American business women, 1890-1930: Creating an identity

Candace A. Kanes
University of New Hampshire, Durham

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AMERICAN BUSINESS WOMEN, 1890-1930: CREATING AN IDENTITY

BY

CANDACE A. KANES
B.A., Ohio Wesleyan University, 1968
M.A., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1992

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

December, 1997

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Dissertation Director, Dr. J. William Harris, Associate Professor, History

Dr. Lucy Salyer, Associate Professor, History

Dr. Ellen Fitzpatrick, Associate Professor, History

Dr. Sarah Way Sherman, Associate Professor, English

Dr. Elizabeth Lapovksy Kennedy, Professor, American Studies, State University of New York at Buffalo

9/25/97

Date
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ABSTRACT

AMERICAN BUSINESS WOMEN, 1890-1930: CREATING AN IDENTITY

by

Candace A. Kanes
University of New Hampshire, December 1997

Between 1890 and 1930, many thousands of women in fields ranging from millinery, corset making and dressmaking trades to medicine, social work, and advertising called themselves "business women." Organizations of business women and publications aimed at them helped create an identity for "business women" that served to acknowledge and inspire such women. Business women saw themselves as serious, ambitious, competitive, economically independent, career-oriented, and successful. They focused on gaining recognition for women's achievements, opening new opportunities for women, and instilling high ethical values into business. These self-defined business women, most of whom were single, looked to like-minded women for economic, social, and professional support. Organizations of business women and publications aimed at them sought to alter public opinion and public policy to favor business women, even as they focused on the business woman's more personal and social needs. These business
women dealt with constraints of gender in a variety of ways, ultimately redefining both "womanhood" and "business."

The sources used to explore the business woman's identity include the 1889-1892 *Business Woman's Journal*, the 1914-1915 *Business Woman's Magazine*, career advice literature, novels about business women, and accounts about and records of groups such as the Colored Business Women's Club, the National Council of Business Women's Clubs, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs, along with the Zonta Club of Buffalo, New York, and the Portland, Maine, Business and Professional Women's Club. BPW and Zonta are examined in detail, as are membership data of the two local clubs and the manuscript Fourteenth Census of Population for Portland and Buffalo. The close scrutiny of membership and examination of women's own words about their occupational lives helps uncover the achievements of the business woman, which often have been obscured both by the census and by gendered interpretations of "success." These women faced numerous limits and barriers, but still saw themselves as vital to business and as comparable to business men.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:
"BUSINESS WOMEN AND WOMEN IN BUSINESS"

Two contemporary examples capture themes prominent in the efforts of women between 1890 and 1930 to develop identities as business women. The first is a television commercial for a car dealership that appeared on a Portland, Maine, station in late 1996. In the commercial, a woman employee of the dealership explains that she was a homemaker for twenty years before taking her present job, doing office work. Being a wife and mother prepared her well for the business world, she says. She relates a story about a woman customer who brought her car, full of lobster, in for lengthy repairs. The lobster would have spoiled while the repair work was done. The employee comments that she learned as a homemaker how to take care of people. She arranges to sell the lobster back to a fisherman to solve the customer's dilemma. The employee, and the car dealership, are successful, according to the commercial, because she uses her skills as a woman, caretaking skills she had perfected in the home.

The second example comes from the Library of Congress Subject Heading catalog, the organizational tool used by most libraries to help patrons locate books and articles. The catalog includes listings for "Businessmen," but for "Women in business," not "businesswomen." "Business" and "men" are combined into one idea and one
word. In the second entry, the gender notation comes first and "women," instead of being linked to business, are a subsidiary, or smaller part, attached by a preposition.

Even further instructive are the subcategories under the two headings. "Businessmen" include Entrepreneurs, Manufacturers, Capitalists and financiers, Distributors, Industrialists, and Merchants. "Women in business" might be Entrepreneurs, women; Women-owned business enterprises, Landladies, Self-employed women, Women consultants, Women in real estate, or Women merchants.¹

Each example suggests the importance, and persistence, of gender in describing and practicing "business." The woman at the car dealership identifies herself primarily as a homemaker, a woman's job. It is her two decades of experience in that arena that have enabled her to solve a problem on the job. Further, her job itself, clerical work, is "women's work" and the problem she solves is neither automotive nor technical, both arenas marked as "male." She takes on a "domestic," food-related problem for another woman. Her purported success in business is made possible by her womanly skills and traits. Being a woman is central to everything this employee does.

The subject headings, too, are dominated by concerns of gender. "Business" and "men" are merged but women are "in," rather than "of" business. All but one subcategory of "businessmen" are positions of higher status than those of the women's list. "Entrepreneurs" appears on both lists, but the male version is presented as gender

neutral. The women are not just entrepreneurs, but women entrepreneurs. A notation of
gender is attached to every woman's occupation, even within a category already
designated as pertaining to women.

The distinction between "women in business" and "business women" is especially interesting, as it was used by women themselves during the early twentieth century. For example, journalist Elizabeth Sears, who later served as editor of the magazine of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, wrote a magazine article in 1917 entitled "Business Women and Women in Business." Sears stressed the importance of women's economic independence as she noted that the "business woman" worked because she had ability and liked to work, while the "woman in business" worked because she had to. The difference, according to Sears, was not only one of necessity, but of attitude. She saw the "business woman" as qualified, efficient, and a go-getter, traits not shared by the "woman in business."² Likewise, Edna Ferber in her novel The Girls distinguished between the two terms. Carrie, the business woman in the book, "effected a quick change of manner" when she left the office at the end of the day and went home to her daughters and her spinster sister who took care of the household. She "became the woman in business instead of the business woman."³ In both instances, the difference is clear. The "business woman," much like the "businessman," is focused on work, on achievement, on

efficiency. The "woman in business," with no apparent parallel for men, is more marginal to "business." She might have vestiges of the "business woman," but her attention and energy are elsewhere.

The contemporary examples are not intended as a comment on women's progress or lack of it in the world of business. Instead, the examples demonstrate in terms familiar at the end of the twentieth century what gender might mean to women who choose careers in business. That understanding is crucial to this exploration of business women. Self-defined and aspiring business women between 1890 and 1930 faced a number of questions and dilemmas about their relationship to "business," several of which resemble those suggested by the contemporary examples. The earlier group of business women sought space for themselves and other women in a field linked linguistically and practically to "men." They wanted to be both "women" and part of "business," to gain acceptance by being womanly, and to be non-womanly enough to be ambitious, competitive, independent, and career-oriented. This study examines the shape of the identity created by women who formed and joined organizations for business women, by publications aimed at them, and by novelists who wrote about them between about 1890 and 1930. It examines women who called themselves "business women."

Little has been written about business women during this period. Studying self-defined business women, their organizations, and publications aimed at them reveals a largely unknown group of women, a group that has been obscured in part because it crosses occupational lines, and, to an extent, class lines. This study will argue that self-
defined business women chose to focus on ambition, careers, and success, all goals that previously have been ascribed to college-educated, elite professionals at most. Some business women were college educated, but many were not. Some were professionals, some were clerical workers, some were tradeswomen. Ambition and careers were major aspects of their identities as business women. Uncovering this group of women not only adds to our understanding about working women in the period from 1890 to 1930, but helps to explore how a diverse group of women constructed an identity that centered on ambition and career-orientation.

A further argument requires some explanation. The women on whom this work focuses called themselves business women. In doing so, they adopted and adapted a male-defined term, and sought entrance into a "male" arena of work. They often spoke of themselves as comparable to businessmen. They believed they were successful, and, I argue that they were. Yet the idea of "success" must be reconceptualized in ways that consider the gendered nature of much of our understanding of the term. To begin to do that, it is necessary to examine the meaning of "business." In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the "business woman" might have been an executive or an entrepreneur, but might also have been a milliner or a doctor, an insurance saleswoman or a journalist. Further, distinguishing between the business of "Main Street" and that of the "Corporation" is crucial. Studies of "business" during this era often have focused on the Corporation, the large enterprises that grew larger and more complex and had
significant economic impact on the country.⁴ Even much of what has been written about "small" business has highlighted smaller manufacturing concerns, not the truly small businesses of Main Street.⁵ Yet, the experiences of most women and many men are obscured when historians focus only on those businesses with the largest overall economic impact, those which made the most money or employed the most people. Even as industry was growing and becoming more complex, replacing or eliminating small firms, Main Street businesses persisted. In census reports from 1910, 1920, and 1930, about 4 percent of working men in the U.S. were enumerated as proprietors, managers, officials or retail dealers in the "trade" category, as compared to 1 percent in each of those years listed as managers, officials and manufacturers in the "manufacturing and mechanical" category.⁶ Clearly, "small business" men remained, although their relative economic contribution may have declined. Main Street included the growing numbers of bankers, real estate and insurance agents and advertising

⁴ Alfred D. Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1977), has been among the most influential theorists about "business." He argues that business enterprises between about 1840 and 1920 controlled the way the market operated, replacing the "invisible hand" of market forces. These new enterprises with large managerial staffs and many business units came to dominate American business, and require that employees were no longer relatives or wealthy and prominent men, but rather were trained in technical or professional fields.


⁶ These figures do not represent the complete numbers of non-manual men in either "big" or Main Street business because some persons involved in both groups would have been listed in other census categories. The percentages quoted are based on figures in the printed census summaries for the three years.
executives in addition to shopkeepers. Therefore, to appreciate an argument about the
gendered nature of success, and to explore how men’s and women’s experiences can be
compared, it is imperative to recognize that “business” includes Main Street as well as
the Corporation.\footnote{This approach is suggested by others examining women in business. An
excellent example is Wendy Gamber, \textit{The Female Economy: The Millinery and
Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930} (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press,
1997).}

This study also argues that, in forming business women’s organizations,
especially after World War I, these women came together as women, with the intent of
promoting the interests of women. Most studies of post-World War I women’s groups
suggest that single-sex organizations mostly ceased to exist, and those that survived
focused on individualistic goals.\footnote{See, for example, Anne Firor Scott, \textit{Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in
Press, 1987), 277-283; Dorothy M. Brown, \textit{Setting a Course: American Women in the
1920s} (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 245-250; and Sara M. Evans, \textit{Born for
Liberty: A History of Women in America} (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 172-173.} While the business women’s vision of “woman” was
inscribed by race, and to some extent, by class, these women sought to do more than
advance their personal interests. Organized business women’s goals were directed to
the interests of women as a group, although they were not broadly defined “feminist” or
women’s rights goals. Instead, these business women sought to gain recognition for the
achievements of business women, open new doors, and assist girls and women in
getting ahead. Their views of who constituted “women” was limited, yet their efforts
suggest a need to look at both organizations and feminism in new ways. The picture of business women's organizations is a complex one in part because of the diversity of membership. Contradictory views often emerged from individual and from group discussions of issues. Understanding these and other organizations is aided by not expecting single or even coherent ideas from them, but by recognizing the ways in which they did advance the causes of women.

Further, an examination of census records in conjunction with club records from post-World War I organizations illuminates why these women have escaped our historical attention. The census often categorized women in "lower" occupations than they were in, obscured advancements through its system of categorization, and frequently failed to recognize women's work at all. Other works have suggested ways in which the census is misleading, especially about women's work, but this close study of individual women in two cities adds new concerns.

Finally, this study concludes that for women to operate in the largely male-defined arena of business careers, they developed an inside-outside mode of coping with many of the claims of womanhood: marriage, children, domesticity and appropriate modes of behavior, dress, and attitude. Inside their organizations, they could critique some of those claims; outside, they often acknowledged the importance of society's views of womanhood. The majority of business women were single, and never married, a fact some reveled in privately, and sidestepped publicly. For many, singlehood was an important aspect of identity, and a state that had to be negotiated within the larger expectations of proper womanhood. While self-defined business
women could not step outside of sex and gender dichotomies, they often disrupted the categories, paying public homage to womanhood, marriage, and motherhood, while privately critiquing such expectations.

The "business woman" who is explored here was described first by Mary Seymour's *Business Woman's Journal*, published from 1889-1892; then by clubs such as the National Council of Business Women and the Colored Business Women's Club that existed as the new century dawned, and their various successors; by the 1914-1915 *Business Woman's Magazine*; and finally, by two post-World War I business women's groups, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs, their national magazines and conventions, and by publicity and records of the Portland, Maine, Business and Professional Women's Club, and the Zonta Club of Buffalo, New York. The postwar groups are especially instructive because of the extensive existing records for each, including some local and national membership information and transcripts of discussions at annual conventions. Such records facilitate a close examination of individuals, including considerable demographic information about members of the two local clubs, and comparison between club records and the 1920 census.

This study does not pretend to represent the identities and views of all "business women" during this time period. It focuses largely on white women, and only those white women who identified themselves as "business women" by joining various organizations, or the presumably white audiences of publications aimed at business women. Certainly many other women held jobs in various fields of business and might
have considered themselves "business women," but they may not have joined
organizations, or, in the case of African-American women, may have been excluded
from most of the groups discussed here, at least during this time period. Other women
involved in business pursuits may not have agreed with the ways in which the
publications or groups conceptualized the business women, or may not have adopted
the same goals. Yet, the many thousands of women whose voices are represented here
helped to create an idea in the larger society of whom and what the "business woman"
was.

This is not an examination of the work lives of business women, although
mention of their jobs, and in some cases, job progress, is included. The women
discussed here held dozens of different types of jobs in hundreds of settings. What they
did on the job, what their particular work situations may have been like, and how much
they earned are outside the scope of this examination.

**Women in the work force**

This time period, from about 1890 to 1930, often has been characterized as one
of promise and increasing opportunity, leading only to disappointment and loss for
women. They gained the vote, more access to higher education, an increased presence
in the work force, new individual freedoms, and at least a brief foray into male-defined
jobs during World War I. Women experienced what was often an exhilarating suffrage
struggle, only to gain the vote, but little political influence or presence. They increased
their bonds to other women, only to enter an era of increased individuality and an
emphasis on companionate marriages, focusing on male-female, rather than all-female friendships. They gained entrance into the work force, only to lose authority through professionalization and only to find jobs becoming increasingly segregated by sex. Their all-women organizations and women-dominated causes were lost to dual-sex groups and male-led occupations and causes.

That sweeping view of the era, however, fails to capture the meaning of individual lives and therefore does not allow the nuance nor the important detail that would allow us to understand who business women were, what they did, what they believe they achieved personally, and what they sought for society. To fully understand those aspects of the business woman, it is important to understand some of the elements of that sweeping view and the business woman’s relationship to it.

Women did enter the work force in increasing numbers between 1890 and 1930, although the increase was not always steadily upward. (See Table I) With more women in the work force came at least the possibility of women in new types of jobs or jobs that offered entrance to career ladders.

For elite women, the new era often meant attending college, especially one of the new women’s colleges. There, women sometimes were exposed to new ideas, to women who chose careers instead of marriage, and to a community of like-minded women.9 Many of the new college graduates before World War I, like their professors

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9 A number of studies have explored the meaning of college to elite women. Among them are Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Patricia Palmieri, In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley (New
before them, chose careers instead of marriage, raising concerns about declining birth
dates and "race suicide." Women seeking careers faced other obstacles as well. Some
graduate schools would not admit women and some medical residency programs barred
them, making it difficult if not impossible for women to pursue their career interests.
Women often responded by creating new fields of endeavor or seeking careers in areas
less attractive to men: settlement houses, social work, some forms of social research,
teaching in women's colleges, and home economics.

Table 1

Percentages of women in the work force, 1890-1930*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
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* Women ages 16 and older.

Series D-11-25, p. 128.

Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, A
Generation of Women: Education in the Lives of Progressive Reformers (Cambridge,
Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1979); and Barbara Miller Solomon, In
the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in

10 A good discussion of the issues and responses to these concerns is found in
Palmieri, In Adamless Eden, 217-231.
In addition, for women workers at many levels, the work force became increasingly segregated by sex during this time period. Clerical work is an excellent example of this trend. Clerical workers in the mid-nineteenth century were mostly men who hoped to, and often could, rise from low-level jobs to managing or owning their own businesses. By the early twentieth century, many clerical workers were women and business opportunities no longer flowed through the route of clerical work. Some recent works on clerical workers have argued that women did see promise in this work, and, because of that, helped to turn it into a female-dominated arena. These studies suggest, however, that few women rose to the top by starting as clerical workers.

Clerical work was important to the self-defined "business woman," although it did not define her. Even though many business women could be labeled clerical workers, they often sought to separate themselves from the mass of clerical workers.

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12 Sharon Hartman Strom, Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-1930 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), argues that women who stayed in the work force after their 20s could advance, but in much more limited ways than could men. Women often failed to see that hard work would not lead to rewards, despite considerable optimism to the contrary in the 1920s. Lisa Fine, The Souls of the Skyscraper: Female Clerical Workers in Chicago, 1870-1930 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), suggests that women helped to make clerical work a relatively good, well-paid occupational option, yet upward mobility was not one of the attributes of the field. But women did gain valuable female friendships and some degree of independence, both of which made them cautious about marrying.

13 See Chapter IV for statistics on the number of clerical workers in local chapters of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and
Among the earliest expressions of the "business woman" linked the term to clerical work: a magazine begun by Mary Seymour who was herself a stenographer and court reporter and who operated several stenography schools. A column on stenography was the magazine's most consistent feature. Likewise, the National Council of Business Women, formed at the close of the nineteenth century, had begun as an organization for stenographers. Historians who have mentioned groups like the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs often have noted that the clubs were dominated by clerical workers, or that BPW, in particular, had rather plebeian goals.14

As noted, not all historians writing about clerical workers viewed all such women as marginal, nor all such jobs as routine and offering little challenge or reward. Nevertheless, because many members of the most visible twentieth century business women's group, the National Federation of BPW Clubs, were clerical workers, the club and others like it have been lumped into a category with clerical work and club members not recognized as "business women" in a sense comparable to the Confederation of Zonta Clubs, and a discussion of the meaning and experience of clerical work to various club members.

14 See Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism, 90; and Strom, Beyond the Typewriter, 352-353. Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, Women in the Twentieth Century, A Study of Their Political, Social and Economic Activities (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1933), 63, notes that the National Federation of BPW Clubs goal is "at least a high school education for every business girl." This slogan has been picked up by late twentieth century historians and used as evidence of the group's limited goals. Yet it applied only to one aspect of the organization's activities. The overall slogan was "Better Business Women for a Better Business World."
"businessmen."15 As this study argues, the clubs were composed of more than clerical workers and the women who did hold clerical jobs often did not hold "ordinary" ones. Even when their clerical jobs were unremarkable, the women themselves, by virtue of joining business women's organizations, chose to identify with a larger, more diverse group of working women than solely with fellow clerical workers.

It was not only clerical work that was segregated by sex. Many women who entered "business" worked in female-defined occupations. Career advice books and other writing of the era led women into what were seen as jobs appropriate for women. One career advice book recognized that "women are found today in practically every type of business occupation," but added that the percentage of women in administrative and supervisory positions was smaller than of men.16 The book noted that business was becoming a profession and being chosen by more and more college men and women. The *Business Woman's Journal* in the 1890s suggested women take up stenography, court reporting, journalism, social work, and insurance sales, among other jobs that became female-dominated or had sections of work especially for women. Similarly, career advice literature through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries steered

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15 Several studies sponsored by the National Federation of BPW Clubs suggested the large number of clerical workers. These studies have been used, without further examination of this and other organizations, by historians who have seen clerical workers, not business women, in these groups. One often quoted study is Margaret Elliott and Grace E. Manson, *Earnings of Women in Business and the Professions*, Michigan Business Studies III (September 1930).

16 Bureau of Vocational Information: *Training for the Professions and Allied Occupations* (New York: Bureau of Vocational Information, 1924), 128.
women to "softer" jobs such as those related to food, government, civic, social or industrial service; journalism or advertising, office or mercantile work, library work, teaching, fine arts, or various health services. Advice that appeared in the *Business Woman's Magazine* in 1914-1915 for moneymaking opportunities for women with limited capital included selling things women could make, like beads, crafts, clothing, and hand-painted items; a photography business, fashion drawing, shopping for others, helping people gain citizenship and operating a home tea room. Most of those possibilities could be considered "business," but were quite different from what might be considered "Main Street" small businesses, and clearly different from "Corporations" or the types of business associated with men like Andrew Carnegie or even department store owners.

The women who joined business women's organizations like the Business and Professional Women's clubs and Zonta clubs after the World War I also were likely to

have more "feminine" business jobs, but still remained closer to the mainstream of business life than home tea rooms or shopping for others. These club members often held jobs that offered some promise of promotion or financial gain, albeit on a different scale from that of many men. They were in advertising, real estate, investments, banking, small shopkeeping, social service work, the arts, clerical work including supervisory or high responsibility office jobs, or independent professions such as medicine or law. Self-defined business women often were aware of the limits they faced as a result of jobs being marked "female" or "male," yet many believed that entering the world of business, and adopting "male" traits of aggressiveness and ambition would bring rewards. Business, after all, was what the era was about.

The era of business

"Business" was loved and hated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Especially in the decades before World War I, when many businesses and industries grew in size and wealth due in part to mergers, pools, cartels and other devices to control the market, many Americans sought to limit what they considered the excesses of big business. Critics focused on unfair business practices, the appearance that a few were getting wealthy at the expense of many, the lack of concern for workers, and the sense that big business was destroying the individual. No longer could Americans pursue what had been the dominant dream, being one's own boss.
Instead, they were working for someone else, whether as laborers or as managers. To help gain individual control and status, groups of employees and independently employed persons adopted professional standards. Reformers sought less personal goals when they considered big business. They worked for antitrust legislation, controls on child labor, protection for injured workers, safety standards and other regulations that many people believed would never happen voluntarily. Some historians argue that reform efforts barely affected business, especially since many businesses supported initiatives such as workers' compensation and municipal reform, as well as various government efforts to stabilize the economy. Despite the criticisms of big business and efforts at reform and control, Americans often admired the men behind big business, the wealth produced, and the effort at modernizing business to make it more "scientific" and efficient. That admiration could exist hand-in-hand with the criticisms of excesses.

By World War I, "business" had a new image and a new role. Government and business cooperated to an unprecedented degree, with businesses and businessmen

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stressing their efforts, and sacrifices, to help win the war. Gabriel Kolko notes, "the
war period represents the triumph of business in the most emphatic manner possible."²⁰
Many businesses made huge profits during the war years.²¹ The public and government
enthusiastically supported business after the war. The big grew rapidly bigger, and
business was "proud and self-confident."²² And so were those who entered business. By
the mid-1920s, President Calvin Coolidge was talking about the centrality of business
in American life with comments like, "After all, the chief business of the American
people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling,
investing and prospering in the world."²³

Americans loved and criticized small business, as well, although adoration was
the stronger sentiment. Small business, which could refer to either smaller-scale
manufacturing, or very small scale retailing, was a symbol of success in American
society. People were drawn to it not so much to accumulate wealth, although that was
possible, but because it promised independence, security, and social ties to one's
community, all long-held values.²⁴ Those values could become distorted, however.

²⁰ Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism, 287.

²¹ David M. Kennedy, Over Here: The First World War and American Society
(Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 93-143, discusses both
business profits and business-government liaisons during the war.

²² Geoffrey Perrett, America in the Twenties: A History (New York: Simon and
Schuster, 1982), 336, 337.

²³ Quoted in Keith L. Bryant Jr. and Henry C. Dethloff, A History of American

Sinclair Lewis' 1922 novel, *Babbitt*, epitomized the critique of small business and businessmen. The word "babbitt" has entered the American language, defined in one dictionary as "a smugly conventional person interested chiefly in business and social success and indifferent to cultural values."\(^{25}\) Lewis's book pokes fun at clubs like Rotary, where members engaged in nearly mindless boosterism and backslapping. Yet, as one history of American business notes, "Despite Sinclair Lewis' searing assault on the business mentality in *Babbitt*, the 1920s saw further entrenchment of the businessman as a heroic figure."\(^{26}\) Like big business, small business could be disdained and admired simultaneously.

An earlier Lewis novel, *The Job*, also presents a critique of business and businessmen but better suggests the meaning of "business" to ordinary Americans, and especially to women. The book's central character, Una Golden, and her recently widowed mother go to New York in 1905 from a small Pennsylvania town so Una can get clerical training and earn enough to support the two women. Like many real and fictional women, they discover only after the death of the father or husband that the family has no money. New York means salvation to Una and in her imagination experiences "mellow breezes over marble palaces of efficient business" and "slim, alert business men, young of eye and light of tongue."\(^{27}\) Lewis writes that "the egotistic arts


and sciences and theologies and military puerilities are but servants" to business. Further, "business" is no longer a dirty word and businessmen no longer "crawl to church to buy pardon for usury." Instead, "Business is being recognized — and is recognizing itself — as ruler of the world." Una Golden adopts that view as she sets out not only to earn a living, but also to become a successful business woman. While *The Job* offers many negative appraisals of business, it also reflects the optimism felt by many people, like Una Golden, who believed they had bright and prosperous futures.

Business was the way to get ahead. An "obligation to business success" was placed on many sons. Increasingly, young men went to college to prepare for business careers and focused on activities and courses that would aid that effort. Young people admired businessmen and sought similar successes in business. Boys were raised to assume they would take on such jobs, with stress on traits such as competitiveness, assertiveness, initiative, and ruggedness. Training and opportunities differed for the high-level person in business and for the lower-level, often clerical worker. The higher level jobs were nearly always inscribed for men. Yet that fact did not stop women of all backgrounds and with a variety of occupational interests from pursuing "business."

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28 Ibid., 25.


As one business historian notes, "Women and minorities, if they moved ahead at all, did so in small businesses." That was part of the appeal to women as they chose business careers: they wanted to move ahead.

Moving ahead and being a vital part of business required adopting the language of modern business: efficiency. Across the entire time period of this study, self-defined business women proclaimed themselves efficient and lauded others who matched that standard of business excellence. The ideal of "efficiency" dominated business, and life in general during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In business, efficiency often referred to ideas derived from scientific management. In one's personal life, it meant using time wisely, understanding personal finance, and taking care of one's self. "Efficient" equated to "success," or at least understanding of and adherence to "modern" business principles. By the time of America's entry into World War I, "efficiency" was a national passion. Germany's successes in Europe were attributed to the country's "efficiency." Business women who adopted the word may not have

31 Blackford, A History of Small Business in America, xiv, 24, 58.

32 Systematic management, the parent of efficiency, sought to remove control from skilled workers, and to facilitate better coordination among departments or branches of ever-enlarging industries. Frederick W. Taylor began the scientific management movement when he broke jobs down into their component parts, timed each part, and set timed goals for various tasks. See, for example, Sanford Jacoby, Employing Bureaucracy: Managers, Unions, and the Transformation of Work in American Industry, 1900-1945 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 40-47; and David Montgomery, The fall of the house of labor: The workplace, the state, and American labor activism, 1865-1925 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 214-256.

33 Montgomery, The fall of the house of labor, 330-331.
embraced the industrial methods espoused by F.W. Taylor or the political methods used by Germany. Regardless, they often used "efficiency" to indicate that they were part of the modern business world and understood the requirements of success. They were in the game.

For example, Albreta Moore-Smith, writing about the Colored Business Woman's Club of Chicago in 1901, noted that its membership included:

... many good, true, honest working sisters who are a blessing to their race, sex and country. Their number is legion. They are setting a noble standard of womanhood and efficiency that will be a beacon light for all who follow in their wake.34

Always concerned about racial as well as occupational equity, the club's founder and spokeswoman invoked all possible symbols of the members' respectability and success. They were a credit to their race, they adhered to principles of womanhood, and they were efficient. Moore-Smith also noted that all the club's officers were graduates of a commercial school or college and that "this degree of efficiency" was desired to enable members to better aid in the club's employment service.35

Individual efficiency also was extolled. For example, the first African-American woman stenographer in a white firm in Seattle was an "efficient young woman."36 Efficiency led her to breaking a color barrier. It could lead to other gains as well. A stenographer in 1889 secured a position preparing reports for the Surgical Society in

34 Albreta Moore-Smith, "Why," Colored American Magazine III (October 1901), 470.

35 Colored American Magazine II (April 1901), 466.

36 Colored American Magazine XV (March 1909), 181.
New York because of her "efficient work in a case in court in which the president of that society was an expert witness."37 Being an expert also was a sign of the times and impressing an expert was the height of efficiency. Another successful woman, more than two decades later, supervised and directed many men, who obeyed her because she was "efficient." Further, "Her decisions are always efficient ones and her advice is usually sought ..."38 In Portland, Maine, two BPW members who owned a stenography and multigraphing business had "a reputation for efficiency that goes outside the city and indeed outside the state."39 A headline in a Portland newspaper described BPW member Florence Liscomb, a bookkeeper, as: "She's Efficient -- But Not Effusive."40 She was efficient in an obviously acceptable and perhaps feminine or womanly way. Portland club members perhaps were inspired by a talk on "The Heart of Efficiency" given at a club meeting.

The word was used over and over, referring to individuals or groups. The Woman's Association of Commerce, which called itself a pioneer organization in recognizing the place of women in the business world, believed that business women working together could "acquire efficiency and gain recognition as a result of

37 "Mrs. Emma F. Pettengill, A Successful Brooklyn Stenographer," Business Woman's Journal I (July/August 1889), 118.


achievement."41 Buffalo Zontian Isabel C. Schumer advertised her typewriting and multigraphing company as offering "quick efficient service."42 One speaker went so far as to claim that women who attended conventions of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs stressed "increased efficiency" over "increased salaries."43 As the U.S. entered WWI and business women's group gathered in convention, one speaker noted that "The world expects big things now from both men and women, and in the future they will both be measured by the hard rule of efficiency."44 Regardless of the context, invoking "efficiency" marked the person or group to whom it referred as part of the new corporate America. An "efficient" person wanted to get ahead, understood how business operated, and was modern in her approach. In other words, she was an important part of the world of business.

The New Woman?

