point to such processes or to an increasing competition for labour, which is met with attractive wage-packages. We suspect that there are significant regional differences but also between industries. Of particular interest are both the access to managerial positions and the history of the gender pay gap. Here, we feel an urgent need to complement the mainly social and economic macro-studies of the gender pay gap (Kreimer 2008; Busch 2013) with historical studies on companies and industries. Business history research could help identify protest against "unfair" wages and processes of change more precisely and thus contribute to understanding changes in the complex structure of power, politics, economy and gender.

We will deepen the discussion using the example of female migrant workers. For this social group, work-place and wage-related discrimination tend to be particularly pronounced since, in addition to gender, ethnicity or religion function as intersectional categories of difference. The GDR offers another interesting dimension for comparison because of the

[17] Cf. the PhD project: Manuela Rienks (IfZ Munich): Tante Emma macht jetzt Teilzeit. Arbeitswelten von Verkäuferinnen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949-1996, Graduiertenkolleg "Soziale Folgen des Wandels der Arbeitswelt in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts", https://wandel-der-arbeit.de/.

persistent discrimination against women in various institutional settings despite the official claim to equality (Haack & Meyer-Braun 1998; Ansorg 1999; Hübner 1999).

Migrant women workers, labour conflicts and their gendered perceptions

German business history has so far paid little attention to the agency, the occupational and social perceptions and the career paths of female migrant workers or the actual function that migrant women performed in the companies. Overall, the 19th century is better studied in this respect (e.g. Del Fabbro 1992; Hahn 2012) than the period after the Second World War, although many West German companies became culturally and ethnically diverse and, as is often overlooked, increasingly mixed gender sites from the mid-1950s onwards by recruiting migrant workers from Southern Europe, Yugoslavia and Turkey. Like male migrants, foreign female labour migrants were often assigned to unattractive, hard, dirty or risky jobs that could not (or could no longer) be filled by Germans or for which German women workers were unavailable. Between 1960 and 1973, the number of foreign women workers in the FRG rose from around 43,000 to over 700,000 (Mattes 2010).

The data underscore that the concept of exclusively "male" labour migration followed by family reunions, until the recruitment stop for Turkish labour migrants in 1973, is not correct (Hunn 2005; Mattes 2005, Miller 2018, Stokes 2022). To the contrary, female workers were explicitly recruited at all stages of the immigration process. Companies valued the lower wage costs compared to male migrants, contributing to the deepening of the gender-segregated labour market. In the 1960s and 1970s, women earned significantly less than their male colleges, sometimes receiving even 30 to 40% less pay for the same task as they were registered in so-called "light wage groups"(*Leichtlohngruppen*). An ethnic hierarchy added to the existing gender hierarchy through the recruitment of female migrant workers (Chin 2007; Miller 2018). However, these women were not only workers but also actors in internal company conflicts, articulating their interests independently– also in conflict with the male-dominated trade unions. This was the case, for example, when migrant women successfully fought for the abolition of the "light wage groups" in wildcat strikes during the 1970s (Kürten 2017). The situation in the GDR was not fundamentally different; from 1960 onwards, many large nationally owned companies (VEB) relied on Polish, Hungarian and later Cuban, Mozambican and Vietnamese contract workers (Rabenschlag 2014). These workers had to face rather specific working conditions as they were kept apart from the East German population in segregated living areas and mostly had strictly time-limited contracts.

Focusing on female migrant workers enables business history to examine the intersection of categories of difference and to carve out how power structures and social value constellations added up to socio-economic, social, and gendered discrimination (Knapp 2005; Cho et al. 2013; Degele 2019). The migrant women were young and by no means always single, came from "foreign" national and cultural contexts, and usually took on jobs at the lower level of the companies' wage hierarchy. The categories of *race*, *class* and *gender,* but also "age" and sometimes "religion" and their intersectionality determined the position of the individual in the worksphere. From the vantage point of (contemporary)

business history, the question proves fruitful how companies deal with such differences, the conflicts and opportunities that diversity creates.