This independent, achieving woman of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often is described as the New Woman. She was "new" in breaking out of Victorian restrictions, stressing economic independence and often focusing on some


42 Zonting Zebra I (June 1921), 9.

43 Miss Forba McDaniel, quoted in "Sixth Annual Convention, West Baden, Ind., July 1924, NFBPWC," July 11, 1922, Marguerite Rawalt Resource Center, BPW/USA, Washington, D.C., 188. (Collection cited hereafter as BPW/USA)

44 "National Convention of Business Women, (1917, Chicago)," 6-7.
type of work. New Women were "single, highly educated, economically autonomous," and often products of women's colleges. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes three generations of New Women, who moved from beliefs that women were unique and superior, and who focused on reform and separate communities of women, to women who matured in the 1920s and believed in women's equality with men, marriage, and individual achievement. Many of the individuals in this study would fall in the first or early second generations of New Women by Smith-Rosenberg's descriptions. Yet, philosophically, self-defined business women are much harder to categorize. Some believed in equality with men and some believed in an essential womanhood, but those beliefs did not follow women's ages. They were seen across the time period studied, with each belief, or a combination of both, held by a variety of women. Individual business women might hold contradictory beliefs, determined more by circumstance than a strict ideology. In addition, the time periods associated with the characterization of New Women fails to recognize the persistence beyond World War I of same-sex organizations and women's reliance on other women for emotional, social, and occupational support. The women who formed and joined organizations for business women included both college-educated professionals and tradeswomen who had come

45 Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct.

out of working-class backgrounds. African-American as well as white women joined
groups aimed at the business and professional woman. And, as this study of the post
World War I business woman shows, these women, regardless of when they were
born, frequently remained single, and used their single-sex business to sustain them
even as they often worked in mixed-sex environments. Most did not turn to newly
popular companionate marriages. But, in terms of seeking independence and activity
defined outside of domesticity, the turn-of-the-century business woman was a New
Woman, even if she did not always embrace the term.

Albreta Moore-Smith, founder of the Colored Business Woman's Club in
Chicago in 1901, disliked the term "New Woman," because she believed it
misrepresented women's history. Moore-Smith wrote: Theories have been put forth to
prove that she is new, but the only satisfactory evidence or conclusion agreed upon is
that she is simply progressing, her natural tendencies not having changed one iota.47
Likewise, a headline in the Business Woman’s Magazine in 1914 announced, "Woman
-- Not the 'New Woman.'" The article noted that "the position woman holds today in
the civilized world is a reversion to type." Women of achievement were not new, but
mirrored what women had always been, when they had been given a chance and
opportunities such as education.48

47 Albreta Moore-Smith, "Woman's Development in Business," Colored
American Magazine IV (March 1902), 323.
48 "Woman -- Not the 'New Woman," Business Woman's Magazine I (October
1914), 7.
Women who focused on achievement and sought meaningful work might not have been "new," but they often captured the attention of writers in the early twentieth century. Maureen Honey, analyzing formula magazine stories about New Women, notes that these stories described women on a "voyage toward self-definition." The heroines could have it all -- financial success, physical activity, and intimate relationships.\(^{49}\) Honey suggests that the women in the stories blurred public and private, male and female, art and business. These challenges to traditional spheres meant women could no longer be defined as "domestic" or "private" and therefore, there was no unified group that could be called "women." The stories often portrayed women as enemies of one another and of other women's efforts to succeed. Nevertheless, the heroine usually found "a community of women struggling for fulfillment outside the family."\(^{50}\) Such communities were what the organizations of business and professional women wanted to provide.

Unlike the New Women of magazine stories, the self-defined business women did have a sense of sex solidarity, despite the changes in society and despite business women's interests in success. Individual achievement was important, but not at the expense of one's fellow business women. The community these women found was the organizations they formed, groups that sustained them personally as well as professionally.


\(^{50}\) Ibid., 18-19.
Even though more women were entering the work force during this period, working women, and especially single working women, remained in the minority. The community of women was important, in part, because women were still expected to focus not on careers, but on home and family. In her study of women’s organizations, Anne Firor Scott suggests that most women in this period, even women who called themselves socialists, "stayed within the accepted cultural definitions [of womanhood] or tested the boundaries without actually breaching them." She concludes that women’s organizations did the same thing, although the fact of their existence and their actions helped change the norms of womanhood. The expectations of womanhood were so commanding that even non-traditional women did not break out of them. When women challenged those norms, by remaining single and by identifying by occupation rather than by gender norms, they needed support. The community of women offered that support.

The organizing craze

On the occupational side, business women’s groups fit into two popular trends of the times: professionalization and business men’s organizations. The new "professions" required specialized training, adopted of specific codes of behavior, monitored by an occupational or government groups, and stressed service and dedication instead of focusing on individual material gains (which were expected

51 Other historians have explored similar ideas. For example, Scott, *Natural Allies*, 81.
anyway). Robert Wiebe suggests middle-class groups, including professional organizations, formed after the turn of the century because industrialization and changes in occupational structures had stripped many people of the status they had held in small communities. To regain their positions and be able to function in new systems, many Americans formed professional groups that were exclusive, offering prestige by limiting membership.\textsuperscript{52} Professions implied distinction, power and influence. Women's experience with professionalization was different from men's. Even though women were engaged in work that became professionalized, that very process often created a conflict for women. "Professionals" were expected to be rational and scientific in their approach to their jobs. Yet many women went into careers such as law, medicine, and social work to help people, to get involved, and to use the more female traits of nurturing and caring for others. The dispassionate approach was a masculine one and uncomfortable and unsatisfying for many women. Nevertheless, women were involved in professionalization in a variety of careers, and as noted above, sought ways to cope with the conflicts.

Women's business groups also were inspired by men's business organizations. Beginning with the Rotary Club in 1905, business men in communities across the country joined together for fellowship, civic improvement, and boosting their communities and "business" in general. Similar groups of businessmen had existed before 1905, although they rarely formed lasting national organizations. As early as

1911, Rotary discussed admitting women, but declined to do so until the 1980s. Other businessmen's clubs, such as Kiwanis, formed in 1915, and Lions, in 1917, also were exclusively male. Writing about the history of these men's groups, Jeffrey A. Charles suggests that by the early twentieth century, most middle-class men, and many women, no longer joined groups that stressed mutuality and kinship. Instead, the organizations they joined were more modern, focusing on the language of the new corporate society: service and efficiency. He believes the men's groups adopted the idea of community reform from the women's clubs that had thrived before World War I. They also developed classification systems to limit membership and codes of conduct in response to the professional groups. Many members of business men's clubs were professionals who were influenced by national professional organizations. Clubs for businessmen thus evolved from several organizing trends of the era. Regardless of why or how they formed, most of these groups were for men only.

When women joined together as business women, they, too, responded to many impulses: their own history of organizing to solve societal problems, meet individual needs, and gain entrance to the public arena; their imitations of occupational groups, their observation of men's business experiences. Business women's clubs, from the 1890s to the 1930s often included "professional" with business. They likely were doing more than taking advantage of the status and prestige of already-organized professions


54 Ibid., 28, 50.
such as medicine, law, social work, and nursing. They linked business with professional because they wanted their clubs to represent and appeal to women at the top levels of jobs for women. It was only in the broadly defined categories of "business" and "professions" that women could aspire to be executives or rise to other top jobs in their communities. Linking professionals, top executives and women in somewhat lower status jobs did serve to raise the prestige and distinction of the latter group and likely was intended by the organizers. Since they organized as women, they avoided many of the problems women had in professional groups, problems that stemmed from the "masculine" definitions of professional behavior. Not all business women claimed to be "professionals," but all of the organizations for business and professional women, and especially those formed after the war, sought to gain recognition for women's achievements, and professionals were part of that picture. Recognition meant, in part, affording women the status and respect given to aspiring career-oriented men. The groups shared the business men's and professionals' goals of securing status and position for members, but they also shared traditions of older, single-sex groups.

Like their predecessors, they sought to create a community of women who could support and encourage one another in ventures into uncharted territory. By the end of the nineteenth and first years of the twentieth centuries, there were too many women's associations to count. Business women's groups were part of this organizing

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55 Ibid., 81.
craze, although their purposes often varied from other women's groups. Many historians have looked at the post-suffrage era groups and lamented the loss of women's solidarity as women and their lack of interest in political or feminist issues. These failures of the 1920s are seen as losses for women personally and for women's efforts to achieve a more equal status in society. Business women, however, did experience sex solidarity, organizing as women with a consciousness about women's issues and experiences. They had a political purpose and an interest-group purpose, but equally or more significantly, they offered non-traditional women, those whose major attention was on careers rather than domesticity, a community of like-minded women with whom to socialize, share business concerns, and gain valuable personal as well as career support. Clubs for business and professional women, beginning with those formed in the 1890s and continuing through the 1920s, included recreation, education, fellowship, encouragement, and often a physical location for women to gather with other women as they pursued non-traditional lives as career women. Club members were women who pursued equality of opportunity in the business world, but they talked as much about the community of like-minded women as they did about their business ambitions.

A report of the Zonta Club of Buffalo in 1925 noted that the club room at a local hotel was becoming more popular and "is becoming more and more a center of

our social activity with the constantly increasing friendships which naturally result. "57 Zontian Fennella Crowell "entered wholeheartedly into club activities" in part because of her "great enjoyment in contacts with other women."58 At a National Federation of BPW Clubs convention in 1923, one official said, "It is a great day when women in the world of work can meet together like this and say to several hundred at one fell swoop, 'Friends.'" She added that whenever she was traveling she realized that "[O]ver here and over there there is a woman I know who is fighting the fight, too, and who understands."59

Buffalo Zonta Club Member Helen Z.M. Rodgers helped explain why the clubs and the associations among women were so important. She said, "Friendliness between business and professional women, cut off from the traditional social life of women and not yet fully assimilated into the predominantly masculine world of business, is an achievement of Zonta."60 The national BPW president in 1924 made the same point about the importance of a single-sex organization in somewhat more embellished language when she described the federation as:

57 "Report of District 'C' of Western District Conference," March 14, 1925, Zonta Club of Buffalo Collection, State University of New York at Buffalo Archives, Buffalo, New York, 2. (Collection cited hereafter as ZCB)

58 H. Katherine Smith, "Women in the Public Eye," Buffalo Courier-Express, April 13, 1930, Scrapbook, ZCB.


60 "Buffalo 'Talks Back' to the Boss," Zontian V (January 1926), 43.
Throwing out its light of understanding of friendship, gladdening the hearts of lonely women, filling the lives of tired girls, giving, always giving the best, the finest and the truest, and may all the lonely women everywhere find their way to our fireside, where warmth, friendship, love and understanding wait.61

It was not just friendships that groups of women could provide one another. Assistance in business matters also was important. The Colored Business Women's Club in 1901 noted that women in the club could provide "inspiration" to one another, "as only those so qualified can give."62 The club had a social committee to insure that members got to know one another informally. The Woman's Association of Commerce, formed in 1912, noted at its first national convention in 1917 that it believed in "commercial reciprocity and mutual patronage of members."63 A woman manager of a telegraph company in 1921 attributed "a large share of her success to fellow club members." The article describing her was entitled "Women Who Stand By Each Other."64

Bringing women together also was important for the survival of the clubs. A 1956 history of the Zonta Club of Buffalo credited the companionship and friendship of other women for the success of the organization. The writer noted that "friendship with


62 Albreta Moore-Smith, "Chicago Notes," Colored American Magazine II (6), 466.

63 "National Convention of Business Women (1917, Chicago)." 5.

64 "Women Who Stand By Each Other," Independent Woman II (December 1921), 8.
its resulting cooperative effect has been most important to Zonta, and one of the reasons it has endured and functioned so well for these thirty-five years.  

Business women found meaning in their organizations that placed them both within the past tradition of single-sex groups and women supporting one another, and the new present and future of mixed groups that focused on occupational issues and marital relationships providing emotional support. These self-identified business women were forming identities based on their ambitions and career orientations, identities that crossed over into "male" territory. Yet it was in same-sex groups, both formal and informal, that these non-traditional women found their major source of support and inspiration.

The business of being women

Despite all the changes for many women in the period between 1890 and 1930 - their increasing entrance into the public arena, growing numbers in the paid work force, increased attendance at colleges among elite women, and a loosening of Victorian strictures -- gender expectations and differences continued to dominate many aspects of their lives. It affected what kinds of jobs they could get, how much they got paid, their chances for advancement, their role in families, how they dressed and behaved. It was never easy for women who sought achievement in male-defined realms.

65 Dr. Margaret Warwick Schley, "The History of Zonta," November 8, 1954, ZCB.

66 Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, best describes these changes.
of professions and business to negotiate the expectations and restrictions of gender. For example, Virginia G. Drachman, writing about women lawyers in the late nineteenth century, suggests that these women were involved in a "perpetual balancing act between femininity and professional identity." Since men had been the lawyers, much of the behavior appropriate to various situations was "male." Women struggled with seemingly mundane questions like whether to wear or remove their hats in the courtroom. Propriety required women to keep hats on, but men to remove theirs. The women lawyers did not want to be seen as improper women, but neither did they want to be viewed as less competent than the hatless men, or as women in a male domain.

The lawyers also were concerned about whether to be coldly objective, as most men the practice of law required, or whether to inject women's manners, interest in charity, nurturance, and general emotional concerns into that practice. They would have preferred to be "lawyers" with no gender attached, but there seemed to be no such option, because being a lawyer already was inscribed with traits linked to being a man.

In other words, as Drachman argues, the women, in order to be lawyers, had to constantly examine their learned and habitual "feminine" behaviors and determine whether those behaviors were appropriate for the practice of law. Would they transform law to include "feminine" concerns? Would they adopt more "masculine" appearance and manners in order to fit in? Drachman concludes that different women

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found different solutions, but many chose to retain some "feminine" behavior and values and apply the latter to their work as lawyers. Women in other "male" jobs faced similar conflicts. Yet many women, especially before World War I, lessened the conflict by choosing "female" professions, making use of the "feminine" traits society expected them to possess. Women themselves helped to create social work, public health nursing and home economics, all of which took advantage of women's traditional focus on nurturing and serving others. By entering these jobs, women could much more easily be "women" and in the work force. 68 Yet, even those choices did not guarantee that women would escape the conflict between work and womanhood, especially as professionalization began to stress "scientific" objectivity, not women's more traditional nurturing behavior. In order to be professionals, women social workers, for example, had to give up the "lady bountiful" model on which many had operated. 69

Self-defined business women, like the women described by a number of studies of professions, also tried to fit into an occupation traditionally defined as masculine. Yet they had a slightly different strategy. They used their single-sex organizations, groups based on women's identities as women, to help them enter and maneuver in the


world of male jobs. Their very source for support -- other women -- may have kept them outside the locus of power, but it gave them the tools they needed to compete and thrive in a sometimes alien environment. Unlike these groups of business women, most professional organizations were mixed-sex groups, or at any rate, based on the "male" model of professionalization. The business women also helped to alter (though seldom radically) the meaning and expectations of both gender and the world of work they entered. The society into which these self-defined business women were born held certain and often different expectations of boys and men, girls and women. Yet gender, those culturally defined expectations that one will behave, react, think, or even dream in certain ways based on one's biological sex, was not just imposed. The women in this study also helped create gender definitions and expectations, ones that were more suited to their occupational focus.

Most self-defined business women did not reject "womanhood," nor did they reject all notions of "masculinity" and "femininity," although they often doubted their mutual exclusivity. Instead, they adapted and altered such ideas of gender, helping to create a new version of womanhood, one that would be compatible with the business woman. Not all historians have agreed that business or professional women accomplished such a feat; they have often suggested that such women failed to

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70 Regardless of whether their organizations kept them out of the locus of power, most business women probably would not have had access to those locations or to the other means of power held by men.
challenge existing roles. Yet such a view suggests absolute binary oppositions, a world in which women would have to stop being "women" and men stop being "men" in order to contest gender expectations. Change on that scale is almost unimaginable. Not only was it unlikely for women to eliminate all expectations of womanhood, they would have been unable to do so without also eliminating "manhood," since the two exist primarily in opposition to one another. Instead self-defined business women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped disrupt gender definitions. Behaviors that might once have been on the "male" side of the equation moved to the "female" side. Motivating this study is a conviction that it is less useful to view women's accession to some gender expectations as a failure that limited their achievements than it is to examine how women who called themselves business women helped to redefine both what it meant to be a woman, and what it meant to succeed in business, how they experienced gender and how they affected it. That is part of the task this study assumes.

Two recent studies of business women examine both the limits of gender, and the possibilities for women who entered various realms of business. These works, Wendy Gamber's *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930*, and Angel Kwolek-Folland's *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870-1930*, also help bring the business woman out of the shadows of the history of women and work. Like some business women of this study, Gamber's

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71 See, for example, Antler, *The Educated Woman and Professionalization*, 14, 407-416.
milliners and dressmakers found an opportunity for relatively high wages, creativity
and possible independence. Their opportunities came, in part, from their businesses
being intensely female — women workers, women employees, and women customers.
Their opportunities declined, however, with the rise of manufactured products, a
process controlled by men. In this case, sex segregation and sex difference provided the
opportunity. The more modern mixed-sex environment ended these business women’s
independence. The self-defined business women of this study, some of whom were
milliners and dressmakers, also found possibilities in serving women’s needs and in
women-defined businesses, but, because these business women represented a variety of
occupations and venues of work, they also found means, in many cases, to make
inroads into the mixed-sex arena.

Kwolek-Folland’s examination of financial institutions explores how the
businesses themselves became gendered, a discussion that helps to explain how gender
works and the purposes it serves. Like the milliners and dressmakers, most of the
women who rose beyond clerical jobs in the financial industries were women who
served women’s insurance or financial needs. They often succeeded by appealing to
men’s needs to protect women and children, reinforcing gender norms. The clerical
workers in these businesses were expected to retain Victorian behaviors: subordination
and serving superior males. These clerical workers were not the independent New


73 Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the
Corporate Office, 1870-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 52-
Women of popular stories, nor the self-defined business women who espoused ambition, aggressiveness, and success. The description of the subordinate clerical worker helps to explain how and why the self-defined business women separated themselves from the mass of clerical workers in the era.

Sharon Hartman Strom suggests that women in the 1920s had a "sense that a critical moment in women's history was at hand." That optimism and belief that the tide had turned for women, and especially for women in business, is dominant in the words of organized business women. Yet history has largely forgotten the activities of the women who sought to take advantage of what they perceived as a new era for women, in part because hindsight suggests the women did not achieve the goals they envisioned. Historians have written that women did not recognize that new opportunities they saw were closed to all women, not just to those who lacked training and ambition; that women continued to enter the work force, but there were "few escalators to the top;" that opportunities in industries had been limited during the war and were even more limited afterwards, leading to a "decidedly static and definitely unrevolutionized world of women's work;" and that what had appeared to be upward mobility was really an illusion caused by new types of occupations, more consumer goods, and better pay, but that women's position in the labor force did not change.  

55, 140, 171-177.

74 Strom, Beyond the Typewriter, 350.

75 Strom, Beyond the Typewriter, 357; Brown, Setting a Course, 246; Kennedy, Over Here, 286-287; and Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press,
These analyses of the outcome of women’s work experiences are useful in understanding their overall position in the work force. Yet the larger and longer the viewpoint, the more obscure the experiences of individuals and groups in particular times at particular places. This study attempts to take a closer look, not so much to examine whether women in the long run gained appreciably in the work force, as to explore women’s experiences and perceptions over a relatively short period of time and in one area, business. This close view can help us better understand not only women and their views of themselves and the world around them, but how American society functioned between 1890 and 1930.

Chapter II examines various early expressions of the business woman’s identity, beginning with the Business Woman’s Journal, the Colored Business Women’s Clubs, and the National Council of Business Women at the turn of the century, continuing through the immediate prewar years and the publication of the Business Woman’s Magazine. Throughout the period, women developed an identity as business women that was inclusive in terms of occupations, that stressed ambition, independence, and career-orientation, and that adapted to requirements of proper womanhood. By World War I, however, the organizations, like many women’s groups, paid less attention to their forays into the public arena than to their occupational goals. The plethora of organizations for business and professional women, and especially the formation of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs and the

1982), 248-249.
Confederation of Zonta Clubs, are the focus of Chapter III, which argues that women were optimistic that organizing would bring them recognition for past achievements, and open new doors for the ambitious and career-oriented members of the new groups. Chapter IV takes a closer look at members of BPW and Zonta, comparing organizational records to entries in the Fourteenth Census of Population (1920) to conclude that the census, as well as our views of success, have led us to overlook and misunderstand post-World War I business women. The chapter contends that club members were successful, as they claimed, and explores the ways in which their ambitions were realized and their own views of what success meant. Chapter V stresses the importance of both business-related and more social and recreational activities to the success of BPW and Zonta and their individual members. The clubs provided important support, friendship, and encouragement for women who forged identities in non-traditional ways. They also gave expression to a version of feminism that has received little attention, lobbying for and expressing concerns for the interests of many women, not just themselves. Chapter VI returns to themes introduced in Chapter I, examining how both real and fictional business women negotiated womanhood and ambition, competitiveness, and a focus on career. It argues that women redefined womanhood, sometimes stepping far outside its boundaries while verbally acknowledging its importance. In short, this study argues that women over several generations and in expanding numbers created and adopted identities as business women that centered on "masculine" traits of ambition, aggressiveness, independence, competition and focus on careers, rather than, or sometimes in addition to, the
traditional women's world of domesticity. In doing so, these women climbed occupational ladders, often achieving the success they sought, according to the standards they set. The businesses in which they operated often were small and may have had less economic impact than those focused on by many studies of this period. Nevertheless, the achievements of many women were real and challenge a new understanding of both the scope of "business" and of "success." Many business women over these forty years turned to other women in organized groups of business and professional women to gain the support, encouragement, and voice they needed to secure recognition for their achievements, to help themselves and other women attain similar successes, and to lead meaningful lives.
CHAPTER II

"FEARLESSLY, PERSISTENTLY, AND IN A WOMANLY WAY": THE NASCENT BUSINESS WOMAN

Mary F. Seymour's obituary in the New York Times in 1893 referred to her as "one of the best-known business women in the country." The label was quite a tribute to Seymour, who had worked for more than a decade to define the "business woman" and publicize her importance to society.

In 1889, Mary Seymour began publishing the Business Woman's Journal, which continued under that name through 1892. The magazine provides a glimpse into late nineteenth-century ideas about women and work and about womanhood itself, as well as into the nascent identity of the "business woman." Seymour was excited and optimistic about the opportunities for women in business. She was convinced that as soon as men, and other women, saw how successful women were in whatever they pursued, limits imposed on women would disappear.

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1 "Miss Mary F. Seymour Dead; Her career as a business woman widely and favorably known," The New York Times, March 22, 1893, 9.

Seymour's publication was but the first to help create the identity of the "business woman" and to attempt to gain recognition and open more opportunities for women. In the decades before World War I, the Journal, several organizations of business women, including one for African-Americans, and at least one other national publication attempted to achieve similar goals. All believed that women could be and were competent and valuable in the business world, that women could focus on careers and success, and that women working together and publicizing their efforts would improve the present and future for all self-defined business women. While all helped to create the early twentieth-century identity of the business woman, they did not create the business woman herself. Since the Civil War, especially, more and more women had moved into occupations they called "business."

Mary Seymour and the BWJ

By the time Mary Seymour began publishing the Journal, she had been a business woman for ten years. She began working, however, like many other middle class women who wanted or needed to earn a living, as a teacher in the 1870s. It was one of the few "respectable" jobs open to women at the time. But, also like many of her peers, she gave it up because of ill health, and probably because she did not enjoy it. As she recuperated from her illness, she taught herself shorthand, and, with the advent of typewriters at about the same time, saw a bright new arena for women. To help women gain access to office jobs, she opened the Union School of Stenography in New York City in 1879. Seymour
also worked as a stenographer, studied law to become a notary public, and took up court reporting, one of the first women to do so.³

But it was the Business Woman's Journal that would make Mary Seymour a well-known business woman. She had high hopes both for the magazine and for business women. In the first issues, Seymour wrote, "The age of martyrdom for superior women has passed, and the world is at last in a condition to give them a fair hearing." She believed the magazine would help to alleviate the "immense amount of ignorance in regard to women's work."⁴ It also would help women achieve equality with men. Seymour wrote that women had been successful for many years, but their achievements had remained unknown to most people. Her magazine would "increase opportunities for women" by publicizing their successes.⁵

In that and other purposes, the bimonthly Journal served at least three audiences. It spoke to business women and aspiring business women, providing information, encouragement, tales of success, and admonitions about dress and behavior. Other women also were part of the Journal's audience. Seymour wanted to encourage all women, in business or not, to be active and productive. Finally, the Journal was aimed at others, especially men in the business community and beyond, praising women's unique


⁴ The Business Woman's Journal I (January 1889), 3. (Hereafter abbreviated as BWJ.)

⁵ BWJ I (September 1889), 163.
contributions to work and justifying their participation in the previously male-defined realm of business. Seymour wrote:

For ten years we have tried to demonstrate that there is no sex in good work. Now we hope to broaden our influence and show that success is possible not in one sphere alone, but in all. Enough examples of prosperous women can be gathered in every business and profession to prove that success is the birthright of all who take the path which nature points out, and follow it fearlessly, persistently, and in a womanly way.6

Seymour would relate tales of successes both to inspire women "in the unequal race" and to "tear away obstacles that custom has placed in her path." The obstacles were the objections of men and, to some degree, the requirements of womanhood. She wanted men to understand not only that women were good employees and successful in business, but also that their success would make them valuable consumers. Still, Seymour did not want to abandon womanhood, only to expand and reconfigure it. An examination of some of the Journal's themes will illuminate Seymour's purposes.

The magazine espoused economic independence and more extensive occupational and educational opportunities for women. At the same time, it also focused on women as wives, mothers, and homemakers, offering advice and drawing connections between home and business. The combination reflected late nineteenth century feminism and women's location between eras of official exclusion from the public arena and somewhat limited participation in it. Drawing on earlier nineteenth-century visions of women as homemakers and mothers who possessed womanly traits of virtue, nurturing, and self-sacrifice, and who contributed to the civic world through their domestic activities, late

6 Ibid.
nineteenth-century women often retained notions of women's unique nature, but used those ideas to argue for their increased civic activity.\(^7\)

Some turn-of-the century women maintained that men and women were fully equal and demanded equal treatment for women in occupational and civic affairs, but many more argued from a belief in women's difference from men, and women's "superiority" in many areas, to advocate for increased involvement in various public pursuits.

Regardless of their nature, discussions between and about women and their place in American life were common in the late nineteenth century. As more and more privileged women attended college and sought employment, as women in factories and their middle-class supporters demanded better working conditions, and as the suffrage movement continued its pressure for women to become full-fledged citizens, the popular media was filled with articles about whether women could physically stand the strain of higher education or employment and whether the family would suffer if women took on functions outside the home.

The debates frequently ignored the realities of the lives of nonwhite and non-privileged women and the fact that most women had worked at productive tasks through most of history. Nevertheless, it was the competing views about what women could or

should do to which the *Journal* would respond. Those views would, for many decades, continue to frame conversations about women's roles in society.

Women in the late nineteenth century were active on many fronts. In clubs, other organizations, and various types of jobs, they tried to translate domestic "traits" and skills into community improvement efforts. The General Federation of Women's Clubs, composed primarily of white, privileged homemakers, was formed in 1890, shortly after Seymour's journal began. Where such women once had joined clubs focused on literature and self-education, by 1890 their groups had switched to projects aimed at civic betterment such as promoting child labor laws, mothers' pensions and improved sanitary conditions in cities. Other women turned their social action into jobs. Jane Addams, who founded Hull House in 1889, sought to improve the lives of immigrant women and their families in a Chicago neighborhood. Her settlement house, like those in other large American cities, gave privileged women a community and forum for their work, and applied women's "special" nurturing and caretaking abilities to immigrant neighborhoods and city politics. Florence Kelley's Consumer's League work also drew privileged women, through their roles as consumers, into the effort to improve the lives of working women, withholding or supporting various products and firms on the basis of their treatment of workers.

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8 For development of this idea of women's clubs, see Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, and Scott, *Natural Allies*.

9 For details about these and other efforts, see Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From the First Trade Unions to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), especially 120-132;
promoted the idea that women's role was to protect their homes and children and that eliminating alcohol would serve that purpose.10

Woman's "nature" as moral, nurturing, and domestic also was central to many woman suffrage arguments. Active from the Women's Rights Convention of 1848, the suffrage movement had experienced ebbs, flows and splits. At the time Seymour was publishing her magazine, suffrage efforts had been at least temporarily reinvigorated with the merger of two national organizations.11 When women could vote, many suffragists argued, women's "difference" from men would bring a positive influence to community life and government. Some contended that it was women's domestic role that required their participation in government. Not only would women have a positive impact on politics, but they needed a voice to be able to better protect their children and their communities.12


11 In 1869, the suffrage movement split into the National Woman Suffrage Association, which opposed granting black men the vote and sought federal action to give women the right to vote, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, which supported the franchise for black men and planned to organize on the grassroots level. The two united in 1890. See Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, ed., One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement (Troutdale, Ore.: New Sage Publishers, 1995), 10-12.

12 See Wheeler, One Woman, One Vote and Anne Firor Scott and Andrew MacKay Scott, One Half the People: The Fight for Woman Suffrage (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982).
In these and other activities, women in the late nineteenth century used the fact of women's difference -- their natural tendency to be nurturers, caretakers, and moral agents -- to create an ever expanding place for women in more public areas of politics, civic affairs, labor, and business.

The Business Woman's Journal recognized and spoke to all of those audiences and views: to reformers and homemakers, to privileged and not-so-privileged women, to men and women who deplored women's newfound expressions of independence and influence, and to women whose career interests came first. The publication focused on white women, but recognized class differences and how they affected women's lives. This breadth of vision and audience contributed to a comprehensive identity for the "business woman." Mary Seymour adopted all women who participated in the public arena as "business women," appealing to women's sense of community responsibility, to their newly appreciated intellect and skills, as she promoted the idea of women working outside the home, or being prepared to do so.