Further potential for gendered business history can be found in analyses of "migrant entrepreneurship" and migrant start-ups. For example, historical studies of the catering sector point to marked ethnic and gender differences (Zeppenfeld 2021). Although men often run snack bars, cafes and restaurants, there have been and are migrant women who have become entrepreneurs but who can rely less on family members for help than their male counterparts (Möhring 2012: 83). However, migrants did not limit their entrepreneurial activity to the catering sector, as recent sociological studies have shown (Leicht & Werner 2013; Laros 2015; Schmitt 2015). Other studies have teased out the formation of networks and the ethnic/gendered dimensions of entrepreneurial activity, for example with regard to "*Jewish entrepreneurs*" (c.f. Godley 2001).

What a critical business history gains from the category of gender

Above we have indicated that German business history tends to reproduce existing gender relations. Building on this diagnosis, we have suggested ways to overcome the existing limitations of business history. Furthermore, critical business history should critically assess and historicise historicise its disciplinary development. To what extent has it been influenced by the political-ideological shift described as neoliberalism? Many authors have adopted ideas from New Institutional Economics and criticised the concept of shareholder value or agency theory. But how did business history respond to the broader social changes over time, including the emphasis on equal opportunity and other emancipatory ideas?

Again, we suggest shifting our focus to the concept of the company as a social organisation (Plumpe 1998) and propose to explore sociological concepts such as micropolitics (Lauschke & Welskopp 1994), feminist entrepreneurship research and other actor-centred research fields. If we consider companies as social organis and use (among others) micropolitical approaches, we can no longer accept to deal with only one "half of the factory" when we study contexts in which equal opportunities, equal rights, equal legitimacy and acceptance of different genders and gender concepts did not exist. Companies were and still are social spaces shaped by power. They impact society because people spend relevant parts of their lives there, earn their incomes, and live from and with these firms' products (and their attributions). In all these areas, we find specific forms of the social construction of femininities and masculinities, emancipatory, disciplinary and exclusionary values (and much more). For a comprehensive study of companies as 'habitat' (*"Lebenswelten"*), as sites of production of economic value and of (re)production of social value, large-scale research projects, perhaps also interdisciplinary collaborative research programmes would open up stimulating paths..

Joan Scott rightly argued already a quarter of a century ago:

> *"The goal of including women in business history requires more than the documentation of their exclusion, resistance, and agency. It's not enough to say that economic practices have been discriminatory [...] Beyond that, attention has to be paid to the ways in which these practices define the structure and organisation of the business world, how they articulate*

> *power relations that don't always involve gender [...]. By asking questions about the gendered organization of the business world, we learn about the specific activities of men and women, and also about such issues as the construction of segmented labour/consumer markets and the marginality of small entrepreneurship in the history of business." (Scott 1998)*

Focusing on the company as a social site also offers great potential for historical gender studies, which has so far tended to neglect companies as fields of investigation. Yet, most workers – and increasingly also women – are spending a large part of their active day at the workplace; companies are central sites of socialisation for a large proportion of women and men; through their daily routines and practices, companies are involved in the construction of gender and gender relations like few other social actors.[18] The company, as a living environment and working space, thus opens up a vast thematic field for historical gender studies and a reservoir of sources that have hardly been considered.

We want to conclude our brainstorming with a small example: In many feature films and novels that deal with the "boss", the female personal secretary is assigned an important function (often with ironic undertones) – as exemplified in the US series "Mad Men" (2007-2015). But apart from such pop cultural readings, the role of the personal secretary, which has been predominantly female since the mid-20th century, and its gendered function for the social cosmos of the company have been the subject of much discussion: the planning and structuring function, the gatekeeper function, the function as the boss's sparring partner for ideas that need to be tested before they are brought into decision-making bodies, the function as a complaint box for senior managers, and even the organisation of the private and family life of the CEO. The "antechamber" – the secretary's office – used to be (and maybe still is) a central place for crucial corporate processes and undoubtedly a gendered place. We assume that a "business history of the antechamber" would not only make for exciting reading but also contribute to the understanding of business (decisions) and to the analysis of the (re)production of gender relations in business.

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[18] In this context, a conference paper by Alice Kessler-Harris (1991) is still well worth reading.

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