In the first issue, the Journal announced itself as "A magazine devoted to the interests of all women, especially those engaged in active pursuits."13 Seymour wrote that "nothing has so contributed to the advancement of women as their participation in active pursuits." She envisioned such pursuits for most women. Often noting a difference between women who had to work for money and those who chose to, the Journal in all cases saw dignity and self-respect in work. Idleness, long vilified in reference to men,

13 BWJ I (January 1889), 1.
was a frequent target of *Journal* articles. Women "of leisure," especially, were encouraged to do productive work. One article commented that some men thought women "should be thrilled to do nothing but socialize and have jewels." The article concluded:

> If a week of idleness is such torture to an invalid man, what must a lifetime of forced inactivity be to a healthy woman, too bright and intelligent to find satisfaction in the weary round of fashionable life?

The writer of another article, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, pitied "dependent daughters of presumably rich parents" more than poor, working-class women. Wilcox wrote, "However small the earnings of the working girl, her wages are her own." Dependency was more to be feared than poverty or its effects.

It was only in economic independence and in contributing to the good of society that women could maintain dignity and find satisfaction in life. That view was shared by a number of women in the late nineteenth century. In the first issue, Seymour wrote that the "degraded condition of women was due to the aimless lives to which custom has consigned them." Therefore, the publication would encourage all women to work --

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15 *BWJ* II (October 1890), 157.

16 *BWJ* IV (February 1892), 55.

except those "occupied in household duties."\textsuperscript{18} Seymour and the \textit{Journal} did not necessarily equate domestic duties or homemaking with idleness, especially if the woman herself carried out those chores. If servants were responsible for household work or if children were grown and gone from home, the housewife might then be considered idle, and therefore degraded. The \textit{Journal} was vague about these distinctions, which probably reflected the reluctance of Seymour and other writers to belittle motherhood and homemaking, still seen as women's primary function in life.

Seymour's introduction to the first issue also noted that the name \textit{Business Woman's Journal} was not intended to limit the magazine's scope. She hoped it would appeal to all women, but especially to those who worked with their "brains or hands."\textsuperscript{19} That reference, too, was vague, but was intended, like Seymour's other statements, to broaden the magazine's appeal as well as to discourage idleness among women.

The "business woman" would be that active woman who used brains or hands and who was fearless and persistent. Her particular career was not as important as the traits she brought to it. However, "business," especially as an adjective for "girl," came to be equated with clerical work. Business schools offered clerical training. Seymour's use of the term "business woman" probably grew out of her own interests in stenography and in

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{BWJ I} (January 1889), 4.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{BWJ I} (January 1989), 4.
promoting stenography for women, in combination with her stated interest in eliminating barriers for women's success and achievement in many fields.20

Through its four-year history, the Journal devoted more space and attention to stenography than to the many other occupations it mentioned or featured. Every issue of the publication contained some discussion of stenography. A column by Seymour entitled "Practical Hints for Stenographers and Type-Writers" began in the first issue. It gave information on various types of work a stenographer might encounter, behavior tips, and, sometimes, skills-related information. The columns provide insight into how women saw the field of stenography before the turn of the century, and into Mary Seymour herself. One column was entitled "Homely Hints to Young Women in Business." The hints included asking for pay equal only to one's worth, not chatting, not using the phone for personal calls, not receiving personal letters or visitors at work, and being "as lady-like as in a parlor." In addition, Seymour advised stenographers not to socialize with men in the office and not to accept gifts or attention from the employer unless the stenographer had been introduced to the employer's family and been received as a social equal.21

"Lady-like" behavior was as important as good skills for stenographers. Because women were undertaking new pursuits, they were being carefully scrutinized. Seymour suggested that women were judged as one group and that, if any one of them misbehaved

20 Seymour ran four stenographic schools in New York City, along with a stenography business and an employment bureau. See James, Notable American Women III, 271-272. For a further discussion of clerical work, see Chapter IV.

21 "Homely Hints to Young Women in Business, BWJ I (March 1889), 50.
or made a mistake, all women would be seen in a negative light. "When we have
advanced to such a position that we may be judged as individuals," Seymour wrote, "then
the responsibility which rests on our shoulders will be lighter." Silencing the critics
would require good work habits, intelligence, and attention to accepted norms of feminine
behavior and propriety. It also would require educating and informing men about
women's new roles. Seymour urged business men to buy the Journal, read it themselves
and distribute it to their employees. She helped insure that some men, at least, received
the publication by sending complimentary copies to "representative men and women." She never specified who received the copies, but they likely were proprietors of business
colleges, employers of large numbers of clerical workers, or influential business men in
large cities.

To help stenographers with skills, Seymour wrote articles focusing on how to
write business letters, take and give dictation, answer correspondence, use hyphens,
improve spelling, and increase speed. In 1890, the magazine ran a mini-course in
stenography skills. It gave readers exercises in translating text to shorthand and vice
versa, as well as practice in specialized applications, such as legal documents.

Advertisements for Seymour's Union School of Stenography and Typewriting
appeared regularly in the Journal and suggest that Seymour saw stenography as
harmonious not only with women's unique nature, but also with more male-identified

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22 BWJ I (March 1889), 52.
23 BWJ I (May-June 1889), 132.
goals of earning an adequate income and advancing in one's career. The school was the largest in the country run by a woman, ads announced. Seymour was quoted in ads as saying women made better typists than men and "quite as good" stenographers. Again, with an audience of women and men, she hoped to convince both that women belonged in offices and that they were particularly suited to stenography and type-writing. That argument, of course, also would serve to benefit Seymour's businesses, by increasing the number of students at her schools and the number of readers of her magazine. Ads claimed women could make good salaries, a further appeal to those who earned little as teachers, in some trades or in factories. Ads attributed the success of Seymour's students to their being taught "actual business methods."  

Besides providing information and training in stenography skills, the publication promoted the occupation in other ways. One article compared stenography and teaching as careers for women. A teacher was quoted as saying, "Imagine a girl spending her days between that host of little rascals on one side and the school principal on the other, one to annoy, and the other to nag, and all for $400 a year." Instead, a woman could train to be a stenographer and earn more. One stenographer reportedly went from a salary of $8 to $18 a week in just two years. That would have been an increase from about $400 to about $900 a year. Clearly, the prospects for stenography were brighter than those for teaching, at least in that one example. Since teaching had been almost the only

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24 BWJ II (February 1890).

25 BWJ II (February 1890), 17. Estimating yearly salaries is tricky, since employment often was not steady.
occupational choice for middle-class women or those seeking "respectable" jobs, and a choice that many disdained, stenography and office work seemed like bright alternatives. A career advice manual summed up the view many women had of teaching when it described a clerk's job as "far preferable to the drudgery of teaching and the small pay." 

Stenography also was seen as a desirable career because women might move from it into other jobs. An article in the Journal noted that some architects were asked if they would give their female stenographers and typewriters a chance to study architecture. Fifteen said they would. (The total asked was not specified.) For the woman who could not afford other education, then, stenography allowed a foot in the door. Another article, "How Poor Girls May Learn a Profession," advised them first to learn clerical skills to support themselves while pursuing other studies. It suggested girls learn bookkeeping, stenography and typewriting, all fields that offered opportunities for part-time work. The "girls" would have income to permit study in other fields, and their business skills might


28 BWJ I (January 1889), 31, 39.
aid them in other pursuits. Business knowledge was touted as especially useful in law school and journalism. Few newspaper reporters knew shorthand and typing, the article noted, but those who did admitted the skills had contributed greatly to their success. A girl who studied stenography but wanted to be a doctor could work in a doctor's office.²⁹

The possibilities for stenography and other clerical work seemed endless.

Stenography and other types of office work were burgeoning new fields for women in the 1890s. Working- and middle-class women were attracted to the relatively good pay and respectability of office jobs. Many, as Seymour's publication suggested, envisioned possibilities for advancement and learning new skills. In 1890, nearly 82,000 students were enrolled in private commercial schools throughout the United States to learn clerical skills. Twenty-eight percent of those students were women.³⁰ Seymour promoted her own school through the Journal, but even more, she championed the idea of women in business and in a career she believed would offer them considerable opportunity. As one historian has written about clerical work, "The pre-World War I generations looked upon these jobs as new, exciting employment options." Even college-educated women often found them appealing.³¹

²⁹BWJ I (March 1889), 43-44.


Clerical work was not the only type of job the "business woman" might hold, however. Journalism, often mentioned in career advice books for women as a good "business" career, also was featured frequently in the Journal. A regular column about journalism appeared in 1890. It focused not on specific skills, but on various issues, including how newspaper editors viewed women. Jean Kincaid of the Boston Globe, in an article on "Women in Journalism," criticized editors who thought women cared only about "crochet work and babies." She accused some editors of hiring "experts" for all coverage other than the "women's department," where these editors assumed "anybody, especially any man" could do the job. Kincaid suggested that items of interest to women should not be segregated into a column or a department.

How would men like to be shut off from the rest of the world by a headline and a rule in that fashion? Perhaps the first thing the modern editor needs to learn is that the modern woman who thinks at all (and the others don't read newspapers) takes herself seriously, very seriously indeed.32

The solution was implied: hire women journalists and let them work in all newspaper departments, covering broadly defined news of interest to women. Kincaid's comments implied more than a concern about newspaper content and tasks assigned to women reporters. She believed that women, like men, were interested in all aspects of life, not just domestic concerns. The use of the term "modern woman" suggested a break with the past, when women had been limited to homemaking, wifehood and motherhood.

32 BWJ II (June 1890), 92. Jean Kincaid was the pen name of Mrs. Estelle M.H. Merrill.
Other occupations were featured less regularly. Selling insurance was praised because it would allow women to support themselves and be independent. A short item and a later obituary highlighted a 99-year-old woman banker, Deborah Powers, who had been a daughter, wife and mother for nearly forty years before taking over a large manufacturing business. When a bank in her hometown of Lansingburgh, N.Y., failed and her son was named receiver, Powers formed a private bank with her two sons. They ran the bank, D. Powers & Sons, together for fourteen years before her death. She was so successful in running her late husband's business, in which she participated during his life, that she was said to be worth $2 million at her death. Other short items featured a manager of a mercantile establishment, a portrait photographer, an undertaker, and manager of the shoe department at Macy's, who earned $5,200 a year, twice what an advertisement bragged that a young stenographer made, and much more than some other articles in the paper claimed stenographers earned. The Journal wanted women to consider career possibilities in fields that were less popular, and therefore less crowded with other women. One article mentioned that telegraphers' salaries had dropped fifteen to thirty-five dollars a month in a decade because too many women were going into the field. It did not discuss the gendered nature of pay scales.

The Journal's depiction of what might be considered business careers for women fit within the broad societal view of women in business. Career books aimed at women and published in the same era generally included sections on business, suggesting occupations

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33 BWJ III (May 1891), 137.
such as advertising, department store work (often supervision or buying, rather than sales jobs), banking, real estate sales, insurance work, and journalism. The 1893 *What Can a Woman Do* by Mrs. M.L. Rayne contained sections on the business and literary worlds that reflected the broad notion of "business." "Departments of Business in Which Women Are Engaged" included bankers, poets, elocutionists, piano tuners, dressmakers, bookkeepers, architects, poultry raisers and brewers. Specific suggested occupations "in the business world" were the "professions" of literature, journalism, law, medicine, music, telegraphy, elocution, and nursing; and jobs as government clerks, lady government officials, women of enterprise; and in the fields of stenography and typewriting, wood engraving, canvassing, art and industrial exchanges, gardening, raising poultry, bee keeping, dressmaking, housekeeping, cooking, and keeping boarders. Many of those same types of jobs were featured by Seymour's publication as suitable and desirable jobs for women. "Business," by some definitions, included most occupations in which women were involved, with the exception of lower-skill and lower-status jobs such as domestic service and factory work.

Like Seymour, Rayne believed women should have the skills to be self-supporting. She noted that some women had no opportunity to marry, others preferred being single and independent, others needed extra family income, and still others disliked domestic work. Regardless, women did not know what their futures held and should

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therefore be prepared for any eventuality by being able to support themselves. But neither Rayne nor Seymour believed that women should forsake marriage and traditional women’s activities. Like Catherine Beecher and other noted women writers before her, Mary F. Seymour was single and financially independent, but did not let that fact influence the advice she gave to other women. Women should have careers in part, the Journal suggested, because the business world would benefit from the inclusion of women and ultimately marriages and families would benefit as well. Careers were not necessarily alternatives to marriage and child-rearing, but neither were they presented as incompatible with such traditional women’s work. Articles and editorials in the Journal suggested many non-economic advantages of work. Wealthy women should work for self-satisfaction and to make contributions to the world, and all women would benefit from the skills and habits learned by working.

The Business Woman’s Journal connected the knowledge, skills, and behavior necessary to business success to those traits required for homemaking. It stressed that business traits enhanced women’s domestic or feminine traits and roles. Women could be better at the womanly tasks of homemaking and child rearing if they had business skills and attitudes. For instance, an 1890 article challenged the idea that a man would be foolish to marry a woman trained in business when he could instead marry one trained as

a housekeeper. The business woman, the article noted, "has a brain, a methodical mind."

A woman so trained would know enough to provide good ventilation in the home to
guard against headaches, which cause lost work time. She would understand money,
having earned her own living, would know the value of time, would "take readily" to
modern inventions and would stay calm in emergencies.  

Those skills were more valuable than mere knowledge of cooking or sewing.

Another article described husbands and wives as business partners, "co-equals in
the moneyled interests of the firm." The firm (marriage) encompassed several functions of
equal difficulty and responsibility, the article noted. One, the "outside" business or
money-making, usually was the husband's role. The other was management of the
household, which usually fell to women. "The work of each is indispensable to the
success and happiness of the family," the article suggested. To uphold her end of the
partnership, therefore, the wife needed to know budgeting, record-keeping and general
organizational habits -- all things that could be learned in business.

Seymour went even further in linking business skills and homemaking. She called
homemakers business women, making business training a necessity for all women.

Although someone has aptly said house-wives belong to the great army of unpaid
laborers, we still intend to claim them as business women . . . Is not
housekeeping a business, and should it not be done in a business-like way? 

37 BWJ II (March 1890), 61.

38 BWJ II (November 1890), 191.

39 BWJ I (September 1889), 163.
Skills that made a woman successful in business would make her successful in life in general. Shorthand speed and proficiency might be important, but working methodically was valuable in a larger sense and would help women live better lives and master the world around them, including the domestic world to which many women were tied.

Portraying the homemaker, the wife and mother as a thinking, reasoning woman was in itself breaking new ground. Thinking and reasoning usually were considered men's traits, while women were thought to be emotional, fragile and naturally dependent. The *Journal* often portrayed women as "naturally" nurturing and having higher moral standards than men, but it did not see all traits, especially the more positive ones usually ascribed to men, as "natural." Seymour's publication stressed that thinking, reasoning, and ability to organize were attributes of business women, ones they might learn from their business experiences. In fact, the magazine argued that thinking and reasoning were rare in men. Seymour wrote that good judgment and intelligence were developed qualities that many men and women lacked. She said that most people were capable of learning shorthand, but many had to abandon it because "their reasoning powers, and consequently judgment, have not been sufficiently trained to enable them to read their notes intelligently."  

Temperance leader Frances Willard, who wrote a column on philanthropy, suggested both that reasoning and thinking could be learned and that working outside the home would aid women in homemaking.

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40 *BWJ* I (March 1889), 48.
[Philanthropy] is also the best preparation for that home life which lies before the great majority of women. It keeps their sympathies always warm and tender, while it develops their reasoning power and accentuates their strength of will.41

Work in offices or work with the less fortunate all would require women to be organized, to think rationally, to make decisions, to handle any situation. Those qualities were crucial to running the modern household, the "scientific" home where health, safety, and wise spending all were required. The Journal rarely assigned a gender to such qualities. Instead, they were skills to be learned, just as stenography, bookkeeping, journalism, and management were skills.

While thinking and reasoning were not gendered, at least in the view of the magazine, much else was. The Journal recognized that various types of jobs were seen as "male" jobs and that certain leisure activities and other tasks were male or female. Women could take on "male" tasks or activities, but it was important that they remain "feminine" or "womanly." Gender expectations were real barriers to many women's pursuits. "Professional" behaviors at the turn-of-the-century, such as activity, confidence and self-assertion, generally were associated with masculinity. Aspiring professional women still were expected to display such "feminine" behaviors as passivity, humility and self-sacrifice. Most of the women portrayed in the Journal and the women in its audience were not professionals in the sense of holding jobs that required specific

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41 *BWJ* II (March 1890), 55.
education, training and certification, but they faced the conflicts inherent in such expectations.  

The problem for women was that though they sought access to occupations and privileges that previously had been the province of men, they did not want to be men. Their language for expressing these ideas was limited, especially given the rigid gender distinctions of most work. How was a woman doing "men's" work to remain "womanly"?

In one article, the Journal grappled with that issue as directly as it could. Mrs. Mary E.H.G. Dow of Dover, New Hampshire, had been president of a horse railroad, a teacher, an actress and, after marrying a newspaper owner, a journalist. The Journal noted that Dow's career demonstrated that a woman doing traditionally male jobs did not have to "unsex herself" and destroy the family. It added that she:

... fulfills all the functions once supposed to be woman's only rational ones: tender wife, mother, charming hostess, helpful and sympathetic friend, skillful housewife, scrupulous in her dress, which is rich and charming.

Dow succeeded at male occupational pursuits as well as female ones. She also took on both male- and female-identified hobbies. She was good with a shotgun and pistol and enjoyed hunting, fishing, swimming, and amateur veterinary surgery. She also enjoyed continental cooking, gardening and needlework. Dow defied many gender expectations, but still carried out the primary woman's responsibilities of marriage, motherhood, housekeeping and being attractive. Had Dow rejected those traditional women's tasks, it

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might have been harder to explain how she could do "men's" work and still be "womanly."  

A profile of Frances Willard, head of the temperance movement and a Journal columnist, noted that she had executive ability, shown through her temperance work. Willard, who was single and childless, nevertheless "taught the world that true womanhood is as beautiful on the platform as in the home." Willard's "noblest achievement" was raising the standard of womanhood. Mrs. Emma F. Pettengill, "A Successful Brooklyn Stenographer," was described as a "handsome, bright, clear-brained, magnetic little woman." The writer described her considerable business talents before noting that Pettengill was "full of womanly graces, yet without one trace of coquetry or self-consciousness." Her womanly graces were more aligned with intelligence, organization, and raising her children while working, than with those needed to attract men or to be a helpless woman.

Regardless of how it manifested itself, the feminine side was important. Women needed to remain "women" in all their pursuits in the household, the political arena, or the business world. The Journal did not challenge the notion that women must have "feminine" traits, but it did redefine what was "natural" for women and therefore expanded what being a "woman" meant. That expansion allowed women to be womanly

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43 BWJ I (September 1889), 141.
44 BWJ I (January 1889), 4.
45 BWJ I (July 1889), 118.
while giving speeches, working in offices, and owning businesses, as well as taking care of homes and children.

Even though women could be womanly while working outside the home, the societal norm for middle-class women in the late nineteenth century was that they be wives and mothers and not hold outside jobs. Working class women, even though they probably came from traditions where women had always worked out of economic necessity, and therefore may have had fewer personal concerns about working than middle-class women, often were ignored when the dominant American view posited domesticity as the ideal state for women. The notion that women did not work persisted, even though in 1890, nearly 17 percent of all adult workers were women.46

The Journal both supported women's domestic roles and offered other possibilities, including singlehood or a combination of work and marriage. Articles acknowledged and affirmed women who were married and raising families and who did not enter the paid workforce, the women Seymour had "adopted" as business women. It also sanctioned the possibility of combining work and marriage. Women such as Dow were cited as examples of those who could do both and do both well. Finally, it affirmed women's choice to not marry. The only choice the Journal did not applaud was that of the idleness of dependent, wealthy women whose lives were filled with nothing but social engagements.

Besides Dow, other married, working women sometimes were featured. In one lengthy article, May Wright Sewall, the Journal's education columnist, defended married women working as teachers. She focused both on what a married woman could add to the school and on her ability to keep up with household duties. Arguments against married women teaching, Sewall wrote, were "slander against matrimony." She suggested that marriage and motherhood "deepen a woman's nature, quicken and enlarge her sympathies, and enrich her spiritual experiences." Marriage was good for women and married women were good for teaching, Sewall believed. She dismissed the very question of whether a married teacher would be able to keep up with household duties. That question was a private one, between the woman and her husband. Asking whether a single woman working as a teacher would ignore her mother was "the same sort of irrelevant question," Sewall suggested.

Keeping married women out of teaching would have negative consequences for schools and for society as a whole. Sewall believed married women teachers were superior to single teachers, who might just be working until they found the right husband. Those temporary teachers would not be as interested in teaching, nor as inspiring to children, who might come to regard work itself as "irksome" because their teachers were reluctant employees. Finally, Sewall noted, forcing married women to quit teaching or working at any job could help explain "the small amount of respect boys have for their
mothers.""47 If women were forced to stay out of the workforce, then sons would get the idea that their mothers were inferior and incapable of successful careers.

Marriage often was portrayed as the expected state for women, although, as with womanhood, the Journal often presented a modern type of marriage. When the desirability of teaching and stenography as occupations were compared, the article suggested that business offices were better places to find husbands than schools. "... three of the six [stenographers] with whom we spoke have been married out of the offices in which they were employed, and the others are likely to be."48 The Journal rarely mentioned that marriage provided more social and economic security than most available jobs for women, but rather portrayed marriage as the "normal" state. But some women in the late nineteenth century, including Seymour herself, did not marry. Jane Addams and many of her Hull House residents chose work and lives centered on relationships with other women over marriage. The same was true of many other women. Being single was stressed less by the magazine than the benefits of business to marriage, probably because privileged women who did not marry or who chose careers faced considerable societal criticism. The Journal likely found a more receptive audience by focusing on the benefits to marriage of women working outside the home.

47 BWJ I (October 1890), 148.
48 BWJ II (February 1890), 17.
Women before the late nineteenth century often were unable to make such a choice to be single.\(^4\) The lack of job opportunities for women helped make marriage and its economic security nearly the only viable option for women. Those who did not marry often were pitied or ridiculed. In her 1893 book, Mrs. M.L. Rayne devoted a chapter to unmarried women. She began by noting that one sign of progress was that the phrase "old maid' has gone well nigh out of fashion."\(^5\) She suggested that any woman who really wanted to marry could do so, but many single women declined to marry just for convenience or other similar reasons. She also insisted that women who chose to be single were not selfish, providing examples to make her point that single women could be interesting, considerate, compassionate, and loving.

Rayne defended single women, but still considered marriage the "natural" state. She quoted a letter from L. Maria Child, "a friend whose own character invests single life with peculiar dignity."\(^5\) Child wrote:

The Author of Nature doubtless intended that men and women should live together. But, in the present state of the world's progress, society has, in many


Presumably, the friend was Lydia Maria Child, who died in 1880. She was married, but had no children, and supported her husband. She wrote a number of books, including *The American Frugal Housewife* (1832), and was noted for her anti-slavery work.
respects, become artificial in proportion to its civilization; and consequently the number of single women must constantly increase.\(^5^2\)

The quoted letter continued for several pages. It, like Rayne’s own writing and much of the content of the Journal, did not suggest that women reject marriage. Instead, it acknowledged the primacy of the married state, but complicated that by its assertion that contemporary society had so upset “nature” that some of nature’s rules were upset as well. These women then were single for complex reasons, not just to be independent. In fact, this letter writer noted that women who were single because they had “too much worldly ambition, or from the gratification of coquettish vanity” gave a bad name to single women.\(^5^3\)

These ideal single women did not reject heterosexuality, nor were they dangerous challengers to such a system. They were not trying to make a point by being single. But, as single women and as human beings, many of them were portrayed as superior both in character and their occupational pursuits. As with many of the late nineteenth century feminist arguments, it was important to conceptualize as “womanly” and therefore as normal women who were outside traditional boundaries of feminine behavior, even though their paths to womanhood were not traditional.

Another facet of the Journal’s notion of the business woman (and the late nineteenth century woman in general) was that she was interested in and aware of many social and political issues facing women. To help women learn about these issues, the

\(^5^2\) Ibid., 422.

\(^5^3\) Ibid., 424.
Journal printed news about women's social clubs, information on reform movements, and short items on achievements of women worldwide. A preview for 1890 promised features such as Occupations for Women, Physical Culture and Hygiene, Women Under the Law, Philanthropy and Reform, Sensible Dress for Women, and a serialized story for children. The Education Department that year planned to tackle serious issues for women. What does it mean that the majority of teachers are women? Were women prevented from developing "executive" abilities by being kept in low-responsibility jobs in schools? Did young girls have poor self-esteem and lack ambition because all the women they saw in schools were in low-tier jobs? And, how could the public be aroused to fight for equal pay for equal work for women?54

The Journal promised that news about reform work would be especially important. In the first issue, Seymour noted that the paper was to be an "organ of all reform." It would support higher education, be a champion of the poor working girl, and a champion of all women who suffered from unjust laws and customs. It would, she promised, "look at the woman's side of all questions."55 In the second issue, she repeated her promise in new words. The Journal was "not the organ of any special reform." Instead, it would "lend a hand to every effort to advance the financial, political, intellectual and moral interests of women."56

54 BWJ I (May-June 1890), 107-8.
55 BWJ I (January 1889), 4.
56 BWJ I (March-April 1889), 90.
The coverage of reform issues was broad. Among the publication's contributors was Frances Willard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, whose column, "Philanthropy and Reform," covered a variety of topics, promoting women's enfranchisement, temperance, and women's involvement in social issues. Willard was a vice-president of the company Seymour organized in 1889 to run the magazine.57

Suffrage and suffrage-related activities also garnered considerable space. In 1890, the publication covered the convention that brought the National and American Woman Suffrage associations together, profiling suffrage leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone and Mrs. Rachel Foster Avery.58 The Journal covered the Woman's Suffrage Association and the New York Woman's Suffrage League. In addition, numerous articles linked women's occupational freedom and economic independence to suffrage. The Journal also ran articles about the Women's Prison Association, the Association of Working Girls Societies, the Society for Political Study, the Mutual Improvement Association of Female Grammar School Teachers of the City of New York, and the New York Women's Press Club. The Woman's Journal, the pro-suffrage newspaper from Boston, often was quoted or referred to. Besides Willard, another well-known reformer, May Wright Sewall of Indianapolis, was a frequent contributor, writing the Journal's education column. Sewall was involved in suffrage work, the peace movement, and the National and International Council of Women, which grew out of the

57 James, Notable American Women, 271.

58 BWJ II (March-April 1890).
suffrage movement and sought to bring various women's groups together. The National Council of Women's annual meeting report from 1891 was printed in its entirety in the *Journal*.

Grace Dodge, organizer of the first Working Girls' Society, Commissioner of the New York Board of Education, and president in 1906 of the National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association, sometimes wrote for the *Journal* and was the subject of a profile in September 1889. Also profiled were Willard and Mrs. Mary A. Woodbridge of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and Rachel G. Foster-Avery of the Council of Women.

Not all reforms covered by the *Journal* were political or economic. The publication promoted sensible dress for women. A number of articles detailed the dangerous effects of corsets that compressed the waist and upper torso. One, written by Dr. Madana F. DeHart, an officer of the Seymour Publishing Co., included anatomical drawings of damage to the ribs and spines of women wearing restrictive clothing. Other reforms included encouraging the creation of lunchrooms and toilet rooms for self-supporting women and of physical activity. An article on lawn tennis noted that it was not a very expensive sport, but that women must be willing to devote some of their money to physical activity.

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59 Ibid., 269-270.

60 *BWJ* III (February 1891).

61 *BWJ* IV (February 1892), 73.

62 *BWJ* III (1891), 147.
One aspect of the *Journal*'s emphasis on reform was an effort to create a sense of the unity among women. It promoted the idea that women of all classes had common interests. For the most part, the *Journal*'s contributors were privileged women who held a somewhat naive view of the commonalities of women, a view typical of many nineteenth-century reformers who often failed to recognize structural limitations faced by women of other backgrounds. For example, when describing Working Girls Clubs, the *Journal* wrote "Go on brave girls! Free yourselves from the dreadful curse of grinding poverty, and then add to the intelligence which labor has given you, the culture of study." It sounded so easy. The girls (and their middle class patrons) would raise wages, shorten working hours, enforce existing labor laws and protect workers against unfair and cruel treatment. Then the girls could study and improve their cultural education.

In the same issue of the magazine, another article was less complimentary to working women. Seymour began a series called "What Occupation Shall I Choose." She suggested women needed to decide early what they wanted to do; if they waited until necessity forced them to work, they might have to "step from a luxurious home into the unwholesome atmosphere of a crowded factory and the companionship of the rude and ignorant." Neither article showed much sensitivity toward working-class women, but the more positive tone of the first one may have reflected the nature of the group being discussed: girls affiliated with a group organized by middle-class women.

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63 *BWJ* I (January 1889), 21.

64 Ibid., 24.
Some articles were more sympathetic to the needs of poorer women. For instance, the publication urged bored women of means to go to work, yet warned them against taking jobs that other women needed. They were advised, instead, to invest their capital in enterprises that would benefit both the investor and the poorer women, who could be employed by the ventures.\textsuperscript{65} The Journal also chastised women of means for working for no pay or reduced pay. Employers would take advantage of the free labor, thereby depriving poorer women of income.

Many articles suggested that women had common interests that crossed class lines and that various classes of women had much to learn from one another. Grace Dodge, founder of the Working Girls Clubs, wrote:

\begin{quote}
Half the world does not know how the other half lives -- nor how dependent they are on the other half, nor how much each learns from the other . . . Sisterhoods are forming -- but the greatest sisterhood of all is womanhood -- a complete unity.
\end{quote}

Dodge also wrote that women of different classes should become acquainted as a first step to forming friendships. She believed that many privileged women were sincere in their efforts on behalf of working women: "Wage earners need to know the kindliness, generosity, and desire to share of the more fortunate -- as these must learn to admire the busy workers."\textsuperscript{66} As her biographer has noted, Grace Dodge believed in joint action with working women, not imposition of her views on them. But she also ignored many of the differences of circumstances between poor women and herself, focusing instead on the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{65} BWJ II (October 1890), 157-8.
\textsuperscript{66} BWJ III (October 1891), 208.
\end{flushright}
universal experiences of women. Still, as one of the contributors to the *Journal*, Dodge helped raise the issue of class and of women's responsibilities to other women.

Seymour also argued for women's solidarity because women were responsible for the success or failure of ventures by other women. She believed that while men might compete, women should cooperate. That cooperation would, among other things, help insure the financial success of the *Journal*. Cooperation would bring business success and women's equality. In a prospectus printed when the journal became a stock company, Seymour wrote:

> As the representative of a grand co-operative movement which shall unite women in every sphere of life, as the champion of woman as woman (not in antagonism to man, but as an individual), as the exponent of the idea that the equality of women can in no other way be more speedily accomplished than by promoting and providing their success in business and professional life ...  

Cooperation was important to the totality of women's concerns. The *Journal* stopped short of suggesting, however, that by promoting and practicing cooperation, women would change the way men did business. The notion of a women's "culture," distinct from that of men stressed this difference. Women cooperated; men competed. By seeing themselves as a group with common interests and goals, women could help one another become successful; by changing the way they behaved, they could benefit all women.

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68 *BJW* II (March 1890), viii.

69 A number of observers of women in this era have written about cooperation. For example, see Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden*, xix.

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The point was made explicitly in an article about an insurance company formed by and for women, which noted the company had been successful, but could do better if women cooperated more.

That suspicious attitude and indifference of the average woman toward a woman's enterprise, especially if such an enterprise is managed by women, does more to retard the advancement of her sex than anything else. The average woman will pin her faith to a man of small abilities and questionable character before she will trust a woman whose intelligence even men respect.70

The article did not blame women for the situation. It suggested that education and environment had led women to be suspicious of one another. But once aware of the problem, women could and should change it.

The notion of a common identity and common interest as women was an outgrowth of women's clubs and various reform movements, but most especially the women's rights and suffrage movement, the first widespread effort in the United States to bring women together for a political end. Issues of race and class often divided the suffrage movement as they did the rest of American society. The Business Woman's Journal tried to deal with class issues, albeit from the perspective of fairly privileged women. Race was ignored. Because the publication focused on work and issues of women who worked, it was able to bridge some class gaps. Some of the writers were women who volunteered as reformers or social activists, but many held paid jobs. Women like Seymour, who ran stenography schools, likely came into contact with many less privileged women and girls and might have genuinely understood their concerns. Yet the theme of the Journal and of

70 BWJ II (January 1890), 2.
much of late nineteenth-century feminism was commonality and finding common ground, not
differences. When difference was mentioned, it was women's natural difference from
men, not from other women. That approach ignored many of the realities of less
privileged women in American society.

The *Business Woman's Journal* was the first American publication to appeal to
women who identified themselves by their work. As a reflection of the times and of
women's new forays into the public arena, work was closely linked to improving social,
political, and economic conditions for all women. Its conception of the business woman
began with founder Mary F. Seymour's own business, stenography, and expanded to
mean much non-manual work, especially in the areas of commerce and trade, as well as
homemaking. The business woman also should be informed about health issues, politics,
the arts, other countries, history, and about women of all classes. She was not just a
working woman, she was an involved, interested member of the wider society.

In fact, in Seymour's eyes, the business woman was *the* woman of the future.
Tapping into the language of efficiency and scientific work that would dominate the
beginning of the new century, Seymour wrote in the final issue of the *Business Woman's
Journal*:

> It is the business woman who is the woman of the age, the woman of wisdom, promptness and self-control, the woman who works easily because she works methodically, the woman who is not in a hurry, because she works systematically, she is the woman of the day.\(^71\)

\(^{71}\) *BWJ IV* (August 1892), 300.
Seymour clearly believed that women who went into business would learn important skills and develop traits that would benefit them in the workplace as well as probable domestic roles. Self-controlled, methodical and systematic, the business woman would be successful at whatever she pursued.

It is unclear how influential the Journal was in its four years under that name. At the end of its first year, 1889, Seymour wrote in a publisher's note that 75,000 copies of the journal had been printed that year. Six issues were published, putting the per issue circulation at about 12,500. Some of those were complimentary copies, intended to boost circulation. The continuing per-issue circulation probably was closer to 5,000 copies. Subscriptions apparently were a continuing concern. In publisher's notes, Seymour warned those who had received free copies that finances would not allow continued free distribution. In addition, frequent advertisements offered cash incentives for people to sell subscriptions. In September 1889, the cost of a year's subscription was lowered from one dollar to fifty-five cents and the per issue price from twenty to ten cents. From January 1889 through August 1892, the journal published twenty-four issues.

In June 1892, Seymour announced that the Journal was going to become a department of a new venture, the American Woman's Journal & The Business Woman's Journal. An advertisement explained that the change was being made to provide for a "new scope and usefulness." The ad noted that the stenography section would be

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72 James, Notable American Women III, 271.
enlarged. Nevertheless, business and work interests in general seemed to move into the background.

The goals for the revised publication shifted the emphasis from cooperative womanhood to individualism. A statement by Seymour focused on the individual woman who wanted to rise to prominence, to reach her aspirations. She still intended to appeal to housewives, philanthropists and intellectuals, but did not specifically mention women who worked or who were seeking financial independence. The content was to include public events, music, art and literature, various types of organizations, dress reform and physical culture, politics, homemaking, and the stenography and type-writing sections of the old Journal. The new publication continued until 1896, three years after Seymour's death.

Although the Business Woman's Journal ended, the development of the identity of the "business woman" was just beginning. Seymour's publication is particularly important as it gave voice to ideas and concerns that would be repeated by several other publications and organizations for business women that followed. Seymour's concerns about political and social education and involvement, proper dress, womanhood and femininity, training and education, recognition for women's accomplishments, and women striving for success and achievement all were frequent themes over the next four decades as others created publications aimed at business women and as business women organized groups to meet their needs.

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73 BWJ IV (June 1892), 259.
The first business women's associations

In fact, in 1892, the same year the Business Woman's Journal ceased publication under that name, a group of women in Chicago formed what would become the first nationwide business women's association. They called it the National Association of Women Stenographers, even though it existed only in Chicago when it began. The group sought to improve conditions for stenographers, without resorting to trade unions. No information is available about why they opposed trade unions, but it is likely that they were trying to portray themselves as middle class, as different from the factory workers who belonged to unions. They hoped for a cooperative effort with employers. But opposition came from an unexpected source: women stenographers themselves. Some women apparently were reluctant to join the group because of the often negative view newspapers and others in society had of stenographers.

Complete records of this group of business women, functioning at about the same time as Mary Seymour's publication, are not available. Yet it appears that they were more focused on direct career and occupational issues, and less on reforming society as a whole. Individuals among the group may have been involved in other concerns, but the group sought goals directly related to jobs of a particular segment of women workers. One of their major goals was an effort to improve public perceptions and treatment of women stenographers. The effort paid off, according to a later observer who credited the "able leadership of some of the most representative women stenographers of Chicago" for gaining for the group a "dignified recognition from the press and public alike."
Membership figures are not available, but more and more women reportedly joined and by 1900, the Chicago group had 600 members.\(^7^4\)

It took six years for the women stenographers' group to expand from Chicago. In June 1898, they met in conjunction with the General Federation of Women's Clubs convention in Denver. Federation clubs were composed primarily of women as volunteers, rather than paid employees, on social and other issues. Nevertheless, the stenographers joined the convention and inspired the formation of a branch group in Denver.

At the National Association of Women Stenographers convention in 1899, members discussed changing the name of the organization to eliminate "stenographers." A number of women objected, apparently reflecting the group's success in improving the image of stenographers. Some of the women who had been reluctant to join an organization of women stenographers later spoke in favor of keeping "stenographer" as part of the group's name. But others prevailed and the organization became known as the National Association of Business Women.

Within two years, the group had chapters in Chicago, Denver, New York, Detroit, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Washington, D.C., and Columbus, Ohio. The biennial convention was held in Buffalo, New York, in conjunction with the Pan American Exposition in August 1901. A number of Buffalo women attended the meetings and soon formed a chapter of their own. The New York City chapter, which began in April 1901, shortly

\(^{74}\) Matae B. Cleveland, quoted in "Banquet Closes the First Annual Convention of the National Association of Business Women," \textit{Buffalo Daily Courier}, August 17, 1901, 5.
before the convention, initially was called the New York Council of the National Association of Business Women. It later became known as the New York Business Woman's Club. About 100 women attended the organizational meeting and heard plans for a headquarters with reading rooms, dressing rooms, and luncheon rooms. A newspaper account of the meeting stated: "Cleanliness, daintiness, and comfort are to be features of the new club." Some issues with which Mary Seymour and her publication had grappled faced other "business" women as well. They apparently needed to remain feminine and womanly, while pursuing the seemingly masculine callings related to ambition, career and economic independence. Hence the concern with cleanliness, daintiness and comfort in their new headquarters. With those features stressed, no one would confuse these business women with men.

Two months later, the new clubrooms opened with 200 people attending the celebratory event which lasted until about midnight. At the event, telegrams were read from New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt, Senator Chauncey M. Depew, and President William McKinley, who stated his regret at being unable to attend. The women had an exalted view of the future and importance of their organization as they invited state and national politicians to celebrate their clubrooms' opening.

Membership apparently was composed in large part of stenographers and typewriters (typists). The opening night speaker was Thomas G. Sherman, who called himself the "father of the female type-writer." He related how he taught the daughter of a friend

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how to type, then gave her a job in his office, even though no other office would hire a
woman in that capacity. He operated a typing and stenography school.

While Sherman and other speakers praised the club and women workers in
general, the opening messages were not all so positive. A newspaper account noted:

The Rev. Dr. Balcolm Shaw told the business women he hoped that they would
cultivate repose in their new club, that it was one of the thing the American
woman lacks, and a quality which she needs and which men need in her. 76

No further details were reported, but the comment suggests that the importance of women
being quiet, and probably submissive, was not to disappear even when they entered the
work force. Shaw wanted women to remain feminine and define womanhood in ways that
were more akin to homemaking than to the male world of business. In addition, the final
comment suggested that women structure their actions to please men. The Rev. Shaw did
not seem to recognize the significance of women organizing as women employees,
announcing their economic and, to some degree, social independence.

By 1902, the group was known as the Business Woman’s Club and had a
membership of 250, including physicians, lawyers, newspaper women, clerks, private
secretaries, stenographers and others. 77 A newspaper reported that the club “has gone
through many trials and tribulations, as infant undertakings must ...,” but offered no
specifics. The clubhouse had a library, dining rooms, parlor, and other rooms. While
much of the newspaper report focused on social advantages of the clubhouse, including


facilities to change into evening wear for theater attendance, and places to lie down when ill, it did mention other purposes.

The Business Woman's Club wanted its members to live by high ethical and moral standards. To join, women needed recommendations from current club members or "satisfactory testimonials in writing as to character and ability."\(^7\)\(^8\) The conflation of proper womanhood and respectability with the business woman, which frequently was emphasized by the *Business Woman's Journal*, was central to the organization of business women. The business woman should demonstrate characteristics revered in all women, and should be especially ethical.

Miss L.W. Law, president of the New York City club in 1901, elaborated on the connection of business women and ethics in a speech to the biennial convention in Buffalo. Law's talk was entitled "Elements Which Combine to Make the Successful Business Woman." She began by explaining what she meant by success: the business woman's "acknowledged labor value," their many on-the-job responsibilities, and "the large monetary results which have come as a natural following." Contributing to the success of business women were health, including a temperate life, exercise and recreation; good humor, tact, hard work, patience and perseverance; and, finally, integrity. Law defined integrity as "honesty of purpose, honesty of thought, honesty of life, honesty of action, so honest and upright that the word is equal to the bond."\(^7\)\(^9\) The

\(^7\)\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^7\)\(^9\) Miss L.W. Law, quoted in "Banquet Closes the First Annual Convention," *Buffalo Daily Courier*, August 17, 1901, 5.
themes Law suggested would be stressed by future business women's groups as well. Positive character traits and unquestionable ethical behavior were especially crucial to rebut attacks on the desirability of women working in offices and women holding jobs that some people felt should be reserved for men.

The National Council of Business Women had purposes beyond sociability and promoting the status and respectability of the business woman. Some of the chapters, including Chicago and New York, offered employment bureaus known as "exchanges." Other women's clubs also contributed to the support of the Chicago exchange, run by club president Matae Cleveland. Club members could use the exchange services at no charge and other women could pay a small fee. The Chicago Business Women's Exchange was organized to help "self-supporting women" find the most suitable employment.

The organization and activities of the business women's clubs provide insight into what kinds of lives business women might have lived at the turn of the century, as well as into issues they faced as working women. First, it is important that the clubs had physical spaces. The clubrooms in Chicago and New York, and likely in other cities as well, were not primarily meeting rooms, but more akin to safe spaces for working women. Many club members probably were single and may have lived either in rented rooms or boarding houses. They needed a space where they could gather with other women, read, relax, and socialize. The clubs often provided lunches at reasonable rates and sometimes

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offered dinners as well. Mary Seymour's Business Woman's Journal often commented on the paucity of services for women in most cities. Being able to purchase a healthy lunch at a reasonable rate, and in a location where a respectable woman could go (especially without a man) was important to women who worked in downtown offices. At other times, women also needed a place to go. As noted previously, women could take their evening attire to the club, leave it there while they were at work, then change into it before going to the theater or other entertainments after work. The convenience eliminated the necessity of a streetcar ride home and back into downtown, or the embarrassment or inconvenience of changing clothes at work or wearing inappropriate clothing either to work or to evening outings.

Women also could entertain male friends at the club, an important benefit for the woman who wanted to announce and maintain her respectability. The business woman who joined a club may have had as one goal an image different from the mass of working women whose attendance at dance halls, amusement parks and other public entertainments were the source of concern for middle-class reformers.\(^{81}\) To maintain a sense of respectability, then, she would entertain male friends at the club, rather than participate in public amusements.

An adviser to the New York Business Woman's Club, Grace Dodge, had been a contributor to the Business Woman's Journal and was the founder of Working Girls' Clubs which attempted to "uplift" young working women. Her views about the necessity

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 161-168.
of propriety between men and women, of the danger of public entertainments and of the
value of women being able to support themselves no doubt influenced the Business
Woman's Club as well as the Working Girls' Clubs.

Some of the opposition to women working in offices or other pursuits came from
concerns about women's frailty, both physical and emotional. Privileged women,
especially, were allegedly prone to nervous ailments. While business women and their
supporters did not see women as weak or inclined to illness, they did provide rooms
where members could lie down and rest or recover briefly from ailments. A medicine
closet also was available. These benefits of the club may reflect more than a belief in
women's frailty; they may also be a response to the separation of women's work places
from their homes, and perhaps to the lack of family or nurturing available at the place of
residence. As the clubrooms suggest, women who sought occupations or careers in the
business world needed a variety of types of support to make their entry into the male
realm both possible and successful.

In Buffalo, New York, a group of women organized a chapter of the National
Council of Business Women sometime in the late fall of 1901, after the national group's
convention at the Pan American Exposition there. The Buffalo Business and Professional
Women's Club was organized "upon thorough business principles" and was expected to
be of great benefit to business and professional women. A newspaper account gave no
further details.82

82 Club column, Buffalo Daily Courier, January 7, 1902, 5.
The Buffalo group either survived until the next decade or was reincarnated with some of the same members at some point. Meeting at least from 1913 to 1915 as the Professional and Business Women's Club, the organization each fall published a small booklet listing its year's program and names of members. They met twice a month, alternating business and social meetings. Talks focused on municipal issues, the Consumers' League, social work as an occupation, prevention of insanity, suffrage, the European war, teaching as a vocation, the peace movement, mercantile occupations, manufacturing opportunities for women, welfare work in stores, and general issues facing business and professional women. Club members presented most of the programs. Some members of the Professional and Business Women's Club went on to become founding members in 1919 of similar groups in Buffalo, including the Quota Club and Zonta, both of which were founded in Buffalo.83

The Colored Business Women's Club

Even before the National Association of Business Women held what was probably the first national convention of self-described business women at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901, another group -- African-American women -- decided to organize as business women. The Colored Business Women's Club was born in Chicago on April 21, 1900, an outgrowth of the National Negro Business League that was formed in Boston that year. The Chicago women claimed their club was the first and

only group of its kind. Albreta Moore-Smith, a club founder and journalist, wrote that for two years prior to starting the group, she had watched and studied the condition of many black women who worked in Chicago. She did not detail the obstacles the women faced, but decided something could be done to overcome those barriers and that bringing women together to solve their own problems was the best approach.

The club for black women, and the writing about it, picked up familiar themes. The club's focus on bringing business women together to gain respect and improve conditions for them was similar to that of the apparently all-white National Association of Business Women, which also was founded in Chicago. Like Mary Seymour's *Business Women's Journal*, Moore-Smith and the Colored Business Women's Club lauded women's abilities in business, espoused the nobility of work, promoted the advantages of business training, and urged women of leisure to either work or get involved with women who did. Also like the *Journal*, Albreta Moore-Smith's columns in the *Colored American Magazine* profiled successful business women as a way to gain recognition for their achievements and to inspire others to attain similar successes. Yet the Colored Business Women's Clubs and Moore-Smith had an added, equally important focus: reducing racism and discrimination. Some of the clubs' other goals were to stimulate business pride in black women, whether engaged in business or leisure; to promote appropriate commercial enterprises, to secure employment for competent black women "in every
branch of the professional and commercial world," and to bring together black business women.  

Moore-Smith, who wrote for the *Colored American Magazine* from its founding in 1901 through about 1903, used the magazine as a forum for philosophizing about racial and gender issues, especially regarding business, and for promoting the club and business women in general. For instance, she wrote that business itself was one solution to racial problems. Recognition of the "excellent business qualities" of the Negro would go far in resolving the "opprobrious Negro problem." She believed there was no color in dollars and cents and once blacks became bankers, property-holders and merchants in large numbers, racial issues would disappear.

Yet, for women to get into business and help resolve some of the race problem, Moore-Smith wrote, men needed to let go of their prejudices about women. She questioned why American business men, who had "all the essential qualities which go to make a successful business career" withheld their knowledge from ambitious wives and daughters. She thought it unfair of men to say women were not their equals when men kept from woman "the very means by which he reached his giddy station in life." The progress of men and women were linked, Moore-Smith wrote. As each sex climbed, it helped lift the other. Blacks at the turn of the century, especially those who followed Booker T. Washington, were particularly interested in the idea that good work and good

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85 Ibid., 285-286.
behavior would help white Americans see the value of African-Americans and improve conditions. Moore-Smith added gender to that philosophy. Business women were equal to men and wanted equal access to education and training that would allow them to succeed, but they were not asking for political equality. Moore-Smith asserted women's ambition and ability, but wanted to insure society, and men in particular, that women would not push that ambition too far.

Moore-Smith also reassured men (and society) that marriage and motherhood would not suffer by women going into business. "No matter what a woman's work or aim might be she can never shake off entirely the responsibilities of the home, for they are joined by inalienable ties," Moore-Smith wrote. Furthermore, she added that while she encouraged women to go into business, she did not want a "general exodus." Most women were not suited to business, she said. The Colored Business Women's Clubs welcomed some homemakers, or "leisure" women into their ranks because working women often lacked the time to do some of the organizing and operating work the clubs'
required. The "leisure" members could carry out those tasks while working women worked and, often, raised families.

The Colored Business Women's Clubs offered both social and professional programs. Mrs. Dora A. Miller, a modiste who founded the Colored Business Women's Club of New York, believed that the club could stimulate members to a "nobler and truer mode of living." The club, which had thirty members in its second month, met weekly. One out of four meetings was social. The club's purpose was "practical" rather than "theoretical."89

Among the practical aspects of the Chicago club was one "dream" that was unfulfilled and several projects. The dream was to start a home for working women, but the club was hampered by a lack of funds. Such a home, the Eleanor Club, existed for white working women. Providing adequate, often supervised housing for working women was a goal of many middle-class reformers as well as business women themselves.90 One major project was the Chicago club's Employment Department that helped women find jobs. Moore-Smith rarely specified whether the jobs were in white- or black-owned businesses, although the clerical jobs likely were in black businesses as such work for African-Americans in white businesses was rare. Domestic work was most likely for white families. In 1901, Moore-Smith wrote that "six lucrative clerical positions and a

89 Albreta Moore-Smith, "Chicago Notes," Colored American Magazine II (February 1901), 289-290.

dozen or more domestic places have been filled.\textsuperscript{91} Moore-Smith wrote that there was a great demand for domestic workers and that, if women were well trained in "domestic science," they could earn more than did clerks. Since there was a growing demand for women in professions and trades, she said qualified black women could fill those jobs and help overcome racial prejudice.

Domestic work, one of the major occupational fields open to African-American women, was not generally regarded in Moore-Smith's glowing terms. Most African-American women did not think of the work as "business," seeing it instead as demeaning and confining.\textsuperscript{92} Moore-Smith redefined the field in modern terminology, calling it domestic science. In doing so, she adopted the language of white women, who created home economics in which they studied subjects such as nutrition, health, sanitary requirements and other semi-domestic courses. Despite that, white women also did not speak of domestic service -- working in other women's homes -- in positive terms.\textsuperscript{93} Yet, Moore-Smith knew that black women were channeled into domestic service jobs because employers would not hire them for other types of work. Again, she reflected Booker T.

\textsuperscript{91} Albreta Moore-Smith, "Chicago Notes," \textit{Colored American Magazine} II (April 1901), 465.


\textsuperscript{93} See, for example, Barbara Miller Solomon, \textit{In the Company of Educated Women} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 85-87.
Washington's philosophy in proclaiming the nobility of all work and the possibilities for advancement of individuals and the race in doing a good job at whatever was available.

Moore-Smith sometimes cited Booker T. Washington and generally supported his ideas, but she and the Colored Business Women's Clubs had their own goals. They wanted women to gain access to jobs in stores, offices, and other arenas. Moore-Smith wrote, "As a race, the doors of the commercial and industrial world are closed almost entirely against us, regardless of ability." She wanted the Colored Business Women's clubs to help force down some of those doors.94

Members of the New York and Chicago club were the elite among African-American working women. In the Chicago club, all of the officers had attended commercial school or college. Moore-Smith wrote that "this degree of efficiency was desired" to aid in the operations of the Employment Department. The club's twenty-five members were stenographers, bookkeepers, clerks, trained nurses, doctors, milliners, seamstresses, and "leisure" women. In New York, members were dressmakers, nurses, journalists, hairdressers, and a "female manufacturer of regalias." Few African-American women in 1900 worked in offices, stores, or held professional jobs, mostly because white-owned businesses refused to hire African-Americans for anything but menial labor.95 African-Americans who had their own businesses often were in fields such as hairdressing or barbering and undertaking in which white proprietors were reluctant to

94 Albreta Moore-Smith, Colored American Magazine II (April 1901), 466.
serve blacks or in which whites were not concerned about competition. These black businesses served predominantly African-Americans and sometimes employed black clerical or professional workers.\textsuperscript{96}

Business women or women of achievement profiled in the \textit{Colored American Magazine} followed, but were not limited to, those trends. Miss Anna K. Russell of St. Louis, a "rising young woman with distinctively business inclinations," was bookkeeper and cashier for a black-owned undertaker.\textsuperscript{97} Also involved in the undertaking business was Miss Lola Ford, the "only colored lady embalmer and undertaker's assistant west of the Mississippi." She worked in Denver.\textsuperscript{98} Insurance businesses also became common venues for black entrepreneurs. Miss Bertha Bulkley of New York City took over her father's insurance business when he died and operated it successfully on her own.\textsuperscript{99} Also involved in a likely black business was Miss Sallie Brown of Indianapolis, who owned and operated one of the "largest and most elaborately equipped hair manufacturing and hair dressing establishments in Indiana."\textsuperscript{100} Likewise, Mrs. Mary E. Williams of Chillicothe, Ohio, a former slave, set up a hairdressing business that she operated for twenty-five years. Her patrons were the "wealthiest people of the city as well as a large


\textsuperscript{97} "Here and There," \textit{Colored American Magazine} II (March 1901), 367-368.

\textsuperscript{98} "Here and There," \textit{Colored American Magazine} V (June 1902), 136.

\textsuperscript{99} "Here and There," \textit{Colored American Magazine} IX (December 1905), 723.

\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Colored American Magazine} VII (August 1904), 560.
class of good substantial citizens." She trained many girls, turning down white applicants because they had other opportunities.\footnote{101} Mrs. George W. Alexander was one of Chicago's oldest and best established milliners. She had worked in a white shop before opening her own store.\footnote{102} It is not clear whether her customers were black or white.

Some black business women worked in white businesses, or served white customers. For example, Miss Emma J. Johnson was the youngest person in West Chester, Pennsylvania, to work as a caterer.\footnote{103} Miss Clara R. Threet of Seattle, Washington, was the "first and only" African-American woman in the city to work as a stenographer for a "great white firm." She began as a stenographer and, seven years later, was the firm's confidential clerk.\footnote{104} Mrs. Birdie High of St. Paul, Minnesota, a graduate of a business college, was a stenographer and bookkeeper for "one of St. Paul's largest wholesale and retail business houses," presumably white-owned.\footnote{105} Miss Nora Perkins of Chicago was a saleswoman for C.W. White sewing machines. The company's owner called her "one of the best business women I ever saw."\footnote{106}

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\footnote{102} Albreta Moore-Smith, "Chicago Notes," \textit{Colored American Magazine} III (June 1901), 150.

\footnote{103} "Here and There," \textit{Colored American Magazine} VI (March 1903), 372.

\footnote{104} "Miss Clara R. Threet, of Seattle, Wash.," \textit{Colored American Magazine} XV (March 1909), 181.

\footnote{105} \textit{Colored American Magazine} V (August 1902), 299.

\footnote{106} "Here and There," \textit{Colored American Magazine} VI (August 1903), 601.
was editor of the colored department of a white newspaper, the Jeffersonville (Indiana) Star. Mrs. Hattie M. Hicks of Harrisville, Missouri, was rejected for jobs in stores and offices, but finally secured a position in a white hairdressing salon. She worked behind a screen so her dark skin would be hidden from other customers. Some customers did complain, but Hicks eventually won over her employer and many customers and the screen was removed. Eventually, she moved to Chicago and opened her own business.

Race was never far below the surface in any of the magazine's brief profiles of business women, but it appeared more prominently in a discussion that was not centered on jobs or occupations. In 1900, the Women's Era Club of Boston, a black women's club, sought membership in the General Federation of Women's Clubs. A controversy ensued and many comments were made over the next two years about black women and black clubs, about their trying to seek "status" by joining with whites and about white clubs not wanting to associate with blacks. Some whites defending the black women, but many did not. Moore-Smith blamed the problem on a "few aspiring Negro women, not content with our own associations, federations and clubs." The conflict over the issue lasted for two years. The General Federation of Women's Clubs voted on May 5, 1902 to deny membership. While she blamed the one black club for trying to join, she also castigated white women for their prejudice. Illinois had twenty-one black women's clubs at the time and Moore-Smith pointed out that none had sought membership in the white group,

107 Colored American Magazine VII (August 1904), 560.

although the black women's clubs were structured largely like the white clubs. Moore-Smith expressed anger at the white reaction. She said whites should not blame all blacks for the actions of a few, but neither should any blacks "remain silent under this ignominious lash of prejudice."\(^{109}\)

Of the vote by the General Federation, Moore-Smith said:

> We had hoped that as a race, we should receive the fair treatment, the sympathy, the loyalty that their (white women broadened by educational opportunities) reputation guaranteed, but the Biennial at Los Angeles has given us a rude awakening.\(^{110}\)

The issue was not a business women's club being denied membership, but the vote by the white women to chose race over gender solidarity was an indication that black women's uphill battle to gain access to better jobs and to fulfill their career aspirations would not be eased.

Yet black women persisted in their determination to enter business fields and in their desire for advancement. Both were expressed by The Colored Business Women's clubs and the *Colored American Magazine*, which did much to define success and ambition for black women in the early twentieth century. Ambition and success had been the language of the business man, of the Horatio Alger myth of working hard to gain a


\(^{110}\) "Famous Women of the Negro Race," *Colored American Magazine* V (July 1902), 210-11. The magazine provided considerable detail about the refusal of the General Federation of Women's Clubs to admit blacks.
better life and more rewards. It was now the language of the African-American business woman as well.

Responding in print to a student's questions about working women, Albreta Moore-Smith suggested the student probably would find that the most cultured, sympathetic, thoughtful, earnest, intelligent women he knew had been working women. She said all of those traits came from perseverance and ambition. She added:

Ambition! What is ambition? Only a meteor gleam whose rays, elusive but fascinating, beckons us on. It is the light, the life of all who have ever reached that earthly goal -- "Fame."  

Many of the brief profiles of business women in the pages of the magazine stressed the women's ambition to gain access to employment, to get better jobs, to earn more, or to build a business.

In a talk before a Chicago club, Albreta Moore-Smith described success as deciding what work to pursue and doing one thing well by concentrating on it. She said success meant doing "honestly and completely whatever your hands find to do." She further described it as the result of stick-to-it-iveness, punctuality, thoughtfulness, level-headedness and the ability to work.  

Among the examples of ambitious and successful women was Miss Mattie Johnson, "the only colored saleswoman employed in this capacity by a large department

111 Albreta Moore-Smith, "Why?" Colored American Magazine III (October 1901), 470.

store in the United States." Johnson moved to Chicago and sought a position in a
department store where blacks previously had been employed only in menial jobs. The
manager was impressed with her manner and granted her an interview. She was so
persistent in seeking a sales job that he hired her, for a six-week trial. At the end of the
time, he let her go. She persisted again until receiving the job. The Colored American
Magazine contained many such examples of women who persisted and pushed for
entrance into formerly white-only jobs, or for success in other pursuits.

This emphasis on ambition and success was repeated in the publications and
groups that followed the Colored Business Women's Clubs and Albreta Moore-Smith's
writing. No evidence is available about how long the clubs lasted or other possible
activities they undertook. Even without such evidence, it is clear that African-American
women, largely excluded from white women's organizations, and from many jobs open to
white women, helped define the early twentieth century business women. Their focus on
persistence, achievement, and the work ethics and habits as major components of success
would be echoed by other organizations and publications.

The Business Woman's Magazine

One such publication was the Business Woman's Magazine, which appeared in
October 1914 and ceased operations about a year later. An editorial in the first issue
stressed the importance of ambition. A drawing showed a woman in a long skirt, carrying
an overnight bag, standing by a signpost at the junction of two roads. One way was
marked "success," the other, "failure." The editorial noted that "failure" was a "smooth,
open expanse which looks like easy going." That road contained inviting-looking flowers. The road to the left, however, was rough and forbidding. It wound "past many a Slough of Despondency," but always stayed headed toward "that far off point of radiance which glimpses satisfied ambition and the joy of achievement." The editorial acknowledged the difficulties of the road to success and the lack of reassurances for the woman who chose that path. It asked, "How many girls pausing at the fateful parting of the ways are tempted to sacrifice Ambition to Expedience?"

In urging women to seek better jobs and better conditions, promoting ambition and success, giving tips on how women could best negotiate the business world, and featuring women who had done well, the *Business Woman's Magazine* resembled Mary Seymour's *Business Women's Journal* and Albreta Moore-Smith's writing in the *Colored American Magazine*. The magazine was published by the Mail Order News Corporation of Newburgh, New York, and edited by Helen Ruttenber. It sometimes promoted the mail order business as a lucrative one for women, but also featured many other occupations. The publishers did not explain their purposes in the first issue, but a small filler item in the second provided a clue. The headline noted that the magazine would have no fashion pages, cooking recipes, beauty lessons, nor serial stories. "This publication is dedicated to the interests and welfare of the working woman," the item noted. Too many other

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publications dealt with women's domestic concerns and there was no need to repeat those. In the second year, however, the magazine did print serialized stories.

For the most part, the *Business Woman's Magazine* stayed away from political discussions that related to women's status. In the third issue, an item presumably by Ruttenber noted that the magazine was non-partisan toward suffrage and "all other matters of public concern." But the article went on to say that the magazine was interested in issues that affected business women and that business women in suffrage states had said it was easier to do business there than in states "where her word carries less weight." It also printed articles about feminism on a few occasions, including one critical of an anti-suffrage, anti-feminist spokeswoman. Generally, though, the publication focused on items about successful women and ideas for women who wanted to start businesses or pursue various careers. Its lack of emphasis on social and political causes reflected a changing dimension in women's experiences in American society. The exhilaration of being part of the public arena, of reforming social ills and of gaining expressly political rights, became more separated from women's explicit occupational concerns. Political influence and political causes would continue to be important, but were less tied to the focus on careers than they were by Mary Seymour. The difference was, in part, that Seymour viewed active women of leisure, and women in any type of work as business women. By the immediate pre-World War I years, "business" was

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becoming more selectively defined as women in commerce, trade, and non-manual
industrial jobs. No longer were all "active" women "business women."

The Business Woman's Magazine, and presumably editor Helen Ruttenber, were
especially enthusiastic about the future of business women, seeing her moving in many
new directions. In its 1915 New Year's message, the magazine noted that all signs pointed
to "the speedy realization of what promises to be the golden age of womanhood." The
message suggested that society was returning to an era when women controlled property
and held power in families. That change was attributed to the efforts of the business
woman "who has made good in man's world without saying much about it and without
relying upon her sex to smooth the pathway for her." 116 Women would now, with the new
era of womanhood, move more and more into jobs that previously had been denied to
them. Again, ambition was the keyword. The article looked at what women wanted.

They are ambitious to earn larger salaries or to embark in enterprises which net
them something more than a comfortable competency . . . They want to count, to
exercise a very real power, to be recognized by their men competitors as actual,
not merely nominal, equals.117

Those changes were on the horizon in 1915, the magazine believed.

However, many of the careers and jobs women held or the magazine suggested
they consider were not the large, powerful, well-paying jobs the New Year's message
foresaw. The first issue listed a number of money-making plans for the "Ambitious Girl

116 "What the 'New Year' Means to the Business Woman," Business Woman's
Magazine II (January 1915), 5.

117 Ibid., 6.
Starting in Business on Small Capital." Most of the suggestions were traditional women's activities adapted to produce income. Most probably would have produced relatively little income. They included china painting, making artificial flowers, embroidery, piano tuning, helping renters find homes, home letter writing, and home millinery. The magazine sent a supplement to all subscribers with further business plans for women with small capital. A later column suggested shopping for others, buying and reselling old sewing machines, starting a sheet music club, and helping immigrants gain citizenship. Other women started businesses in which they made and sold marmalade, opened an arts and crafts shop, set up a chauffeuring business to take children for rides, and made potato chips.

A regular column featured news about stenography. Business had a "crying need" for expert, trained, intelligent stenographers, according to one item. Another noted that the work of private secretaries was taken so seriously that women trained for years rather than months for such jobs. Stenography was even described as a profession, promoted to that status by the National Association of Stenotypists with chapters in many larger cities. Sales clerk jobs often involved low pay and tedious work, but an item suggested

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121 Ibid., 51-54; *Business Woman's Magazine*, I (November 1914), 31-31.

122 *Business Woman's Magazine* I (November 1914), 33-34.
women could use their personalities and energy as "negotiable assets." Some less traditional jobs for women were possibilities, such as doctors, lawyers, and homesteaders, butchers, barbers, fire inspectors, and a steamboat operator. For the most part, though, the *Business Woman's Magazine* offered advice to women who were or would be office workers, teachers, or small-scale entrepreneurs.

Some of the women the magazine profiled did hold more lucrative jobs. For instance, one article focused on Katharine Bement Davis, women's correction commissioner for New York; another on lawyer Florence King who later was among the founders of the Woman's Association of Commerce in Chicago; and others on an architect, a butterfly and moth mounter at the National Museum in Washington, D.C., a chief of police, a dean of a college, and a band mistress. Two separate articles used as an example of women's business success Emma McChesney, a fictional character created by Edna Ferber.

Whatever types of jobs women held, ambition and success were important. A contest invited readers to submit stories of success and many were printed. The first was from a woman who had studied stenography from a book, gotten a job in a small firm, and was now in charge of employment for a typewriter company in New York. Her

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123 Ibid., 70-73.


advice, printed in the headline, was "Work every rung of the ladder." Other submissions featured a bookkeeper who opened a business that changed from making baskets to raising chickens and selling eggs, a woman who worked for a newspaper who entitled her story, "How I learned to play the game;" a woman who helped her husband get a college education by baking, renting rooms and writing verses for post cards; and a woman who opened her own stenography business. All were women who started with little or nothing, used intelligence and perseverance, and thrived.

The contest stories might be described as the success of "self-made" women, a term the magazine used in an early issue. Self-made men made a lot of money from "energy and brains." The magazine suggested the idea of wealth needed to be separated from "self-made." The true self-made man or woman, despite adversity, "has kept sweet and pure of soul and kind and gentle of life." Money was less important than how one lived, than one's ideals and values. The theme that success did not equate with money was echoed throughout business women's organizations and publications.

These pre-World War I expressions of the identity of the "business woman" were similar in many ways. All saw a place for women who were ambitious and success-oriented. All sought to improve conditions for women workers, to open new opportunities, and to gain recognition for women's abilities in the business world. All struggled, also, with issues of womanhood, femininity, and women's domestic responsibilities.

The identity as "business woman" was radical in that it challenged the common perception that "business" was an adjective for "man." Women struggled throughout the waning decades of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries to formulate that identity. Historian Robert Wiebe suggested that as American businesses grew and became more complex in the late nineteenth century, employees needed more specialized training. Business was becoming a profession. Wiebe believed that the new middle class, looking for its niche in society, turned to professional identification to replace a lost sense of place within a community. The new identities would be based on occupations and their accompanying skills and standards. Women probably came to business for different reasons. Mary Seymour's *Business Woman's Journal* portrayed a business woman who was similar to the emerging public woman of the late nineteenth century. Her particular line of work was less significant than her involvement in the public arena, as a reformer or as a worker. Women did not have public status to hold onto and hence were less interested in qualifying standards and certification mechanisms. They were much more interested in gaining a place in business, in being accepted on comparable terms as men, and in assuring comparable opportunities for advancement. The clubs that formed at about the same time and the later publication began to move away somewhat from a focus on gaining access to public space. Their definitions of the business woman became somewhat more specific. Like the groups that would follow, they insisted on ethical behavior and suggested cooperation among women and other

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behaviors that would assure the survival of womanhood, while allowing "masculine" ambition. They offered numerous suggestions for business women concerning their relationship to domesticity, marriage, competition, and respectability. Each of these organizations and publications sought both to develop the identity of the "business woman" and to improve the status and opportunities for most women. The organizations than flourished immediately before and especially after World War I would continue those purposes. By the end of the war, especially, women were convinced that they no longer needed to justify, nor acclaim, their entrance into public space.
CHAPTER III

"AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAD COME":
BUSINESS WOMEN ORGANIZE

Before World War I, business women's organizations and publications often spent time and space arguing for women's right to be part of the work force. The war, many women believed, would eliminate the need for such an argument. The U.S. government told women their labors were crucial to the war effort. Self-defined business women sought to capitalize on that feeling and translate it into further opportunities in the business world.

An examination of post-war business women's organizing and a close look at two of the new groups will demonstrate that the women who came together as business women, like suffrage groups before them, held complex and often contradictory views of women's place in society, of who merited inclusion in the groups, and of what approach would best gain their goals. They sought personal as well as organizational recognition and advancement. Many members of the new organizations had been involved in suffrage work. Some believed men and women were equal; others believed that women had special qualities to offer. Most believed in some combination of both ideas. Some called themselves feminists, others did not. When most of them talked about women and securing increased opportunities for women, they were thinking
about white, native-born women, although the groups did cross class lines. Mostly, they saw opportunities ahead. They knew women had proven themselves in the past but received little acknowledgement of their achievements; they believed the future would open new doors and bring the recognition women deserved.

Business and professional women came together as women, not so much because they were excluded from men’s groups, but because a significant part of their identification with business was as women. They believed women joining together could help themselves, as well as women in general, to achieve occupational goals and equality. While the organizations and their members were far from separatists, they saw their social and occupational support coming from other women. This chapter will explore how and why their optimism and identification as women, and as business women, brought them together, and how they believed that such organized action would gain recognition for their many previous achievements, open new occupational doors, and help assure women’s success in the business world.

**The Woman’s Association of Commerce**

The one organization that spanned the war years was at the forefront of the effort to insure that possible wartime occupational opportunities remained after the war. Founded in 1912 in Chicago, the Woman’s Association of Commerce sought to "vitalize the spirit of cooperation" among business women. They chose a name that would give "an impression of dignity and exalted purpose." Organizers believed their efforts would provide for business women "what men have found so helpful in
promoting their interests." In addition, they believed women needed to organize to gain recognition "as a serious factor in the commercial world." The group wanted to assure, too, that women got adequate training and experience so they could move from employee "to skilled business woman, manager or employer."¹

Like groups that preceded it and those that would follow, the Woman's Association of Commerce spoke the modern language of corporate efficiency, while reaching back to traditional expectations of women, linking the public and private spheres as well as the past and the future. The group noted that it believed in "a high standard of efficiency for all women," and believed that "since every industry formerly carried on in the home has been commercialized, home making should be conducted as a business."² Like Mary Seymour in her Business Woman's Journal in the 1890s, the Woman's Association of Commerce clearly linked homemaking and business, suggesting that the homemaker was or should be a business woman. But the Commerce group went further when it suggested that much of what once had been homemaking was now "business." The theme was reiterated during a welcoming address at the 1917 convention by Grace Wilbur Trout, president of the Equal Suffrage League of Illinois. She noted that women in 1917 were "just as domestic and just as home-loving as were their grandmothers," but since their (home) work had been taken away, they "have had


² NCBW, 5.
to follow their work out into the industrial world."³ She urged women to support votes for women to improve industrial conditions and gain equal pay for equal work.

From the time the organization began in 1912, it had hoped to hold a national convention by 1917, at which time it would formalize its organization. By 1917, the group had at least thirty-seven clubs in cities across the country, including Chicago, where it was founded, Los Angeles and San Francisco, California; Denver, Colorado; Indianapolis, Indiana; Des Moines and Iowa City, Iowa; St. Petersburg, Florida; Augusta, Georgia; New Orleans, Louisiana; Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan; Joplin and Springfield, Missouri; Jackson, Mississippi; Omaha, Nebraska; Brooklyn, New York; Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio; Franklin, Pennsylvania; Norfolk, Virginia; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Wheeling, West Virginia.⁴

When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, the Woman's Association of Commerce recognized that it was a difficult time to hold a national convention, but also an important one. It held a convention in Chicago where the group had been organized. Business women needed to consider "the changes coming in the industrial and business world which were of such vital interest to women."⁵ Florence King of Chicago, president of the Woman's Association of Commerce, suggested that those changes were opportunities the war presented. In the past, she said, such crises as war had helped men rise "from obscurity to places of grave international importance." It could do the

³ NCBW, 6.
⁴ NCBW, 6, 28.
⁵ NCBW, 6.
same for women. No longer would women stay at home to support the war. They now had jobs formerly held by men and opportunities to advance "as rapidly as their ability will permit them, without the old prejudices and discriminations on account of sex."  

Another speaker at the convention suggested that it was women's ambition to "become as important a factor in the business world as the big men who move it." In order to help women taking soldiers' places in business become that important factor, she urged those "who have already obtained distinction" to advertise their success, "not for the personal promotion, but for the inspiration which it will afford to those who are beginning."  

At the convention, the first of three such national gatherings held by the group, delegates adopted a constitution that formally created the Woman's Association of Commerce of the United States of America. Like the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs that would largely replace this new group two years later, the Woman's Association of Commerce urged the formation of groups of business and professional women in all parts of the country. The new constitution suggested that by organizing, the women could promote and protect the interests of women in the "industrial, professional and civic world," as well as study existing organizations, and provide information on new opportunities for business and professional women. Taking care of more immediate needs, Woman's Association of Commerce

6 NCBW, 6-7.

7 Ethel B. Scully, "Broaden Your Shoulders," NCBW, 18-19.

8 Ibid., 27.
Commerce delegates voted to pledge aid and support to the war effort, to urge the enfranchisement of women, and to find ways to help women find the most suitable work that would pay the most and help them preserve their health.9

Like the organizations that would follow them, the Woman's Association of Commerce clubs focused on educational, occupational and social needs of members. The Des Moines group, for instance, reported that it held twenty meetings during the year, plus six social affairs. It was affiliated with the Des Moines Federation of Women's Clubs, but was not particularly focused on civic work as were other women's groups. Its members were "business women holding responsible positions, many of whom are leaders in various lines of occupations."10 The national organization had committees on legislation, investments, research, foreign relations, business opportunities, and commercial interests, among others.

The organized business women saw their needs and goals as individual and as global. They knew they were vital to the war effort because the government frequently told them so as part of its effort to gain support for the war and to encourage "efficiency." The government even encouraged equal pay for equal work during the war.11 When the war ended and women, many of whom had been in business long

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9 Ibid., 27.
10 Ibid., 17.
before the war started, perceived an opening for better opportunities and the need to preserve past gains, organizations of business and professional women flourished.

The Woman's Association of Commerce held its third annual convention in July 1919, shortly after the end of the war in Europe. Rhetoric about the meaning of the war to business women intensified. Women who had experiences and observed new occupational possibilities feared they and other women would have to return to pre-war occupations and status, to lives defined by domestic rather than career space. That possibility was "of grave concern to those more progressive women who do not desire to return to pre-war conditions."12 The 1919 Call to Convention stated that the war and women's participation in it had "wonderfully bettered" their condition. Organizers were concerned especially that "the advancement they have made must not be lost through lethargy or indifference."13 Instead, women would organize and strengthen existing organizations of business women in an effort to ensure that America understood that "its greatest asset was in the ability of its women."14 Self-defined business women were going to waste no time in acting to ensure their future employment and influence.


13 Ibid.

14 Florence King, "First Annual Convention and Executive Committee Meeting, National Federation of Business and Professional Women, St. Louis, Missouri, July 1919," BPW/USA, 59.
The mood of business women, while concerned about post-war changes, was optimistic. The suffrage battle was nearly won, women had proven their versatility and worth doing war-related work, the country believed in progress, in forward motion. Women presumed they were on the verge of exciting new opportunities as well as of recognition of their past achievements. Self-identified business women were convinced that organizing would bring both recognition and opportunities.

Women of the 1920s expressed the new possibilities for women in many ways. Some novelists and historians have referred to young adults in the 1920s as the "lost generation," a reference to the effects of the war experience. But historian Dorothy M. Brown believes that "women were never quite as lost as their brothers." The women who joined business women's groups support her contention as the war to them meant opportunity and a bright future. Men, especially those who fought, saw the war and the future as troubling and often saw a darker future than did the organized business women.

The popular image of women in the 1920s is the flapper, who challenged existing standards of behavior with short hair, short skirts, cigarettes, and the

15 This sentiment is clear from BPW and Zonta records and also has been emphasized by other historians. See, for example, Penina Migdal Glazer and Miriam Slater, Unequal Colleagues: The Entrance of Women Into the Professions, 1890-1940 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 12-13; Barbara Miller Solomon, In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women in Higher Education (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 139-140; and Dorothy M. Brown, Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920s (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 29-47.

16 Brown, Setting a Course, xii.
Charleston. But for thousands of women, being a 1920s New Woman meant focusing first on careers and achievement. Brown also suggested that the decade's "most euphoric expectations" were those of educated women in the business world. The women who joined the new and continuing business women's groups were not necessarily college educated, but saw themselves as part of the future created by the business-government partnership that had helped win the war, and that was translated into a positive assessment of the role of business in American society. Many women wanted to be part of the revitalized world of business.

An enthusiasm for organizing was especially apparent just as the war ended. In July 1919, the Business Women's Committee, an offshoot of the Young Women's Christian Association that had voted to form a national federation of existing business women's clubs, met in St. Louis in conjunction with the annual convention of The Woman's Association of Commerce. The two organizations planned to merge, but the agreement fell apart at the last minute. The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was born at that meeting, but the Woman's Association of Commerce, which had existed for seven years and as a national group for two, faded from the scene within months.

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17 Maureen Honey, *Breaking the Ties That Bind: Popular Stories of the New Woman, 1915-1930* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 4-5 and 10-11, suggests that the stock "success" story of popular magazines in the 1920s focused on women striving for self-fulfillment through action. Careers, or at least jobs, were part of the mix of women acting to define their lives and relationships.

In February of 1919, women in Buffalo, New York, had formed an organization called The Quota Club, a group of business and professional women created for mutual benefit and community service. The founders were inspired by attending a meeting of the Buffalo Kiwanis Club, an organization of business men. The group's motto was "We share." They sought a short and memorable name and chose "Quota," Latin for "a share." Founders believed the name represented members sharing with one another and sharing with those who were less fortunate.19 After experiencing severe internal problems, most of the Buffalo Quota members left the organization, followed by chapters in eight other cities. In November 1919, they formed the Confederation of Zonta Clubs. The name "Zonta" came from a Sioux Indian word meaning "honest and trustworthy." The remaining Quota members regrouped and continued to operate. Within several years, the Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Quota, Zonta, and new organizations such as Soroptimist and the Pilot Club, both founded in October 1921, as well as an existing organization, Altrusa, would be competing for business women members in large and small cities throughout the country. Their purposes and membership requirements varied somewhat, but all the groups worked to promote the interests of self-identified business women and to aid young women and girls, especially future business women.

The post-war proliferation of business women's organizations is no surprise, given women's war-time experiences and resulting expectations. But men's business
clubs, such as Kiwanis, Lions, and Rotary, also proliferated after the war. Some of
the women's organizations were structured like the men's groups, but they formed for
somewhat different reasons.

Rotary, founded in 1905, operated on a classification system that limited
membership to one man from each type of business. The businesses were classified
according to the product they produced or service they provided. Founder Paul Harris
wanted the group to appeal to small businessmen and independent professionals who
could use the club for business and social contacts. Harris thought many such business
men probably were lonely. Kiwanis, founded in 1915, and Lions, in 1917, also were
classification groups, although they allowed two members per industrial or business
category. After 1911, Rotary no longer promoted trade among club members, but took
on service, instead, as the club's major function. In fact, each of the business men's
clubs became known as service clubs.

Their service projects included raising money to help put in street lights or
build roads that would promote the economic growth of the area, an approach that
brought considerable criticism. Historian Jeffrey Charles argues that the men's projects
stressed community economic development, often in conjunction with local Chambers

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20 & \text{Jeffrey A. Charles, Service Clubs in American Society: Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 44, 49. Charles noted that in the two years following the war, Rotary gained 17,000 new members and went from 415 to 758 clubs. Kiwanis grew from 74 to 156 clubs and Lions from 28 to 113, p. 45.} \\
21 & \text{Ibid., 9, 11.}
\end{align*}\]
of Commerce, in part to improve the image of business and in part as a logical extension of wartime voluntarism. Clubs such as Rotary were criticized by Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and often poked fun at by writers like H.L. Mencken, especially because of their boosterism and in part because of the back-slapping and singing that characterized meetings. Charles sees both the men's clubs and their critics as attempting to cope with modern society, with commercialism and the waning importance of individuals. Businessmen wanted to be seen as professionals whose motives were not solely based on materialism and profit.

Women's clubs were different because women's relationships to business and the community in general were different. Women had been largely excluded from big business. It was partly the image of big business as callous and profiteering, an image fostered before the war by muckraking journalists and trustbusters alike, that men's groups tried to reverse. Women also had been excluded from sources of community capital and influence that would allow them to focus on profit, or to be part of the power structure of a community. Therefore, while their clubs may have looked, structurally, like Kiwanis or Rotary, the women's groups were less concerned with reforming the image of business or with boosting the business community as a whole than with finding a place for women in that venue. Women's groups sometimes joined in general community service efforts, or helped raise funds for local social service

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22 Ibid., 72-73.

23 Ibid., 97-100.
organizations, but their national and local service projects were focused almost exclusively on helping girls and young women stay in school, get sufficient educations, and otherwise get needed support to be useful and successful in the business world. Men's groups tried to improve the business climate; women's groups tried to help other women get a foot in the door, or on the promotion ladder.

The primary purposes of the women's groups, recognition of women's abilities and achievements and ensuring the access of other women to such possibilities, precluded their joining with men's organizations. One way to help women achieve success was giving them leadership roles, administrative jobs, and committee responsibilities in the clubs. As early as 1911, Rotary discussed admitting women to its ranks. Some women may have sought membership in men's groups, but the evidence from founders of Zonta and BPW was that they were more interested in forming their own clubs. At meetings for which records exist, neither BPW nor Zonta ever discussed joining or being excluded from Kiwanis, Lions or Rotary. Women's opportunities for leadership roles, as well as their focus on helping other women, likely would have been seriously limited if they had been in clubs with men.

The business women's groups that formed after the war sometimes identified themselves as service organizations, but that was not the primary focus of their groups. Their service projects focused almost exclusively on girls and young women, or on

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24 Ibid., 29.
particular needs of business women themselves.25 The clubs might help with Red Cross or YWCA fund drives, but they rarely undertook activities focused on making a community more attractive to business. In addition, the women's groups stressed women's innate ethical and behavioral differences from men. Women would be good for business, clubs often suggested, because women had qualities that were desirable and that would improve the tone and behavior of most business operations.

Joining with men might have benefitted individual careers, but it would not have served women's purposes in focusing on women and their careers, nor in helping to train women as leaders. If the organized business women wanted to be part of the men's groups, or resented being excluded, they did not make such feelings known at their meetings or in their publications.26

The purposes of women's clubs related primarily to women and women's needs. Harriet Ackroyd, president of the Confederation of Zonta Clubs from 1922-24, explained to a 1954 audience why women's clubs were needed after the war. Her views echo those expressed by the Woman's Association of Commerce in calling its 1919 convention, but add purposes beyond recognition and opportunity. Ackroyd said that women after the war felt insecure about their future. "The rank and file were timid,

25 For a complete discussion of clubs' service projects, see Chapter V.

26 Nancy F. Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) has noted that some women's groups, such as those working for peace, joined with men's groups in the 1920s because the men had more money. Others found themselves diluted by a close association to government or various institutions that may have limited their focus on women, 95-96. This did not happen with the business women's groups.
uncertain, without the background of experience to give them confidence ... Is it any wonder, then, that the formation of women's service clubs seemed like 'an idea whose time had come?" She suggested that women recognized the benefits of working together, something they had not done before. "They knew little about co-operation. In fact they had to learn to work, to play, to sing together." 27 Ackroyd's comments ignore the rich history of women working together, especially in the immediate past in suffrage groups, temperance organizations, women's clubs, and religious organizations. Her comments also contradict the sense of optimism expressed by many of the organizers of various groups immediately after the war. She may have suggested that women were uncertain about the future after the war because they were concerned that they would lose their jobs, or be denied the opportunities many believed would open as a result of women's wartime work. Nevertheless, the sense of organizing as a form of power through which women could help themselves and other women and could preserve what they saw as occupational gains propelled women's organizations after the war, and helps explain why many women probably would not have joined men's groups, even if invited.

27 Harriet A. Ackroyd, "What is the secret of Zonta's spirit?" Zontian XXXV (October-November 1954), 3.
Federation of BPW Clubs

The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs emerged as the largest of the post-war groups, with more than 53,000 members by 1929. It was the most prominently active in national political debates, and had the most inclusive membership. It also was most closely tied to women's war efforts and views of the possibilities the war presented them. The organization, which had its genesis in the Young Women's Christian Association War Work Council, was conceived to serve at least four purposes, some stated and some tacit. First, it would be a means of locating and categorizing business and professional women who could help the government's war effort. It would encourage and facilitate the development of more adequate education and skills training for aspiring business women. It would promote the interests of existing business women. Finally, it would provide a national forum of expression and influence for some women.

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29 Its membership was most inclusive because it was the only one of the major organizations that did not base membership on classification. The classification system, explained more fully in Chapter IV, limited membership to one woman from each type of business or service. Thus, a club like Zonta, Quota or Altrusa might have six private secretaries as members, but those secretaries would have to work for different types of businesses.
The founder and single most influential person in the first several decades of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was Lena Madesin Phillips, a Kentucky lawyer. She expressed the possibilities and personal benefits of organizing business women in a letter to her father in the spring of 1918, when she went to New York to join the National YWCA War Work Council.

I feel it is a wonderful opportunity to do good, and feel that during these strenuous times everyone who can should be doing his part to make the world a better place in which to live ... I will have a wide field ... I will have the whole United States under me in this particular line of work, and will be in line to become one of the really big women of the country.30

Phillips' ambition and vision dominated the effort to organize business women and the resulting federation. Her story cannot be separated from that of the organization.

Lena Madesin Phillips was 36 when she went to New York and began her business women's work, but she had been interested in women's work her whole life. Born in 1881, she was the only child of her father's second marriage. William Henry Phillips, a judge in Jessamine County, Kentucky, was involved in electoral politics and a prominent citizen of the town of Nicholasville and Jessamine County. He and his daughter were close, living together while she was in Kentucky, and writing and visiting frequently after she went off to New York. She emulated him, getting a law degree...
degree, seeking influence, albeit on a larger scale, and even running for office later in life.31

Young Kentucky women of Phillips' background usually married and were infrequently involved in paid employment, especially wage labor. But Phillips broke the mold, first by enrolling in 1889 at the Woman's College of Baltimore, something she later said few Nicholasville girls did. She did not graduate, but switched to studying music at the nearby Peabody Conservatory, intending to be a concert pianist. Her plans changed when she injured her elbow.

Returning to Nicholasville, Phillips took a job in a local store. She wrote, "Nice girls did not work in public places" unless they were very poor, and even then, not in grocery stores.32 It was only the beginning of her occupational adventures. She sold books door-to-door, taught piano at the Jessamine Institute, went to New York to be a song writer, returned to Nicholasville and taught piano again until a nervous collapse in 1915 forced her to leave that occupation. After six weeks in a sanitorium, Phillips enrolled at the University of Kentucky Law School. The second woman in the law school, she graduated with honors, in 1917, just as the U.S. entered the World War.

The YWCA enlisted Phillips to help raise money for its War Work Council, which was charged with mobilizing women for the war effort. The position would soon


32 Sergio, A Measure Filled, 23.
boost her onto the national scene as an organizer and as an advocate for women's occupational opportunity. When invited to join the staff of the National YWCA in New York a year later, Phillips expressed an interest in organizing business and professional women, and was given the top job and responsibility for doing so. The YWCA had been charged by the government with creating, maintaining and sustaining woman power for use in the war effort. Money was set aside for organizing "any specialized group which might have peculiar value to the government in the emergency." The business women's effort got $65,000 to carry out such a task.

The official history of the National Federation noted that individual business and professional women responded to war needs in a "prompt and efficient" manner, inspiring national leaders to recognize the "potential power of a thoroughly mobilized group." Women had little or no influence in the business world as a group, forcing them to take whatever jobs they could get, rather than jobs for which they were particularly suited. "In the business world of 1918, it was primarily 'every woman for herself,'" the history noted. The YWCA offshoot sought to change that.

After a short time on the job, Phillips, along with other YWCA officials, convened a conference of business women in New York to discuss how best to use


34 Ibid., 12-13.

women in the war effort. On May 11 and 12, 1918, one hundred women from communities east of Denver gathered to discuss the "needs of womankind and how they can best be met during this critical period of transformation." Mary Johns Hopper of New York City, who chaired the gathering, charged the group with thinking of business women as a country-wide movement. She suggested aiding the war effort by focusing on needs of women and children. "We are to get ourselves together in some form of service," Hopper told the group.

Florence King of Chicago, representing the Woman's Association of Commerce, made it clear that she did not equate war service with domestic-type activities. Her group's slogan was "Efficiency first" and, King said, "Knitting is not efficiency ... We have no time to knit. We are in the business world ..." King saw the war as women's "big opportunity." "We'll rule the world before we get through," she said.

At the end of the two days, the women formed the National Business Women's Committee and agreed to a program of war service that would be operated through the YWCA. The Business Women's Committee had one business woman from each of eleven YWCA Field Centers and fourteen other business women as board members.

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37 "Business Women's Conference, May 11-12, 1918," TMs, LMP, Carton II, Folder 22, 5.

38 Ibid., 13.
Some delegates were concerned about perceptions that the YWCA discriminated, especially against Catholics and Jews. But given the difficulty of starting new organizations during a national crisis the group agreed to at least temporary support from the Y.

Initially, the goal of the Business Woman's Committee was not formation of a new organization, even though it spawned the National Federation of BPW Clubs about a year later. Instead, the group wanted to develop a program that would draw the support of existing groups and thereby aid the war effort and consolidate business women's activities. The stated goals of the new group were protecting and promoting the interests of women in industrial and commercial life. To do so, the group planned to focus on promoting suitable dress for women in business, ensuring proper working conditions, securing equal pay for equal work, promoting business opportunities and advancement, securing standardization of morals, and encouraging and developing efficiency in all activities of the world's work.

The Business Women's Committee's program was never implemented, but its specific elements provide insight into how women saw their place in business and how they thought they might be useful during the war. One early member of BPW described the program as having four elements: efficiency, patriotic service, an educational program, and stress on appropriate dress. The plan was for individuals meeting the program's standards to receive honor badges and firms to receive window flags with
varying numbers of bars. The planned prizes resembled those given by the Red Cross and other agencies for war contributions.39

Efficiency meant technical competency, courtesy, reliability, promptness, accuracy and stability in the amount of time spent with one employer. The committee proposed giving a flag with a single bar to any firm in which 75 percent of the women employees were "efficient." The firm would get another bar on its flag if an equal percentage of women employees contributed to war-relief agencies and gave "reasonable sums" to Liberty Bonds. Firms would be awarded a third bar for providing educational programs two to four times a month on vocational guidance, business opportunities, efficiency, social morality, thrift, time management, and health and recreation. Finally, the fourth bar would be given if 75 percent of the company's women employees were dressed in a "sound and normal manner," which meant not wearing haute couture or evening fashions, or revealing clothing to work.

The prominence of the concern about appropriate dress, combined with loftier goals of efficiency (the byword of the management revolution) and patriotism, indicates how strongly notions of propriety and womanhood influenced women in whatever arena they operated. It was not enough to be skilled at one's job, to be dedicated to work, to show patriotism by monetary donations or volunteer activities. Women also had to be respectable and womanly. They had to demonstrate morality through actions and through attire. Womanliness or femininity was an important part of discussions of

women's activities, be they domestic duties, community service, patriotism, or occupations.

Much of the inspiration for the proposed war-time program came from Ida Clyde Clarke, a journalist with the *Pictorial Review*, who later edited the Federation's official publication. Clarke was so enthusiastic about women's wartime opportunities that she wrote a book, *American Women and the World War*, published before the war ended in 1918. Her purpose was to detail the activities in which women were involved and, as she noted in her introduction, to urge the government to change the role of the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense from advising the group to carrying out its own programs. She wanted to see a woman as head of the National Food Administration, "since women are the natural conservators of the human race." She wanted women to know that the war could mean opportunities for them, and she wanted to ensure that a record existed of the "actual beginnings of the greatest massed effort of women the world has ever known." Clarke believed in organizing as a method of promoting women's potential as well as their achievements. Her participation in the Business Women's Committee reflected those beliefs and added to the optimism that women's opportunities were expanding.

Lena Madesin Phillips, who had convened the meeting at which the Business Women's Committee was formed, was certain that it would be an influential and

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41 Ibid., vii.
important group. She was conscious, too, of her own power increasing as the groups she headed gained more influence. The success of the business women's conference had added to her standing at the YWCA. In her report on the session, Phillips wrote:

As to the power which might be generated from such an organization of the 9,000,000 business and professional women no one can estimate. It is safe to say, however, that it would be a force which would mould public opinion, set standards and change economic and industrial conditions in such a way as has scarcely been dreamed of in days past. One may well expect to see great things done, and done quickly.42

Phillips expressed the theme that would be reiterated many times over the next few years: by joining together, women could gain considerable power and increase opportunities for themselves and for all women.

The first task for the Business Women's Committee was securing the interest and cooperation of women across the country. Lena Madesin Phillips was sent on a trip to the Midwest and west for that purpose. She visited Detroit, Michigan; Billings, Montana; Spokane, Yakima and Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; San Francisco and Los Angeles, California; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Chicago, Illinois, to talk to existing groups of business women and gain support for the consolidated effort. She and others also talked about the program to the YWCA and government officials concerned with the war effort.

Phillips's message as she visited groups across the country was that if women joined together, they could help win the war, but they would gain other benefits as

well. The message was similar to that of previous business women's groups and publications: together, women have more power and can improve their lives. Phillips later wrote, "We wanted more freedom and a greater degree of justice. Our banner was lifted under the guise of helping to win the war, but our inner urges went deeper than our words. Unconsciously perhaps, we were fighting for democracy ..." As women came together with war work goals in mind, they also recognized the possibilities for improving their position in society and especially in the business world. When she referred to "democracy," Phillips was not paraphrasing President Woodrow Wilson who said America was getting into World War I to make the world safe for democracy. Instead, Phillips saw women's war efforts as part of the fight to include women in American democracy, to increase women's rights and opportunities.

In Detroit, Phillips spoke to and gained the support of 600 women at a banquet arranged by the Woman's Association of Commerce chapter. She and Georgia Emery, a prominent Detroit insurance woman, agreed to implement the patriotic-efficiency program there. In Chicago, officials of the Woman's Association of Commerce gave her a spot on their national convention, to be held in Cincinnati a few months later, to present her ideas. In letters to Business Women's Committee officials in New York and to her father in Kentucky, Phillips raved about her trip, the women she met, and the possibilities for the future. She was dedicated to the idea of a federation of

43 Sergio, A Measure Filled, 36.
organizations, and to increased opportunities and recognition in the business world for women.

However, Phillips' successes and dreams were put on hold. Other war demands pushed business women's organizing to the background. At the end of June 1918, Phillips was pulled off the business women's activities to assume the post of executive of the Eastern Division in the YMCA-YWCA war fund-raising drive. She was the only woman regional director and, again, saw great potential in the position. She wrote to her father "...this is a tremendously important position." She also said she would be working with "lots of fine, smart people." She might continue to increase her own influence, but for the next seven months, her efforts would be devoted to raising money, not organizing business women, which was her ultimate concern.

Finally, in January 1919, with war hostilities ended, the effort to organize the country's business women resumed, again with Lena Madesin Phillips at the helm. Since the war was over, war work and patriotism were no longer the major issues facing women. Preserving gains women felt they had made during the war and continuing that progress topped the women's agenda.

Women's actual wartime gains depended on what types of jobs they held and the types of companies for which they worked. Many women who entered non-traditional jobs during the war lost them when men returned after the war. This was

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44 Lena Phillips, LS, to "Dad," June 20, 1918, LMP Carton II, Folder 23.

45 See, for example, Maurine Weiner Greenwald, Women, War and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States (Westport,
especially true of blue-collar jobs. Yet, for some women, the war did provide new opportunities. The growth in areas such as advertising, design, sales, and various communications fields opened some doors, mainly clerical. Women may not have found new opportunities for advancement with the war, but the founders of business women’s organizations, many of whom had been in the work force for some time when the war began, held out optimism that the new ideas about women’s importance to the economy could translate into more management possibilities.

Women in the Business Women’s Committee believed American society had recognized the contributions women made to winning the war, and would, therefore, also recognize the many contributions women had been making for decades in business. The upheaval of the war, they believed, would change how women were viewed and would lead to opening of jobs for women, promotions and higher pay, as well as political rights. Regardless of the realities women were facing, these self-defined business women were certain their time had come and they did not want to delay organizing to take advantage of the spirit engendered by the war.

The National Business Women’s Executive Committee met in New York on February 17, 1919, and voted to form a committee to work on federating the business women’s clubs in the U.S. In a report to the War Work Council of the YWCA in Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980).


May 1919, Phillips wrote, "While there are one or two small federations desiring to be national, yet there is no federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs in any sense adequate at this time." 48

The Business Women's Committee envisioned encompassing the smaller federations and other local groups of business women, who might keep their own identities as groups, but who would federate to increase the influence of women in business and the benefits to them. The smaller national groups that existed early in 1919 were the Altrusa clubs, the Woman's Association of Commerce, and Quota Club. All but the recently formed Quota Club had been involved since the early days of YWCA war planning. The Woman's Association of Commerce had more than forty chapters from the West coast to the East, from North to South. Altrusa had a half-dozen clubs in June 1918, mostly in the upper south and midwest.

To prepare for the July 1919 meeting that would create the National Federation of Business and Professional Women, the Business Women's Committee named five regional directors or organizers. These women, based in New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, Denver, and Atlanta, were to contact existing groups and identify and contact prominent business and professional women who were not involved in organizations and try to bring them together at statewide meetings. From the statewide

federations, representatives would be chosen to attend the national conference in St. Louis.49

Women called to state and regional meetings heard the goals for the new federation: to unite existing groups to gain a better understanding of the needs and conditions of self-supporting women throughout the country; to focus and direct, in a cooperative manner, all efforts to obtain better conditions through the facilities of training; and, to gather and disseminate information relative to vocational opportunities to bring about greater solidarity of feeling among women throughout the nation and eventually throughout the world.50 The focus was to be on organizing to improve the status and conditions for business women, in part by improving training. But the less tangible goal was that of bringing women together. The unstated assumption was that business women would benefit in many ways from joining forces with other such women.51

The excitement began to build as each existing club and each state group selected representatives to the national convention. The central states meeting, convened in Chicago on May 29, 1919, drew doctors, lawyers, teachers, insurance representatives, real estate agents, secretaries, business managers, lecturers and film actresses, among others. The women who attended were said to represent 75,000


50 Bowman, A History of the National Federation, 17.

51 The Business Women's Committee never tried to define who qualified as a "business woman." For a discussion of occupations represented, see Chapter IV.
business and professional women. Among those attending were leaders of existing
groups, including the Woman's Association of Commerce and Altrusa. All saw great
possibilities ahead as unheard of numbers of women would join for a common goal in
helping women to succeed.52

At the convention, July 14-18, 1919, in St. Louis, 212 delegates were present
from forty-three states.53 Women came from groups named Nurse's Association,
Business Women's Club, Monday Luncheon Club, Social Workers' Club, Associate
Teachers' League, Home Economics Association, Woman's Rotary Club, Altrusa
clubs, Woman's Advertising Club, Women's Commercial Club, Business Women's
Equal Suffrage League, Woman's Alliance, Business Girls Commercial Club, and
United for Service Club.

Linking existing groups would prove more difficult than organizers had
expected. While clubs of many names and unaffiliated delegates were recruited for the
convention in St. Louis, the gathering was built around the Woman's Association of
Commerce Third Annual Convention. The immediate goal was for the proposed
federation of business women's clubs and the Commerce group to merge. The two
groups already were linked with Commerce members on the board of the Business
Women's Committee.

52 Business and Professional Woman, Special Issue 6 (1), July 14, 1919, LMP,
Carton 2, Folder 24, 8.

53 Not represented were Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and
Wyoming.
A tentative name and constitution had been adopted for the combined group. It would be called the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs. The Woman's Association of Commerce asked that "federation" be changed to "league." They did not want to submerge their identity into that of another group.

Mary Johns Hopper, who had chaired the Business Women's Committee, spoke in favor of accommodating a name change, which she described as a very small thing. "I have had the big vision of this work for over a year. The biggest thing to me [is that] we are creating a nation-wide, single movement of business and professional women for the years to come." The BPW representatives voted in favor of the name change, also agreeing after much debate to have equal representation of BPW and the commerce group on the nominating committee.

The "big thing" was an unrealized dream. The two groups held some joint and some separate sessions in St. Louis to work out details of their joining and of the new organization. On the next-to-last day of the convention, the federation group still was awaiting the decision of the commerce group about whether the two would join. BPW officials set a deadline for a decision. The commerce group did not reply and BPW assumed there would be no joint action. After some further communication, the groups went their separate ways, with the Woman's Association of Commerce deciding not to abandon its three-year national history by giving up its identity and goals to belong to a

54 "First Annual Convention and Executive Committee Meeting, St. Louis, Mo., July 1919," BPW/USA, 233.
new group. A newspaper account at the time suggested the issue was YWCA War Work Council money that the federation was using to pay delegates’ expenses.55

The National Altrusa Clubs and the Women’s Advertising Clubs of the U.S. also considered joining the new federation. Some 1919 reports indicate the two decided to join, but since Altrusa continued as a separate organization, the meaning of their joining is unclear.56 The entire Michigan Woman’s Association of Commerce, with some 3,000 members, left the commerce group and planned to decide at a statewide meeting the following summer what to do next. One proposal before the body would be to join the federation. Some Michigan members, and some other Women’s Association of Commerce members, made it clear they would join with BPW. Among them were Lena Lake Forrest and Georgia Emery of Michigan and Mercia Hoagland of Indiana, all of whom became national officers of BPW.57

55 "Women’s Merger Delayed," New York Times, July 16, 1919, 20. Apparently, the question of YWCA involvement, first raised when the Business Woman’s Council was formed, had reappeared. Some women objected to any YWCA money being used in the new organization, and others objected to money allocated for war work used for non-war purposes.

56 "Women to Vote on Merger of Four Societies," newspaper clipping, BPW/USA, n.p., n.d.

57 Another group calling itself the Woman’s Association of Commerce also existed in Chicago. A 1919-1920 membership book for the other group noted that it was not affiliated with the other Woman’s Association of Commerce headed by Florence King. It listed the officers of King’s group, apparently to make the distinction clear. It was the group’s first membership book, indicating the group could have been formed from among women who did not join the federation effort. "Woman’s Association of Commerce Membership Book (1919-1920)," WAC: Chicago, n.d., Science and Business Library, New York Public Library., New York City, n.p.
The new National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs apparently was not harmed by the lack of agreement of other groups to join a federation. It grew and prospered, gaining more members over the 1920s than any other national business women's group. The lack of agreement among the groups, however, does reflect a broader trend in organizations in general and in women's organizations after the war in particular. A number of business men's groups existed, each believing it had something different to offer. The same was true of the women's groups. The Woman's Association of Commerce had existed for three years, had a certain base of support and power, and some momentum. It had chapters in large cities like Chicago and Detroit. Some of its members were reluctant to join another group, in which they might have less influence and less authority. Once groups are established, they often seek to hold onto their identities. Such was the case with business women's groups.

Finally, historian Nancy Cott argues that the trend after the war was for women's groups to splinter into many small groups of particular focus. Rather than come together as women, the groups organized around specific needs or concerns. Subtle differences no doubt separated Altrusa, the Woman's Association of Commerce and the new Federation of BPW clubs. Those differences might not be apparent from the outside, but club members probably saw them as significant. As discussed below, when Zonta split off from Quota, the rebels formed an almost identical organization, differing only in the enforcement of membership policy and recruiting tactics. The proliferation of business women's groups after the war is more of an indication of the
extent of the interest in organizing and in organizing around careers than it is of
disunity among women. So many women were career-focused and ambitious that a
half-dozen national groups could attract sufficient members to survive.

The new National Federation of BPW Clubs did not waste time mourning the
lack of agreement with the Commerce group. Instead, the convention continued and
plans were made for the future. The women who attended, the volunteers who wrote a
newsletter during the convention, and various newspaper and magazine reporters who
covered the event reveled in the accomplishments of the gathered group, beginning
immediately to work toward the goal of recognition of the accomplishments of women.
One publication delighted in short descriptions of attendees such as Gail Laughlin of
San Francisco, a practicing lawyer and seasoned suffragist; Gratia Rice of Bridgeport,
Connecticut, associate justice of juvenile court; Claudia Quigley Murphy of New York,
a consulting chemist; C. Louise Bachringer of Arizona, ranch operator, editor of a
teachers' journal and activist in a business woman's club one-third of whose members
were "Spanish;" Mrs. A.D. Colby of Georgia, "probably the only woman broker in
fertilizer materials in the world;" Georgia Emery of Detroit, the first woman to drive a
Ford automobile in that city (and, not mentioned, but a prominent insurance
saleswoman); and Lillian Palmer of San Francisco, manufacturer of electric fixtures.58
The achievements were more than self-congratulations. The founders of the National

58 "Can Happen," Daily Bulletin of the Federation of Business and Professional
Federation believed that women had achieved success in a number of fields and that that fact needed to be publicized. In addition, the stories of success would serve to inspire other women as well as break down barriers to increase women's opportunities.

Ida Clyde Clarke summed up the feeling of women at the federation meeting. "To those of us who have been watching for the past ten years the movement toward an efficient, all-embracing nation-wide organization of American business and professional women, this meeting seems fairly intoxicating."59

Altrusa and Quota

The intoxication about the future for business women was not limited to the new National Federation of Business and Professional Women. Many women shared the optimism that the post-war period would bring great things to career-oriented women. Mamie L. Bass, the force behind Altrusa and a delegate to the St. Louis convention, saw an exciting future for her group as well. In February 1919, Quota began, and by the end of the year, members broke off from Quota and began Zonta.

Altrusa had begun in April 1917 when a professional organizer, Dr. Alfred Duke Durham, decided to create a group of business and professional women as a business proposition. He earned money from every woman who joined. The first club was in Nashville, but Altrusa was incorporated in August of that year in Indiana, Mamie Bass's home state. Six clubs were functioning a year later.

59 Ida Clyde Clarke, "Can Happen" I (July 16, 1919), 1.
Bass transformed the organization from the profit-making venture begun by Durham to a Rotary-like classified organization that stressed service and assistance for career-minded women. Her familiarity with her brother's Rotary Club led her to the classification idea and to the vision of a national organization. Her plan, adopted in principle, allowed one woman from each type of business or industry in each local club. The goal was to attract women who held the most prominent or most responsible positions within each classification. The first classification guide, however, did not appear until 1926.

Although its first convention was held in 1918, it was not until 1924 that Altrusa formally adopted the goals, constitution and structure that would help it to carry out its mission. It had some 40 clubs by then, with 1,000 members in 20 states. It took on a national project of vocational guidance, similar to the projects stressed by the National Federation of Business and Professional Women and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs.

Altrusa's "Key" or statement of purpose, adopted in 1925, included providing a source of friendship and support for business women, helping women achieve self-realization through loyalty to their ideals and to others, the community and the nation; understanding, encouraging and developing individual talent; helping women make

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business contacts; and creating an organization that would transcend individuals in order to attain the "evolution of womankind."\(^{61}\)

At Altrusa's 1918 convention, President Mamie Bass said, "[W]e stand in this convention as sponsors of a great women's movement, convinced that organization is the tool to use where great needs exist." Her vision of women working together to help one another and society and the classification system she suggested were not compatible with the goals of the founder and beneficiary of membership growth, Dr. Dunham. The group settled their contract with Dunham and moved in the directions Bass suggested.\(^{62}\)

The Quota Club, formed in February 1919, also had paid organizers and operated on a classification system that limited membership to the "best" woman in each industrial or business category. Quota's early goals, inspired by what founders perceived to be the virtues of the Buffalo, New York, Kiwanis Club, were to help business and professional women to meet other such women and to promote "friendlier feelings" among them, to help occupational development among women, to apply ethical standards to business relationships among members, to promote the Golden Rule, and to further public service.\(^{63}\)

Quota's first president and the woman credited with initiating the organization, Wanda Frey Joiner, a Russian immigrant, began her work life as a clerk and eventually

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 4.


\(^{63}\) Eleanor F. Poole, "The Quota Club of Buffalo," *Buffalo Saturday Night* III (March 10, 1923), 5.
became a corporate executive. She believed that teamwork, constructive thinking rather than destructive criticism, friendship, humor, and community activity were the keys to success in business and in a club of business and professional women.64

Zonta

Like Altrusa, Quota had difficulties related to its practice of paying organizers to recruit members. Ora G. Cole, one of the Quota's five founders, was paid $10 per every member who joined. She used some of the money to hire other organizers. Before a year had passed, many members of the first Quota club, in Buffalo, challenged the per capita system because they believed it encouraged quantity over quality of members. By the fall of 1919, they left Quota, soon taking all eight other clubs with them into a new organization that they named Zonta, a "good old Indian name" meaning honest and trustworthy.65

Marion DeForest, a newspaper writer, playwright, and longtime prominent woman in Buffalo, was the "mother" of Zonta. She is credited with conceiving of the separation from Quota. Clara Hamacher Witt, the organization's first paid executive, who also was a member of the Buffalo club, believed DeForest saw problems with the


Quota model, did considerable research about classification organizations and paid organizers, tried to get Quota to change its methods, then urged the split.

DeForest was concerned that classifications were being stretched to expand membership, and thereby expand the pocketbooks of organizers. The ideal that the "best" woman in the community fill each classification was diluted. The unofficial version of DeForest's concern is that she was offended when another writer gained membership into the Buffalo club. But it was not only DeForest who was offended. Witt noted that organizers were creating more and more classifications. For instance, members were admitted under "interior decorator" and "decorative architect," which actually were the same job in the same business. "The first one to join was always hurt when the second one joined because she had been assured she would be the only one," Witt wrote.

Members were concerned for more than personal reasons, however. Organizers were making considerable sums of money, and a number of Buffalo women believed that such activity violated the very purposes of the organization. The organizer received $10 for each member, even if other non-paid club members recruited the new person.

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66 This version appears briefly in a speech given at the sixty-eighth birthday celebration of the Buffalo club on November 17, 1987. It has survived as folklore in Buffalo, at least, and was repeated to me in 1996 by a woman who had been a member of the Buffalo club. De Forest is quoted as saying either she was the best writer in town or she was not. If she was the best, no other writers should be allowed in the club. ZCB, Box 2, History, 1919-1987 folder.

Witt wrote that in four or five months, nine clubs were organized with 600 or more members. The organizers, therefore, received $6,000. Witt recalled that the main organizer, probably referring to Ora Cole, received $3,000 for four months' work. She explained the conflict she and others saw.

It is very easy to understand why the organizers, who started out with such high ideals, and who must have realized the financial prospects ahead, positively refused to make any changes that would alter their position or power, and why classification difficulties developed.68

Most Buffalo Quota Club members could not reconcile Quota's goal of encouraging high ethical standards in business dealings with a few women making large profits from memberships, some of which they had not even worked to secure. The unhappy members sought to change the system, were unsuccessful, and therefore left Quota. The women who began Zonta kept many of the same principles and purposes of Quota, but tightened classification requirements and opted for slow growth, rather than paid organizers.

The vision of Marion De Forest, nearly a generation older than Lena Madesin Phillips, shaped Zonta, but her influence was not as widespread as that of Phillips on BPW. De Forest served only in volunteer leadership capacities, splitting her time between Zonta and her considerable professional and business ventures. Born in 1864 to a prominent furniture maker and merchant in Buffalo, De Forest attended a private female academy. By the time she graduated, she had published some writing under a pseudonym, much as her hero, Jo in Little Women, had done. She worked for nearly

68 Ibid., 4.
forty years for Buffalo newspapers, during which time she also wrote and published several plays, including the first dramatic adaptation of *Little Women*.69

De Forest had connections throughout the country from her various activities, although most were in the arts community, whereas Phillips's were in politics and women's groups. As a child, De Forest had met actress Lily Langtree, who reportedly encouraged her in her playwriting career. She and Jessie Bonstelle, actress, director and producer, were friends and partners in several projects. De Forest worked with activist and author Zona Gale on a radio show. Actress Katharine Cornell, who grew up in Buffalo, starred in De Forest's London premiere of *Little Women*, and remained a friend. Mai Davis Smith, De Forest's companion of some twenty-six years, was a music impresario. The two knew many of the noted figures in classical music and opera and, in 1924, after Smith's death, De Forest took over the impresario business.

But De Forest also had some connections to business women's groups. She had served as secretary, or executive, of the Board of Women Managers for the Pan American Exposition that was held in Buffalo in 1901. As part of her job, she met with women from across the country and throughout the Americas, planning activities to showcase women and to interest women in attending the exposition. Among the prominent women's events at the exposition was the first convention of the National Association of Business Women.

69 "Miss DeForest Funeral to be Held Tuesday," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, February 18, 1935, 12.
When the Woman's Association of Commerce called its 1917 gathering the "First National Convention of Business Women," it failed to recognize the history of the National Association of Business Women, which continued to exist at least until 1903 when it held another biennial convention. Equally as significant, women in Buffalo were inspired to start a chapter of the organization shortly after the Exposition. No records exist to indicate whether De Forest was a member, or involved in the group, but she certainly was familiar with the idea of organizing self-defined business women. 70

As important as Zonta was to De Forest, her other pursuits sometimes took precedence. She worked many hours and months to lay the foundation for separating from the Quota Club and organizing Zonta along what she considered more professional lines. But at the meeting when the Confederation of Zonta Clubs was created on November 8, 1919, in Buffalo, De Forest was in London with her play, Little Women. Her companion, Mai Davis Smith, stood in for her and relayed her points of view at the meetings. De Forest declined to be an officer of the confederation at its inception, due to her other responsibilities. She did agree to be president of the Buffalo club, though, a post she held through 1921. In 1924-25, she served as president of the Confederation of Zonta Clubs.

70 As noted in Chapter II, the National Association of Business Women grew out of the National Association of Stenographers. The Buffalo group that organized in 1901 called itself the Buffalo Business and Professional Women's Club. Membership records apparently have not survived, but newspaper accounts indicate that a doctor was among the members. Because of the breadth of membership, DeForest might have been involved, or, at least, knowledgeable about the group.
De Forest also exerted influence on the new organization by chairing the national Organizing Committee in 1923 and 1924. The woman who had been opposed to paid organizers, an impetus to found Zonta, gave her own time and money to help Zonta grow and to insure that it would develop as the type of group she had envisioned. She traveled frequently and far from 1920 to 1923, helping to organize new Zonta Clubs. Clara Witt recalled later that De Forest believed the organization needed to grow for several reasons, one of which was to capitalize on what she perceived as post-war feelings that women were capable of holding executive positions. If enough such women could be gathered into Zonta Clubs, much could be done to help convince more and more men, especially, of women's capabilities.

During their organizing travels, De Forest talked to Witt about her vision of Zonta. She believed that she and other organizers were "removing the obstacles of prejudice and old customs" that had slowed women's progress. Now, she told Witt, it was possible for "a capable 'bookkeeper' to be recognized and paid as a 'treasurer.'" Recognition of women was a struggle in the early 1920s, Witt recalled. It was that struggle for recognition that Zonta, BPW and other groups fought.

Even though each of the groups was convinced of the benefits of women working together to improve the status of all women, they competed through the 1920s for members, and failed in efforts to join together into one larger organization. At the Zonta annual convention in 1927, a report on organizing new clubs indicated that

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71 Clara Hamacher Witt, TL to Bertha M. Fox, September 7, 1953, ZI, Past International Presidents files, "Marion DeForest, 1924-25."
Zonta, Altrusa, Quota and Soroptimist, founded in 1921, all groups that used the classification method, were competing for members and to form new clubs, especially in the West and Midwest. As noted above, even though the clubs rejected joining into one much larger club, it is equally important that so many women in so many cities across the country were organized as business women. Whether they were in one group or many, these thousands of business women, all working for similar goals, provided a strong voice on behalf of career-oriented women.

In September 1925, Zonta's national board decided to hire an organizer to help in its effort to expand. Without expanding, Zonta would not take in sufficient funds to have an office and support existing clubs. All new organizations faced this financial pressure, and many hired paid organizers. Zonta's new organizer was very different from those Quota had used in 1919, and that some clubs continued to use. Aware of its history, Zonta did not pay organizers on a per capita basis for members gained or clubs formed. Instead, it hired a Zontian or former Zontian to travel to selected cities and use personal contacts and knowledge of the organization to form new clubs.

Before taking on its organizing strategy, Zonta studied methods used by men's clubs. They saw hiring an organizer as an "emergency" measure. They sent out a questionnaire to Chambers of Commerce in large cities to get names of prominent business women and to seek opinions on whether a Zonta Club would succeed in those

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cities. Their surveyors and organizers kept bumping into similar efforts by Altrusa, Soroptimist, and Quota. Zonta did not have a permanent paid organizer and the group frequently discussed the pros and cons of volunteer and paid organizing. When needed, though, an organizer was hired.

Gracian Warner of Chicago did organizing work in the west in 1927 and reported back to the club that Altrusa and Quota were very active in trying to form new clubs everywhere east of the Great Divide, that Quota was surveying the northwest, and that Soroptimist practically controlled the west coast and was moving east.

Zonta’s Organization Chairman in 1929, Louise Gerry of Buffalo, told the group’s Ninth Annual Convention that Zonta and many other organizations were trying to form new clubs. She believed Zonta would succeed because it was the better club, and because it did not pay organizers from initiation fees of new clubs. Gerry said, “We believe … that Zonta principles and ideals are by far the best that any woman’s classification club has to offer.” Her comments help to explain why the club did not seek to merge with other organizations. It believed it had the best structure, and the best members.

Internally, both Zonta and BPW held discussions about joining with other organizations. At Zonta’s first annual convention in 1921, delegates discussed whether Zonta should affiliate with other groups. They did not propose to end their independent existence, but to join groups under a larger umbrella group. Fifteen of the sixteen

delegates opposed the idea. Other groups with which they might have affiliated were the National Federation of BPW Clubs and the Federation of Women's Clubs. Some delegates saw no harm in affiliation, but most suggested cooperation instead. The delegate from Detroit said her club had affiliated with another group because it thought it would gain some benefits. However, the club now wanted to get out of the affiliation. Instead, she said, eight clubs of business women in Detroit, and eight more composed mostly of business women, shared a clubhouse, and some members.

The Ithaca delegate predicted Zonta would get into "deep water" if clubs affiliated with other groups. The Buffalo delegate issued similar warnings, saying funds Zonta needed for its own work would be drawn away. "It is our duty to strengthen the Zonta idea as fast as we can and get on a safe foundation to put the thing across." She suggested dropping members who joined similar organizations.74

In 1923, the BPW executive committee held an almost opposite discussion, whether other clubs should be allowed to affiliate with the national federation. The group decided that national clubs such as Altrusa, Zonta, and Pilot might "threaten the solidarity" of the federation. Instead, they decided to recruit clubs that had no national organizations, such as the Women's Rotary Clubs, a group Zonta also targeted. They voted to discourage affiliation with similar national bodies.75

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75 "Executive Committee Meeting -- Jacksonville, Fla., March 1923, NFBPWC," BPW/USA, 4, 16.
Discussions between BPW and Zonta about joining forces were held on several occasions. In 1927, Lena Madesin Phillips, now president of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs called together groups such as Zonta, Soroptimist, the national groups of women doctors, nurses and lawyers. Phillips said she believed that women had weakened their cause by their failure to cooperate and by duplication of effort. She did not suggest merging the groups, but did promote some type of joint effort. In 1929, BPW called together another group, this one to promote a Council of Service Organizations. Men's groups as well as women's groups like Zonta, Quota, Altrusa, Soroptimist, and Exchange Clubs were invited. Records did not indicate whether the group ever got off the ground.

With different routes to their creation, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs faced similar issues and adopted similar strategies in their efforts to create a positive, optimistic identity for the business woman. The two groups were not the same, however, in all respects. They adopted different membership requirements and sometimes saw different routes to achieving their goals for career-minded business women. The intent here is not to compare the organizations as much as it is to examine both to present a more complete picture of the 1920s business woman's club member.

Membership: class and race

One of the earliest challenges each group faced was determining whom to seek as members. The question was crucial as the groups wanted to expand both the size of existing clubs and the number of clubs. For Zonta, the question of membership eligibility was the reason the group existed, the reason it broke away from the Quota Club. For the Federation of BPW Clubs, the question of who would be eligible for membership opened a discussion of class and race that both mirrored the atmosphere of much of white post-war America and threatened to cripple the new group.

The women who convened the 1919 convention that would create the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs did not specify who might join. Their only limitation was that 75 percent of each club's membership had to be women who worked as business or professional women. On the final day of the convention, a delegate asked who was eligible to join. She wondered what occupations women might have in order to be invited to membership. Another delegate suggested no one seemed to know where to draw the line that would distinguish "business" women from other working women.

When a member asked if servants were to be considered business women, attitudes about class and race emerged. Geline MacDonald Bowman of Richmond, Virginia, who would become national president from 1931-35 and who helped write the organization's official history, suggested industrial clubs continue to serve "girls who work with their hands rather than their heads." BPW clubs could then be limited to those who work with their heads, perhaps as an inspiration to the others. "Let it be
composed of women who have executive positions, who are professional women and business women in their offices," Bowman said. Her distinction, while not adopted as official membership policy, did define much of the membership of the organization in coming years. As the next chapter will explain, the clubs were composed of entrepreneurs (including dressmakers, milliners or corsetieres), office workers, women in various executive positions, teachers, or women in white-collar professions. Members rarely worked in factories or in domestic service jobs.

Part of the question for the nascent BPW members at the St. Louis convention was what the relationship between club members and other working women would be. Bowman suggested that she treated "industrial girls" and "rag pickers" as her equals as working women, but that did not mean they should be in the club. BPW clubs could work for women who were not members of the clubs. In fact, she noted, the "industrial girls" wanted their own clubs, not to be joined with business women. Some other delegates agreed; some suggested that women in "manual" jobs should be club members as the association would help them move up in the world. These discussions about the relationship of "business" women to other women workers would be repeated in debates at national meetings that persisted throughout the 1920s about protective legislation.77

Although the women at the first Federation of BPW Clubs convention were discussing who should be members, they focused on issues of class and often mixed in

77 This issue is discussed more fully in Chapter V.
issues of race. Some delegates thought that limiting membership to higher level white collar workers would serve to keep blacks out of the clubs. Others recognized that class as determined by occupation and race were different issues. Bowman, a southerner, told the delegates, "We have a problem in the South that, if we don't draw the line somewhere, will get us into trouble." That problem was racial prejudice and segregation. She said that industrial workers and black workers could not be equated, but that drawing the membership exclusion line at industrial workers would be a solution preferable to stating that only "white" women could be members. She did not explain why. She should not have been concerned that an explicit racial definition might alienate some northerners, for while some members spoke in favor of manual workers as members, no one suggested African-American women should join.

Ruth Rich of Florida, a future editor of the federation's magazine, reminded delegates that excluding women of certain occupations did not ensure the clubs would have only white members. She said, "There are Negro stenographers. There are Negroes holding all kinds of executive positions in various parts of the country." Excluding "industrial" workers would not necessarily exclude blacks. Pinckney Estes of Columbia, South Carolina, would not allow the conversation about race to be coded as a discussion about industrial versus executive workers. "I am a Southerner and this is the Negro question as far as I am concerned," she said. "I don't want to come into this Federation if coming into it means that there may be colored members in my club. I am not big enough for that yet." She threatened to resign if any clubs were allowed to have black members. Others agreed.
The question, another delegate said, was not about race or about industrial workers in clubs, but whether each club should "settle its own affairs." The issue of "state's rights" had been translated to the local club level. But Mamie Bass of Indiana, head of the Altrusa clubs, suggested that the race question was not one that divided northern and southern women. "Where in the world did anybody get the impression that any one in the North wants to let a colored woman into her club or that any state Federation would want to let a body of colored women or a club of colored women into an organization of this kind?" Bass asked.

If clubs of African-American business women existed in 1919, as they had earlier in the century, none were invited to join the new federation and no records exist to indicate that any such clubs or individual African-American women sought membership in the Federation or other post-World War I business women's groups, even though as one member suggested, there were African-American business women.78

The racial attitudes reflected those of much of white America in 1919 and duplicate issues faced by members of the Colored Business Women's clubs at the turn of the century.79 With the war, blacks had moved north to take promising industrial jobs. Northern cities proved that racial hatred and discrimination were not limited to

78 I was unable to find any information about the Colored Business Women's Clubs beyond the references in the Colored American Magazine, or about the clubs' founder, Albreta Moore-Smith.

79 These clubs are discussed in Chapter II.
the south. The summer of 1919, when BPW's founding convention was held, saw race riots in several northern cities. Whites often initiated conflict, expressing anger over employers hiring blacks and blacks crossing picket lines. A similar riot had occurred in East St. Louis in 1917.80 The views also were reminiscent of debates by suffrage organizations and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, both of which chose race solidarity over sex solidarity.81 Further, clubs of businessmen also excluded blacks as members during this period; Rotary barred black members because they believed integration would "disrupt the camaraderie of white members."82

Delegates voted to allow individual clubs to define the business woman, then moved to appoint a committee to discuss race. Lena Phillips spoke against the committee, recognizing the importance both of the race question and of the disagreements that had just been aired.

I will say that this is a very healthy and well born child. It no more than gets started than it begins to kick around at everything in sight. I hope, because I love this Federation so much, because we have had such a hard time getting it started -- a lot harder than you know -- that we won't get any uncertain feeling among ourselves.

She concluded that it would be better for the federation to leave the question officially unresolved. She asked the delegates to not "stir up anything on this subject." After

80 Kennedy, Over Here, 279-284.


82 Charles, Service Clubs in American Society, 30.
more discussion, the issue was dropped. Official documents did not specify that members had to be white, nor did they mention race at all. By not taking an explicit stand on the racial composition of BPW clubs, the federation may have prevented divisiveness within the organization. It allowed clubs to follow community beliefs, regardless of the nature of those beliefs. As Mamie Bass had suggested and Phillips certainly understood, northern clubs would be unlikely to admit black members, especially in the racially charged post-war atmosphere. By taking no stand, the organization avoided internal conflicts that might have arisen, but failed to reach out to African-American women who faced even more problems trying to gain positions in the business world than did white women. When the club spoke of its concerns about “women,” it likely was not concerned about African-American women. The first BPW club with an African-American member was not admitted to the federation until 1940.

The Confederation of Zonta Clubs handled membership criteria differently because of its adherence to a classification system. As the inception of Zonta indicates, the classification system and its implications for creating an exclusive organization were important to members. Zonta membership was limited both by the classification system and the general requirements of time spent in business concerns. Membership was limited to women who spent at least 60 percent of their time working for the

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84 Sergio, A Measure Filled, 224. Lena Phillips spoke out on behalf of granting a charter in 1940 to a New York City Club that had admitted a black member.
business under whose activities they were classified. In addition, the business had to spend at least 60 percent of its time in activities that matched the classification.

Individual jobs were not classified. Instead, classification represented types of businesses and business activities. For instance, a classification might be "publishing," with a subcategory of "directory," or "government, county." Various types of jobs were specified, as well, such as "osteopath" (indicating a private practice) or "modiste." The list of classifications was created from surveys of types of businesses that existed in various communities. A club, therefore, could not just go out in the community and recruit members. Members had to fit into existing classifications and only one member from each classification was eligible. The system was intended to insure representation from all major industries and business activities in a community, and to insure that only the "top" women from each business belonged to the club.85

The classification system often was confusing to members. In 1926, Florence Fuchs of Buffalo, who chaired the Business Methods Committee, said at the national convention that letters she had received indicated that some clubs and members did not understand that Zonta represented businesses and professions. "The position one holds or the profession one practices in the business or profession or the employer is not a classification," she said.86 For instance, a lawyer who worked at least 60 percent of her

85 This requirement changed slightly from time to time. At some points, associate members, women in the same classification, could be admitted. Later, more than one woman from each category was eligible.

time for a wire manufacturing firm would not be classified as "attorney, corporate," but under "wire manufacturing." An accountant with executive authority at a brass manufacturing firm would be classified under "brass manufacturing," while an accountant in business for herself or working for a firm that did only accounting could be classified under "Accountants and Auditors." By 1922, Zonta included 305 different professions and businesses in its classification list. With the subcategories, a total of 585 members theoretically could be admitted to each club. Clubs also could have associate members and honorary members. Clubs rarely reached more than 150 members, though. Through the 1920s, Buffalo had the largest club, topping its membership rolls at 178 in 1926.

Zonta clubs made an effort to select for membership the "most representative" woman in each classification. The classification system did not specify whether the woman admitted in that category was a department manager or a clerical worker. However, Zonta also sought only women who were proprietors, partners, corporate officers or managers of "worthy and recognized" businesses; held important executive positions with "discretionary authority;" served as the local agent or branch representative of a company; or worked in a "worthy and recognized" profession. In a question-answer column in the national magazine in 1926, Florence Fuchs gave one example of the type of member Zonta sought. The question was whether a club should

87 "Why Classification?," ZCB, 15.

choose a woman with a big job in a small firm or one with a smaller job in a big firm. Fuchs answered that a cashier in a small commercial bank would be preferable to a department head in a larger bank in the same city. The cashier "can use discretionary authority in the bank as a whole and is therefore the greater executive," Fuchs replied. The other woman could run one department only.

Unlike their BPW counterparts, delegates at the first Zonta convention did not need to discuss what types of jobs constituted the "business woman," because the organization's requirements eliminated industrial workers, domestic service workers, and run-of-the-mill white collar workers. The clubs strove to fill their ranks with "executives." Clerical workers and women in various trades certainly were represented, but the clubs chose clerical workers who supervised other employees or were able to exercise independent judgment and tradeswomen who were well-respected entrepreneurs. Clubs also included retail sales women, but again, these members were to hold jobs that included supervision, management or other independent activities.

Zonta never explicitly defined "most representative." The designation allowed some leeway among clubs and provided the opening for rejecting individuals or businesses for which they worked because they did not have good personal or business reputations. One publication did attempt to define "recognized" businesses or professions as those the board had selected and placed on the classification list. "Pioneer" businesses had to prove themselves worthy of being "recognized."89 Zonta

89 "Why Classification?," ZCB, 9.
Club of Buffalo records indicate that the charge to find the "most representative"
women was not taken lightly. Members were nominated by other members or identified
by a membership committee looking for the "most representative" women to fill
various classifications. On a number of occasions, names of prospective members were
referred back to the membership committee or rejected by the board of directors
because the women or the businesses for which they worked were not the "most
representative." The minutes do not specify, however, the ways in which the women
were not "representative" or more specific reasons for their being denied membership.

The requirements served as a kind of ethical or value screening as well as an
occupational filter. The "most representative" phrase allowed clubs to exclude women
who did not behave ethically in business, who might have been the subject of
community gossip because of intimate relationships, or whose family members were
involved in behavior deemed scandalous. National president Ethel Francis of Detroit,
speaking at the 1926 convention, stressed that membership should be limited to women
who "measure up to the highest standard." She urged that no members be allowed
"whose life and actions" did not conform to Zonta's principles. Members, in addition,
were to endeavor to be kind, tactful and generous toward those whose "seek
membership or who hold and provoke grievances that affect the organization at large or
whose desirability as a member in any way becomes or is questioned." 90 Members
could be asked to leave and prospective members rejected on the basis of their

90 "Minutes of Meetings, The Confederation of Zonta Clubs Incorporated Sixth
behavior, but those rejections had to be done in a proper manner. Above all, Zonta stressed the Golden Rule and civil behavior.

Marion De Forest, in about 1924, wrote a pamphlet "Why Classification?" to explain both how the system worked and justify the importance of such a system. She stressed that the organization was seeking "quality" rather than "quantity" in membership. She urged selection of the "highest quality" women and the "finest type" of businesses. Zonta was looking for the one woman in each business or profession who had "risen to the top." It should be an honor to be chosen by Zonta, she wrote. De Forest and others believed that by having the top women from various venues of the community's businesses and industries, the clubs would have more influence and more potential to gain recognition for women's achievements and to help open doors for women.

Selecting the "highest quality" women as members excluded women in lower status jobs, but did not necessarily imply a racial exclusiveness. Race rarely was discussed at local and national meetings, at least as it related to Zonta membership. The membership restrictions may have served as a racial filter in many cities, since higher level jobs generally were denied to African-Americans. Club founders maintained that racial exclusiveness was not intended. Clara Witt of Buffalo, in a letter written in 1970, indicated that the nine charter clubs had resolved in 1919 that:

Therefore: race, color, creed, politics were not to be considered in an application for membership, nor were any of these subjects to be discussed in

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91 "Why Classification?" ZCB.
any club. Speakers were to limit their subjects to those that were of interest to all. They would respect the right of every person to a difference of opinion, and so, in silence, by word or deed, do nothing that might interfere with the success of any club or person.92

The anti-discrimination policy was unwritten, but agreed to, Witt said. It is not clear how an unwritten policy agreed to by nine clubs could have guided an organization that doubled within several years and kept adding clubs. New clubs probably did not know that the organization originally had such an agreement. No official records exist that indicate whether any clubs had African-American members during the 1920s or when the first black woman or club was admitted.

During the first decade of their existence, both the Confederation of Zonta Clubs and National Federation of BPW Clubs were composed almost exclusively, if not totally, of white women. Most held white collar jobs. As Chapter IV indicates, there was considerable variety in occupations of club members, and some variety in backgrounds of those members. While they might have disagreed at times about who should be considered a "business woman," the members of both organizations agreed that bringing women together for unified action was important. Phillips of BPW, De Forest of Zonta, and other leaders of the two groups spoke in lofty language about the benefits to women's status and opportunities of joint action. Putting specific programs together that would accomplish those goals constituted much of the early focus of the groups.

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Leaders of the movement that created the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs had identified a number of programs for the fledgling organization even before the group was formed officially in St. Louis in July 1919. Equal pay for equal work, housing, vocational training for women, a campaign against Bolshevism in business, and the sale of Thrift Stamps for the government all were seen as important issues. In a newspaper interview during the convention, Lena Madesin Phillips noted that equal pay for equal work was the major issue for business women. She also thought it was important for the success of all women that young women who only worked a few years before marrying be serious about their jobs, not just put in time. She did not want these short-term workers to give career women, such as those who would join BPW, a bad name. Perhaps most importantly, Phillips told the reporter that women could not wait for men to treat them fairly and equally. Women, she suggested, should demand what was coming to them.93

The major focus of Phillips and other leaders of the BPW movement was gaining recognition and opportunities for business women. Phillips told delegates at the first convention that the new federation would place women "where they should be, to secure for them what they should have and to enable them to spend their concentrated efforts in making of the world the kind of place it ought to be."94

93 "Women Seek Same Pay As Men, Says Convention Head," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 12, 1919, BPW/USA, np.

94 "First Annual Convention," BPW/USA, 8.
The bylaws of the new National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs reflected Phillips' vision. The organization would work to elevate standards of women in business and professions, to promote interests of business and professional women, to stimulate local and state organizations, to bring about a spirit of cooperation among business and professional women of the U.S., and to extend opportunities to business and professional women through education along lines of industrial, scientific and vocational activities.

The new federation created committees to carry out its goals, but much of the first year was focused on internal financing and organizational issues. Committees were formed on legislation, research, industrial relations, public health, and education. Others focused on finance, publicity, program, and incorporation. Funding for the executive director, Lena Phillips, and setting up an office, were the major challenge for the first year, July 1919-July 1920.

With the federation's president, lawyer Gail Laughlin, living in San Francisco, and the director, Lena Phillips, living and establishing the national office in New York, conflicts were guaranteed to arise. The two women, each with a following among members, disagreed about budgets and operational issues, including where the national office should be located. Laughlin served only one term as national president, but the undercover maneuverings continued for several years. There were other conflicts as well. In 1921, a member in Cleveland wrote to Phillips to warn her about the issues she heard might arise at the national convention. Phillips wrote back, explaining why certain people might be upset. Of Laughlin, Phillips said, "If Miss Laughlin comes it
will be, I imagine, to fight protective legislation and not me. I think she had about all she wanted last year ...\textsuperscript{95} The first three years, through 1921, brought considerable internal conflict, struggles for power and position among national leaders, and sorting out of positions and roles. Such conflict and jockeying for position is typical in new groups and while it took considerable time for Phillips and others to deal with the internal issues, the organization's work went forth nonetheless.

The Confederation of Zonta Clubs, a much smaller organization, also spent its first year, November 1919- November 1920, focused on internal organization and growth. The group had adopted goals similar to those of the Federation of BPW Clubs. Zonta sought to demand fair dealings, high ideals and honest business methods; to standardize and disseminate business principles and practices; to encourage, promote, and supervise the organization of Zonta clubs in all commercial centers of the world; to study the work of existing clubs and clear information for benefit of all; and to promote a broad spirit of good fellowship among Zontians and Zonta Clubs. Local Zonta clubs, besides encouraging high ethical standards, sought to promote good fellowship as an opportunity to service and an aid to success, to interest members in the welfare of the community and to cooperate with others in civic, social, commercial and industrial development.

The Confederation's committees were primarily focused on internal organization issues such as business methods, education, intercity relations, the

\textsuperscript{95} Lena Madesin Phillips TL to Leona Esch, June 30, 1921, LMP, Carton 2, Folder 28.
convention program, and finance. More outwardly focused were the public affairs and publicity committees. Before the group's first convention, in 1920, the presidents of all the clubs agreed that the Confederation and individual clubs would take on the task of providing and promoting educational and constructive work for girls and young women.

The optimism of bringing together business and professional women was reflected in the groups' goals and statements of purpose. The groups had been launched in an era when business women were convinced their fortunes were about to rise. The war was over and society had seen what women could do. Organizers believed the time was at hand for women to assure that their many past accomplishments would be recognized, paving the way for even more opportunities for women in the future. They came together as women, to serve women and women's needs. They focused mostly on white, native-born women, but their memberships crossed class lines to some extent. They were certain that working together would bring a bright future in which women could focus on careers and would be welcomed onto ladders of success. It was that drive for success that motivated many of the leaders and the clubs as a whole. They wanted business women to have the chance to be successful and wanted women and girls to have access to opportunities that would help them to become business women.

The next chapter will examine the members of a local Zonta and a local BPW club to help explore what types of jobs business women had, how they viewed work and achievement, and why they were so positive about future possibilities for business women.
CHAPTER IV

MERCHANTS, MANAGERS, AND MILLINERS:
"WHAT CONSTITUTES A BUSINESS WOMAN?"

In response to a 1921 contest asking "What Constitutes a Business Woman," Anna B. Haines of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, suggested that a woman so defined would have sound judgment, interest, and ambition. In addition, business women were "all attractive and well-dressed and possess good health." And, Haines wrote, "They have self-possession, poise and that consciousness of being able to do their work well."¹

Character traits and behavior, not types of occupations, were the key to the business woman. Haines' answer won the contest, which was sponsored the Independent Woman, the official publication of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs.

Later in her essay, Haines detailed what types of jobs the business woman might hold. Using members of her own Business and Professional Women's Club as an example, she wrote that the business woman might be a doctor, dentist, illustrator, artist, insurance underwriter, automobile saleswoman, merchant, manager, milliner, private secretary, department head, clerk, teacher, musician or stenographer.

¹ Independent Woman II (March 1921), 13-14.
Both parts of Haines' answer reflect the ambiguity surrounding the term "business woman." For many people in the early twentieth century, a "business woman" was the same as a "business girl." She was one of the ever-increasing numbers of clerical workers in offices. Business schools taught typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, and operation of office machines. At the turn of the century, debates had raged in popular magazines and advice literature about whether "business" required college training. In all such discussions, it seemed clear that for young men or boys, "business" had meant clerking in offices, starting at the bottom, and learning on the job whatever skills were necessary. For girls or young women, the meaning of "business" was similar, although the jobs often were not, limiting women from moving up the ladder.

But even as those debates about "business training" were taking place, the structure of many businesses and the nature of jobs within them were changing. As companies grew in complexity and separated ownership from management in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "business" began taking on new meanings. More levels of management jobs became available and more clerical workers were needed. Nearly all top managers were men. The term "businessman" started to mean "manager" or "proprietor" by 1900 and "business girls" became part of the army of clerical workers.² The first college to offer a business program, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, opened in 1881. By 1917, when 25 colleges or universities had

departments or schools of business, the connection between "business" and management was firmly established.3 Most college business courses were open only to men. The gendered nature of "business" was becoming clearer. A businessman was a manager or entrepreneur. Business women or girls still worked in offices, often as low-level typists, stenographers or clerks. The businessman usually had status and influence within the company and the community. The business girl or woman had relatively low or moderate status and probably little influence. She would not be a high-level manager.

Most late twentieth century observers have noticed few successful business women in the early twentieth century. Historians have written about some women who were entrepreneurs or managers, such as Lydia Pinkham of tonics for women, Elizabeth Arden of cosmetics, Madame C.J. Walker of African-American hair care, and Maggie Lena Walker of African-American banking.4 Others have noted that some women shop

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proprietors were successful, although on a much smaller scale. Much of our historical examination of working women before 1930 has excluded "business women" from discussions of success, in the sense of climbing occupational ladders, and having status, power or influence. Many analyses have focused on barriers or limits women faced in their efforts to enter upper-level white-collar jobs. Historians and economists have noted that women seeking work in the 1920s often were temporary employees, working until they married. Their temporary status justified lower pay and fewer opportunities for women: employers did not want to train them because they could not count on them to stay with the company.

The women who joined organizations such as Zonta and BPW in the years after World War I were not, for the most part, as exceptional as an Arden or Walker. Yet they saw themselves as serious, ambitious, career-oriented women who could achieve, or had already achieved, success. While not denying the difficulties women faced in the work world, the accomplishments and aspirations of these self-defined business women are indications that our customary ways of thinking about and studying business, women in business, and "success" have been too limited. These self-defined business women, whose achievements generally have escaped our notice, saw themselves as an important

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part of the 1920s business community. Most did not own or manage large manufacturing
operations or have large amounts of capital. Many were not business proprietors of any
proportion. They did, however, climb job ladders and achieve many elements of success
and, equally important, they viewed themselves as business women, a term that could be
favorably compared to businessmen. The stories of some members of Zonta and BPW
help uncover these facets of "business."

In order to gain recognition for the ways in which they saw themselves, members
of business women's clubs tried to combat popular perceptions. For example, a career
introduction that many women were content to be "decently paid members of the great
class of permanent subordinates in business."7 Many women may have had no choice in
whether they were "subordinates" since advancement often was closed to women,
regardless of how hard they worked. But members of the Confederation of Zonta Clubs
and National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs were determined to
escape being "subordinates."

Both organizations represented women who saw themselves as career women,
women who either had moved up available occupational ladders or intended to. These
were neither "girls" nor subordinates. Zontians described themselves as "executives --
exerts in various lines."8 The 1926 Confederation president said, "only women who

7 Eleanor Gilbert (Ann Rosenblatt), *The Ambitious Woman in Business* (New York:
Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1916), viii.

8 Marion De Forest letter, *Zontian* IV (January 1925), 5.
measure up to the highest standard should be considered eligible for membership. 'Underpar' women have no place in Zonta."9 BPW officials made similar types of statements about their membership.

Records of national and local Business and Professional Women's and Zonta clubs reveal many stories about members who rose from low-level jobs to management or ownership positions, of success and achievement in occupations often described as "dead-end." For example, Clara McCollum of Buffalo, New York, started work in 1890 at the Buffalo Specialty Company, manufacturer of a home furniture care product. She was 16, had few skills and no previous work experience. She learned on the job how to file, keep books, take phonograph dictation and operate a Caligraph typewriter. Four "girls" worked in the office. Some thirty years later, McCollum was treasurer of the company, as well as private secretary to the president. Her other titles had included director of direct advertising and advertising manager. She was made a stockholder in 1910, and in 1922, at age 48, she was named a director and assistant treasurer of the firm that now employed about 200 women in the office.10

Mary Cass, also of the Buffalo Zonta Club, had begun her career at the Burt Box Company as an office girl, doing "everything from clerical work to nailing packing cases." She noted that "it just developed" that she was in command. She became general

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10 *The Zontian*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (December 1923) 22.
manager of the plant that had three factories and some 900 employees. Mrs. Elizabeth Dickinson of Buffalo, a German immigrant, married a watch and clock repairman when she was 18. She talked him into expanding his business to include jewelry. Under her direction, the business grew to become one of the largest in Buffalo. Wilhelmine Hamelman also began as an office girl, working for a new advertising firm in Buffalo. She became vice-president and treasurer of the company.

Other club members held relatively high-level positions, as well, although not necessarily rising from the bottom to the top. Angela Barone ran her own insurance agency and real estate office; Fennella G. Crowell owned a boiler tube scraper company that she operated herself. Florence Danahy, a graduate of Vassar College, worked in her family's meat-packing business until it was sold, then operated several retail stores before going into partnership with another meat packer. She was vice president of the company. Mrs. Olive E. Frank headed a heating and engineering company. Louise Gerry, who was national Zonta president in the mid-1920s, was women's employment

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14 Buffalo Courier-Express, August 2, 1931, ZI, Scrapbook, n.p.
and personnel manager of the Larkin Co., a large soap company that employed and sold products to many women.

Portland, Maine, a much smaller city, also had its share of women who rose through the ranks and otherwise held high-level jobs. Helen M. Robinson began as a clerk at the Portland School Department and became deputy school superintendent. Mabel Spear started as a telephone operator and rose to chief operator, then to a regional personnel position in Boston. Anita S. Files started as a milliner's apprentice, worked as a store saleswoman, became a buyer in a department store, then opened her own millinery shop. Helen Havener began as a newspaper reporter, became a city editor, returned to reporting, and finally left Portland to edit the BPW national magazine. Mabel Lord was a bookkeeper who studied insurance and had a long career in insurance sales. Elizabeth Taylor was superintendent of the Maine School for the Deaf, which was a day school with one building when she began managing it. By 1921, it had ten classrooms, a gym, playrooms, an industrial building, and dorms, and was part of the state educational system.

Many of these brief stories of BPW and Zonta members fit at least the core of the common American notion of "success:" regardless of the beginning point, the employee moves to or close to the top rung of the occupational ladder, often becoming an owner, manager, or corporate official. "Success" means more job responsibility, more pay, and more status or prestige, and implies power and influence beyond one's own work environment.
The bylaws of the Confederation of Zonta Clubs defined the minimums of "success" it expected of its members. They were to be women in supervisory positions, proprietors, professionals, or those who could exercise independent judgment on the job. Zonta set up a classification system, modeled on those of business men's organizations.15 The system permitted one woman member from each type of business: "newspaper," "pharmacy, retail," "fruits and vegetables, distributing," "woolen goods, manufacturing," "association, industrial," "association, children's aid," "chemicals, pharmaceuticals," "iron and steel, ornamental," and so forth. The woman's actual job title was hidden. She was selected for membership on the basis of her place of employment, although the clubs sought to attract the highest-level woman in each of the categories.

The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was less specific about qualifications for membership, and was one of the few business women's groups in the 1920s that did not operate on a classification system. The only guideline for membership in 1919 was that at least three-quarters of a club comprise women who were "active" business and professional women. Yet some basic understandings developed that helped tacitly define who BPW's "business woman" would be.

At the founding convention, members discussed various occupations and types of work as some women sought specific directions about membership. The discussions focused primarily on class and race. Virginia Marr Fine of Dallas, manager of a ready-

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15 Zonta's predecessor, the Quota Club, was formed after women in Buffalo attended a Kiwanis Club dinner. In its first decade, Zonta often discussed and consulted Rotary's classification system.
to-wear department, said she had asked many men and women where the line was to be drawn to determine who "business and professional" women were. "... shall [we] bring in the girl who works in the laundry, the professional woman, the woman behind the counter?" Jessie H. Appling of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, said her club had asked her to find out whether servant girls were to be classed as business women.

Some delegates were willing to allow "laundry" and "industrial" girls to make up a quarter of the club -- the quarter that was not women active in business and professions. Those comments indicated that "laundry" and "industrial" work were not the same as business. One delegate said her club was composed of "laundry workers, girls in the candy factories, clerks and stenographers, as well as professional and business women." The lines were being drawn.

Other delegates noted that during World War I, many girls and women who might have had office jobs worked instead in factories to aid the war effort and that these women would benefit from BPW membership. Again, the class and status line remained clearly drawn. These factory workers might be acceptable because they could have been office workers.

16 "First Annual Convention and Executive Committee Meeting, St. Louis, Mo., July 1919," Marguerite Rawalt Resource Center, BPW/USA, Washington, D.C., 289. (Collection hereafter cited as BPW/USA)

17 Ibid., 208-9.
Nancy Wardell of San Diego, California, argued against letting "community and class prejudice, which a number of our sections still hold, creep in."\(^{18}\) Her comments were applauded, but "class prejudice" continued to dominate the discussion. Mrs. J.K. Bowman of Richmond, Virginia, who was in "banking," proposed that clubs be limited to "those girls who use their heads and thus make it an incentive to the other girls."\(^{19}\) She said she was not opposed to helping those with lower-status jobs, but she did not think that help needed to include BPW membership. Lloy Galpin of Los Angeles, a teacher, countered Bowman's arguments, noting that the Los Angeles County Federation included 500 women who worked as housemaids. "And believe me, they have heads and they use them," Galpin said.\(^{20}\)

The discussion continued for some time, getting no closer to resolving the initial question about who qualified for membership. Charlotte Wilcox of Houston tried to phrase the problem in a way that might lead to a resolution. She said different localities defined the business woman differently, some calling "cash girls and just the plain clerks ... privates in the ranks of service," not business women. Wilcox even used the term "class," referring to a "business class" and an "industrial class" that would include the cash girls or saleswomen. She asked, "Are we to take into our Federation all women who

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 290.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 290.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 291-2.
earn their living or just women who earn their living in certain walks of life, in certain ways?"\textsuperscript{21}

Bowman argued for clubs "composed of women who have executive positions, who are professional women and business women in their offices."\textsuperscript{22} Some clubs did have sales clerks as members, and a few had women in lower-level service occupations. But, for the most part, clubs seemed to agree that members would not be engaged as factory operatives, as domestic servants, or in any of a number of other lower-skill and lower-status jobs. Ultimately, through statements by its officials, BPW was clear that the organization was not intended for women who held "minor positions."\textsuperscript{23} A BPW official in 1921 called BPW "the coming together of the country's most successful, best informed and efficient women."\textsuperscript{24}

Certainly club members and their publicity efforts could exaggerate the achievements of members. Part of the purpose of Zonta and BPW was to promote the business woman and her position in society. In order to do so, the clubs wanted to convince the public that business women excelled in moral and ethical behavior as well as in their occupations. But the frequency of club claims of members being the "most

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 299-300.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 289-90. Part of Bowman's intention in setting guidelines for membership was to insure that black women were not among BPW members, and thereby to keep from splitting the organization and alienating southern women. See Chapter III for a discussion of racial issues.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 209.

\textsuperscript{24} Nell B. Lynn, "The Market for Ability, notes from a Speech Delivered at the Executive Meeting at New Orleans," \textit{Independent Woman II} (March 1921), 29.
successful" prompts a closer look at who these business women were and what types of jobs they held.

National and local club records and publications, and data on individual club members from the manuscript Fourteenth Census of Population (1920) can help explain who the clubs' members were and why they saw themselves as successful. The information that follows is based on two clubs used as case studies, the 1919-1920 Buffalo, N.Y., Zonta Club, and the 1920 Portland, Maine, Business and Professional Women's Club. Buffalo was chosen because it was the original Zonta club, founded in 1919, and through much of the 1920s was among the largest Zonta clubs in the country. Portland BPW was founded in 1920, soon after the national organization was formed. Within two years, the club had 655 members, making it the largest club proportional to the population of the city of any BPW club in the United States. Portland and Maine in general were enthusiastic supporters of the BPW concept. Maine led the eastern U.S. in the formation of BPW clubs for some six years in the 1920s.25

Other comparative statistics include systematic random samples from the Fourteenth Census of all working women in Buffalo and Portland. Additional data come from membership records of various other Zonta and BPW clubs from the 1920s and early 1930s, and from lists of women who attended BPW national conventions in 1920

and 1921. Buffalo and Portland numbers for club members and all working women in
those cities reflect those women's jobs in 1920. Statistics for other BPW and other Zonta
members include occupations from throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s.

Buffalo and Portland serve as in-depth case studies that reveal considerable detail
about club members and other women in those cities at one point in time. The remaining
statistics provide breadth of geography and time. The purpose of using a case study from
each organization and the other data is not to compare one city or one club to another,
although that sometimes can be instructive. Instead, the purpose is to develop as
comprehensive as possible a picture of women who defined themselves as business
women by joining Zonta and the Business and Professional Women's clubs. The
combination of the statistics allows such a picture to develop and helps mitigate some of
the biases of the sources.

26 The Buffalo Zonta Club data are based on 147 women who were either charter
members or joined within the first year. A total of 192 women fit that description, but I
was able to locate only 147 of them in the Fourteenth Census for Buffalo. Portland's data
are based on 188 women who were charter members or joined within the first year. The
club had a total of 231 members during that time. For a complete description of sources
of the remaining data and information on the systematic random samples, see Appendixes
II and III.

27 These data have several limitations. First, occupational statistics for the Buffalo
Zonta Club, Portland BPW Club, and "all working women" categories come from the
manuscript 1920 census, while statistics for "other" BPW and Zonta categories were
gleaned from club membership lists. Different criteria probably were used by census
enumerators and clubs themselves to categorize members' jobs. Because of Zonta's
classification system, "Other Zonta" statistics, which reflect memberships of twelve clubs
from 1924-1932, probably are more heavily weighted toward upper-end occupations than
were the clubs themselves. Jobs that were specified on these lists were probably the
higher level ones. Women in lower-level jobs often were listed by employer or category
only with no job title given. They were omitted from the statistics. The "other" category
The statistics about occupations of Portland and Buffalo club members come primarily from individual entries in the manuscript 1920 census. I grouped occupations into what seemed logical categories for analysis, based primarily on status and skill of the work involved. The statistics for "other BPW" and "other Zonta" club members are based on the clubs' records of what women did for work, not on census entries.

These statistics, at first glance, suggest that many club members were engaged in the types of occupations one might expect for white, mostly middle-class women. (See Table 2) In Portland, nearly half of the BPW members worked at jobs clustered in three areas. Stenographers, bookkeepers, and teachers made up close to a majority of members and were the only occupational groups that included 10 percent or more of the club's members.

for BPW also is weighted toward upper-end occupations because it includes almost 800 names (some 70 percent of the "other" category) of women who attended national conventions in 1920 and 1921. Women who had financial resources and occupational freedom to attend such gatherings probably were the more "elite" members of local BPW clubs. The remainder of "other BPW" includes data on members from two other clubs, Bangor, Maine, and New Orleans, which can help balance the numbers from the convention.

Determining status and skill is difficult. I tried to use common-sense categories, aided by distinctions the clubs made about occupations. As will be shown, the sense of status most Americans hold is disrupted by a close examination of the lives of BPW and Zonta club members.

I am using "middle-class" broadly to connote adherence to values related to career success and achievement as well as to club membership, but also to distinguish them from women in factory or domestic service jobs.
Table 2

Percentages of club members in selected occupational groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational group</th>
<th>Port. BPW N=188*</th>
<th>Other BPW N=147</th>
<th>Buff. Zonta N=147*</th>
<th>Other Zonta N=480</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total clerical</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookkeepers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenographers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total trade, professional</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-factory manual trades</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total higher-level white collar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office workers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers, etc.¹</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper professionals ²</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proprietors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total managerial</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate officers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial supervisors ³</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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Among more than 1,000 other BPW members nationwide in the 1920s, white collar workers were more prominently represented.\textsuperscript{30} Still, the largest single percentage of these members were clerks, followed by "other" white collar workers: social workers, agency directors, journalists, librarians, and women in advertising and public relations.\textsuperscript{31}

Similar categories dominated the Buffalo Zonta Club. Bookkeepers, clerks, and "other" white collar workers each claimed 10 percent of the club's membership. However, the largest single percentage of members were listed in the census as not working at all, an issue I will discuss below.

Members of "other" Zonta clubs in the 1920s and early 1930s held higher-status jobs overall than women in the other categories. The largest single group were non-
clerical white collar workers, followed by business proprietors and women in the arts.\textsuperscript{32} The "other BPW" and "other Zonta" figures consistently show higher-level occupations primarily because of the nature of the sources.

No one club within either organization can be representative of the entire organization. The clubs developed their own personalities, based in part on who organized the groups. In Portland, for example, founding members included at least seven teachers and the principal from the Maine School for the Deaf. The club's first president also was a teacher and brought in a number of other teachers or school administrators as members. Even though Zonta operated on a classification system that helped control and direct membership, the same thing could happen in a Zonta Club. In the New York City club in 1925, more than a third of the club members were engaged in the arts, working as writers, actresses, artists, or musicians.\textsuperscript{33} All clubs aimed for a diversity of membership, but most clubs developed personalities that attracted women in certain fields of work. Therefore, despite the differences in sources and some of the biases inherent in the "other" clubs data, these figures are useful to help round out and balance the numbers from the two local clubs.

\textsuperscript{32} These figures are based on membership lists from the following clubs: Detroit, Flint, and Grand Rapids, Mich., 1924; New York City and Toledo, Ohio, 1925; Washington, D.C., 1927; Los Angeles and Schenectady, N.Y., 1929; Seattle, 1930; Cleveland, 1931; and St. Louis, 1932.

\textsuperscript{33} Data from "Membership List of the Zonta Club of New York," \textit{Zontian IV} (May 1925), 9.
Except for the Portland BPW Club, at least 10 percent of club members held highest status jobs such as professionals, upper-level office workers, managers, and corporate executives. (See Table 3) In addition, between 11 and 37 percent of all club members held upper status jobs; they were school officials, social workers, journalists, business proprietors, or managers. When data from all club groups are combined, about one out of six of the women held highest status jobs. Another fourth were in upper status jobs. Thus, altogether, some 40 percent of BPW and Zonta members fell into the combined categories of highest and upper status jobs, positions at which members fulfilled club pronouncements such as "most successful."

What about the other 60 percent of club members? They, too, would have had to meet expectations that they were among the top women in their communities. How can statistics that show a majority of club members at "medium" level jobs be reconciled with phrases officials used to describe the lofty achievements of their members? First, it is necessary to look more closely at the women and statistics that make up the previous tables to understand who club members were, how they saw themselves, and therefore how they saw the world around them.

34 It makes sense to average the figures to moderate the higher numbers from the "other Zonta" and "other BPW" groups and the lower figures from Portland BPW. Portland BPW held the distinction in some years in the 1920s of having the largest club as compared to the city's population. It likely achieved those numbers (nearly 700 members in 1922) by pulling in more women from lower status jobs, where larger numbers of women were likely to be found. The Portland club, therefore, probably is not representative of all BPW clubs.
Table 3

Percentages of BPW and Zonta members in highest and upper status jobs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status groups</th>
<th>Portland BPW N=188</th>
<th>Other BPW N=1101</th>
<th>Buffalo Zonta N=147</th>
<th>Other Zonta N=480</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest status¹</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper status²</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low and mid status</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: See Table 2.

¹ Includes doctors, lawyers, judges, capitalists, various managers and supervisors, and titled corporate officers.

² Includes most non-clerical white collar jobs, school principals and superintendents: business proprietors, and upper-level trade jobs such as real estate and insurance agents, department managers, brokers and non-retail sales persons.

Note: Artists and musicians are not included in either category due to the imprecise nature of the title.

Comparing Zonta and BPW members to other working women is useful since occupations were so segregated and stratified by sex. The clubs were exclusively women's organizations, with members coming from among working women in their cities. Therefore, comparing members to those larger pools of working women helps to further define these self-defined business women. When describing their members, club officials implicitly and sometimes explicitly called them superior women. There was little room in the language of the 1920s to discuss whether BPW or Zonta clubs were composed of the best "business persons" or the best "managers." Club members were in a somewhat precarious position when they described themselves as tops among women. On one hand, they seemed to recognize that work itself was heavily gendered. Occupations
most open to women often came with lower status, pay, and opportunity. On the other hand, many BPW and Zonta members believed that their achievements and influence were comparable to those of men in business. The two beliefs could exist simultaneously, a result of a recognition, but not total acceptance, of the limits gender effected in the workplace. Hence, the clubs for the most part compared members to other women, while implying they were comparable to men.

Zonta and BPW members held higher skill and higher status jobs than other working women in their cities.35 (See Table 4) For example, Buffalo Zonta members were eight times more likely to have high status jobs than all Buffalo's working women. Equally significant, club members rarely held the types of jobs that many working women did: domestic service, lower-level service and factory.

35 The Buffalo and Portland working women in this sample are ages 21 and older. The Portland BPW club limited membership to women age 21 and older. Buffalo Zonta had one younger member, but the effective lower age limit was 21. Therefore, to help make more accurate comparisons, the sample's lower age limit is 21.
### Table 4

Occupations of club members and all working women in Portland and Buffalo (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupations</th>
<th>Portland BPW (N=188)</th>
<th>All Portland (N=579)</th>
<th>Buffalo Zonta (N=147)</th>
<th>All Buffalo (N=549)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic, other service</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined clerical(^1)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper status(^2)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest status(^3)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other occupations(^4)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Buffalo Zonta Club membership lists; Portland, Maine, Business and Professional Women's Club membership lists, Fourteenth Census of Population, Buffalo, Erie County, New York; and Portland, Cumberland County, Maine.

\(^1\) Includes higher-status clerical jobs such as private secretary, accountant, and agents.

\(^2\) Includes most non-clerical white collar jobs, school principals and superintendents, business proprietors, and upper-level trade jobs such as real estate and insurance agents, department managers, brokers and non-retail sales persons.

\(^3\) Includes doctors, lawyers, judges, capitalists, managers and supervisors and titled corporate officials.

\(^4\) Includes nurses, teachers, saleswomen, arts-related occupations.

Only in clerical categories were all working women represented in numbers comparable to Zonta and BPW members, a similarity that reflects the proliferation of clerical jobs for women in the early twentieth century and that helps demonstrate the gendered nature of occupations. As several historians have demonstrated, clerical work...
held promise and opportunity for decent wages and working conditions for women in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{36}

Clerical work, though, referred to a variety of types of jobs, salaries, and levels of responsibility. The census included various agents, office boys and girls, bookkeepers, stenographers, and clerks among clerical workers. The 1920 census lists nearly 17 percent of all working women in the United States in clerical jobs, a lower percentage than is reflected in the clubs' memberships. Of these, 25 percent were bookkeepers, 27 percent clerks, and 40 percent stenographers. The remainder were office girls and agents.\textsuperscript{37} Nearly a third of all BPW members and slightly fewer than a third of all Zonta members held some type of clerical job. Even within the clubs, however, members recognized distinctions among types of clerical work and types of jobs individuals held.\textsuperscript{38}

When Portland BPW members split into vocational groups to discuss common concerns, the clerical workers were split into office clerks, bookkeepers and stenographers. These statistics are similarly separated to recognize the important differences club members and society saw among the jobs. In addition, higher-level office jobs are broken out. These include private secretaries, office managers, accountants,

\textsuperscript{36} See, for example, Lisa M. Fine, \textit{The Souls of the Skyscraper: Female Clerical Workers in Chicago, 1870-1930} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); and Strom, \textit{Beyond the Typewriter}, 317-326.


\textsuperscript{38} See especially Strom, \textit{Beyond the Typewriter}; and Fine, \textit{The Souls of the Skyscraper}.
auditors, and various types of agents. Higher-level office jobs, while considered clerical in census and other statistics, more reasonably belong in a managerial or upper white collar category.

Bookkeeping and clerking were among the better clerical jobs. Stenographers, the lowest status clerical workers after office girls, took dictation, typed, or did other often routine work. Clerks' jobs could entail considerable skill and some independent judgment. Some clerks handled filing, others were in charge of various types of accounts, some controlled shipping. Bookkeepers usually had special training in that skill and were considered as holding some of the most desirable jobs. One indication of the desirability, status, and possibilities of various clerical jobs is the number of men who held them. Men made up the largest percentage of all clerical groupings other than stenographers. In the other lower status clerical job, office boys and girls, 87 percent were males, although this category drew the youngest workers. Stenography was clearly a woman's province, and the least desirable of the "adult" jobs for men. Even though men dominated the clerical categories in 1920, only 5 percent of all working men were clerical workers, as compared to 17 percent of all working women. The numbers reflect the wider opportunities for men.

Even with general descriptions of the responsibilities of each type of clerical job, it was difficult to determine the meaning of that job from the title alone. A stenographer

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39 See Strom, Beyond the Typewriter, 82-83. Strom includes statistics that show that while numbers of female bookkeepers were increasing in 1920 and 1930, considerable numbers of men still held such jobs, an indication of their status.
might have had little opportunity for independent judgment on the job or might have been trusted with higher-level tasks. Historian Sharon Hartman Strom has noted that clerical work was termed "light manufacturing" because of its repetitive and routine nature. Employers often saw stenographers as parallels to factory operatives.  

Another title that was even more variable in meaning was "secretary." A secretary could have been a private secretary who filled in for her boss and had considerable independence at work, or might have been an agency director and corporate official. The census recognized these differences among "secretaries," while grouping all levels of other clerical occupations together.

Only two Portland BPW members were enumerated as "secretaries" in the census. After census enumerators interviewed residents and listed their job titles and circumstances of employment, census workers in Washington, D.C., coded the census forms, creating categories of workers that have survived as the published summaries of the decennial census. In the 1920 census, these occupational codes are written onto the forms that were later microfilmed, allowing researchers to examine both the enumerators' occupational listings and the census bureau's codes. For example, Ellen M. Aikens, 28, was the industrial secretary of the YWCA, a job akin to a department director. She was enumerated as a "secretary" and coded with welfare or social workers. The other

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40 Strom, Beyond the Typewriter, especially 172-226.

41 In 1920, Bureau of the Census workers in Washington wrote occupational codes directly on the enumeration forms, making this analysis possible. A discussion of these codes appears later in this chapter.
Portland "secretary," Ella Crocker, 33, a divorced mother of one, was coded as a bank cashier, and listed in club records as a secretary at a company.

In Buffalo, four Zonta members were "secretaries," according to census enumerators. Three were categorized as "clerks," while the fourth, Edith M. Parsons, 30, was coded as "manufacturers and officers." Club records show her as secretary and treasurer of Dusing & Hunt Inc., a manufacturer of metal doors. Club records show the three "clerk" secretaries as Harriet Gloyd, 40, who worked for a telephone manufacturer; Catherine M. Phillips, 30, who worked for a lumber manufacturer; and Stella Thomas, 42, secretary to a cigar retailer.42

However, titles themselves were not necessarily indicators of the work the woman did. Five others were listed by Buffalo census enumerators as private secretaries and coded by Washington, D.C., census workers as clerks or stenographers. Clara McCollum, did hold the title "private secretary" in 1920, but she also was advertising manager of Buffalo Specialty Co. and later became a corporate official. The only woman enumerated as a private secretary who was not coded as a clerk was Florence Pierce, who was coded as a stenographer, but ran the Pierce School of Stenography.

A "stenographer" might have handled some bookkeeping or the more personal types of clerical services a private secretary did. A good example of this was Jeannette Craig of the Portland club. An item in the club's newspaper column noted:

42 Because Zonta operated on classifications, job titles are not always listed on club records. In many cases, I was able to discern job titles from other information, either newspaper publicity, club publications, or minutes of meetings.
In the directory, Miss Craig is listed as a stenographer in the office of John Calvin Stevens, architect, but everyone also knows that she is a great deal more important to the establishment than any mere stenographer would be. Indeed, Miss Craig is a sort of general factotum. She knows just about as much about the business as anybody in the establishment except the Mssrs. Stevens themselves.43

Craig even designed the house that she and her mother occupied, using skills she learned on the job. Jeannette Craig may have been an exception among stenographers in general, but she likely reflected the experiences of a number of those in the business women's clubs. The paragraph about her suggests, as well, that women did not have to move up job ladders in order to be considered successful, at least among club members.

The issue of job titles drew the attention of the national BPW magazine in 1921. The *Independent Woman* ran an editorial decrying the problem of job titles that did not represent actual job duties. "Many women are doing the job of office manager at the title and salary of a stenographer," the publication noted, suggesting that women demand the "title, respect and salary" that went with their jobs, as men had long ago learned to do. It gave the example of a woman who was paid as a stenographer, but when she left the company to take a job where her actual work was recognized, she was replaced by two employees, a man and a woman. She had been doing "executive" work with the salary and benefits of a stenographer.44

When a founder of the Buffalo Zonta club was traveling around the Midwest organizing new clubs, she said to a companion that Zonta could "remove the obstacles of

43 "Efficiency Plus, All the Time ... That Describes Jeannette Craig, Stenographer and Member of Business Women's Club," *Portland Daily Press*, September 3, 1921, 5.

44 "Name Your Job," *Independent Woman* II (May 1921), 8.
prejudice and old customs" that had slowed women's progress. It would now be possible "for a capable 'bookkeeper' to be recognized and paid as a 'treasurer.'”

Determining occupational status or success could be difficult, as business women themselves recognized.

The fact that club members were represented in larger percentages in clerical jobs than other working women is not, in itself, an indication that members were in low-status or dead-end jobs. Some of the Zonta and BPW members listed in the statistics in Table 2 as clerical workers certainly were the superior women the clubs sought as members. Others probably held lower-skill, less responsible positions. Many of the large numbers of clerical workers, as shown by the above discussion, believed they were in jobs with futures, and were in fact in jobs that paid better and had better working conditions than many of the alternatives.46 In any case, club members held much "better" jobs than did other working women in their cities, giving credence to their claims of occupational superiority.

A further comparison that sets club members apart from other working women is racial and ethnic backgrounds. Those factors were significant in determining what types of jobs women could obtain. Census entries from 1920 show Buffalo and Portland club members to have been exclusively white and predominantly native born. In the Portland


46 Strom, Beyond the Typewriter, 10; Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 147-149.
BPW Club, 94 percent of members were native born, with the remainder coming from Canada. In Buffalo, 86 percent of the Zonta Club members were native born, with more than half of the rest from Canada. This is in contrast to all working women in the two cities, many more of whom were immigrants, especially in Buffalo. (See Table 5) Club members also were more likely than other women to have native-born parents. Both factors would have affected the types of jobs women might get and their chances for advancement.\textsuperscript{47} Native-born white women and immigrants from western and northern Europe usually had access to the better jobs for women. Many offices, stores, and other venues of commerce would not hire immigrants, African-Americans, or, in some cases, daughters of immigrants. By virtue of their ethnicity alone, the BPW and Zonta members were more likely to be among the most successful women.

\textsuperscript{47} For examples of how racial and ethnic discrimination worked, see Kessler-Harris, \textit{Out to Work}, 137-140; and Strom, \textit{Beyond the Typewriter}, 273-313.
Table 5
Birthplaces of members of Buffalo Zonta, Portland BPW, other working women in those cities; and parents of each group.¹
(Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Port. BPW N=188</th>
<th>BPW parents N=376</th>
<th>All Port. N=579</th>
<th>All Port. parents N=1158</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-U.S</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6²</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Buff. Zonta N=147</th>
<th>Zonta parents N=294</th>
<th>All Buff. N=547</th>
<th>All Buff. parents N=1094</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-U.S</td>
<td>6³</td>
<td>25⁴</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Manuscript Fourteenth Census of Population Buffalo City, Erie County, New York; Portland City, Cumberland County, Maine.

¹ Parents birthplaces average the percentages for birthplaces of fathers and mothers.
² Includes 2 percent, England and Scotland; 4 percent, Ireland; and less than 1 percent, Germany.
³ Includes 2 percent each from England-Scotland, Italy, and Germany.
⁴ Includes 10 percent from Germany, 7 percent, England-Scotland, 5 percent Ireland, 1 percent Italy, and less than 1 percent each France and Russia.

Club members were cognizant of the effects of race and ethnicity on occupations, as evidenced by the early debates referred to in Chapter III in which Business and Professional Women's Club members, especially, separated themselves from manual
workers, and from African-Americans. They said little about the issue of class, as they described themselves as "superior" and "most successful." Yet some of the club members came from working-class backgrounds and others remained in jobs that might be considered working class, such as hairdressing and dressmaking. Census statistics provide limited clues into class backgrounds. It is only when the working women are listed as daughters, stepdaughters, or perhaps nieces, and are living at home with parents who are still working that such information can be gleaned. These numbers have limited value since it includes a fairly selective group. Nevertheless, the similarities between the Portland BPW and Buffalo Zonta members and between all working women in the two cities are remarkable. Close to half of all working women in each city came from working class backgrounds, while about a fifth of the club members in each city came from such backgrounds.\footnote{The same statistics suggests that about one in ten of the club women held higher status jobs than the parent (or close relative) with whom they lived, while about two in ten of all working women in the two cities held higher status jobs than their parent. The smaller number of club women improving job status over that of a parent is logical, since more of them came from "middle class" homes and were therefore likely to hold "middle class" occupations. The proliferation of clerical jobs also accounts for the rise in.}

\footnote{Among the problems with these figures is the fact that club members held "better" jobs than other working women, likely earned more, and therefore were more likely to move away from home, as other statistics indicate. Therefore, the backgrounds of club members might be skewed. The same phenomenon could occur among the samples of working women as well. In addition, given the older average age of club members, those living with parents were more likely to live with a parent or parents who no longer worked.}
status for many women, whose parent may have been a laborer or factory worker. The
daughter's clerical job was an increase in status because it represented a type of white
collar work with the possibility of advancement.

Club discussions, as well as Zonta's classification system and policies, elevated
club members from what they saw as less desirable jobs and less desirable attitudes about
work. If they compared themselves to other workers, it was to other women, not to
parents or other relatives. In many ways, the club members expressed solidarity among
women, but solidarity did not mean equality. Club members were concerned, for
themselves and for others, about women's opportunities for advancement. They believed
some of those opportunities were dependent on the woman's behavior and attitudes, but
also saw ways in which society limited women's possibilities.

The clubs were worried about occupations becoming dominated by women,
women getting (or not getting) promoted, women entering male domains, as well as the
need for women to gain better training. The success of any woman would help all
women. Their inclusiveness and lofty language went hand-in-hand with their
exclusiveness. They believed in their own superiority among women, but also believed
that all women needed a chance to succeed. They saw no contradiction in the two
positions. Achievement was the primary goal and, in advancing, they might open the way
for or inspire other women.

At a National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs convention
in 1925 an Education Committee member noted the rise in the number of women clerical
workers. "This should give us some cause for thought," she reported. "Before women
make this field their own, there should be some assurances that it does not become a blind
alley occupation. A good education and "steady drive" would be part of that assurance,
she said. Another speaker at a BPW convention noted that typewriting and stenography
were responsible for opportunities being opened for business women, but, she cautioned
the audience, "Now the big question is not to limit women to a few occupations in that
big business field but keep open the way for executive positions." A session at another
convention focused on "Ways Up and Ways Out" in secretarial work. An article in the
BPW magazine stated: "Nursing is peculiarly women's work. It is the one profession
where there is not competition with men. The field is clear for their own activities."

Gender, which drew the women together, also was likely to affect their chances
for advancement. As the article on nursing noted, women could more easily advance there
because it was a woman's field. In fields dominated, controlled, or populated by men,
women would have a more difficult time. Gender realities in the workplace might affect
opportunities for these self-defined business women. The women identified both as
women, with interests linked to those of other women, but also sought to gain access to
the possibilities open to men, and thereby erase some of the lines of gender.

49 Hester M. Smith, quoted in "National Federation of Business and Professional
Women's Clubs Seventh Annual Convention, Portland, Maine, July 1925," BPW/USA,
132.

50 Mary Van Kleeck, quoted in "Third Annual Convention, NFBPWC July 19-21,
1921, Hotel Statler, Cleveland, Ohio," BPW/USA, 227.

51 "Program of Tenth Annual Convention, July 9, 1928," BPW/USA, 21-22.

52 Agnes S. Ward, "Call for Nurses," Independent Woman II (January 1921), 5.
The concepts of career and advancement as both goals and symbols of individual initiative and worth had been parts of American mythology at least since Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*. Perhaps the best known purveyors of the concept were the nineteenth century "rags to riches" stories of Horatio Alger and others. These were stories about boys or men, but the women who called themselves business women and joined Zonta and BPW saw themselves in a similar light. As various critics have noted, Horatio Algers rarely began in rags and did not always end in riches. The 1920s versions generally focused on achievement in a corporate environment, rather than individualistic advancement.53 Women who joined Zonta and BPW seemed to adopt many of the traits of the old stories -- hard work, virtuous behavior and ambition. But they saw themselves in the corporate model as well, moving up occupational ladders in companies or organizations.

Headlines and stories in BPW and Zonta publications and publicity about club members in local newspapers are one indication of how the club members thought about careers and advancement. Sometimes these stories noted that the achievements they chronicled were unusual for women, although under such circumstances they frequently suggested that the woman was just the first and many more would follow. At other times they ignored the fact that "rags to riches" was a male model and the women might be seen

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by society as interlopers. For example, a Zonta magazine article in 1921 was entitled "Don't Stay at the Bottom, More Room at the Top." It encouraged members to seek advancement for themselves and other women.54 "Manhattan Chapter Outdoes the Rotary Club, With Many Female Go-Getters in Ranks," a newspaper sub-heading proclaimed, suggesting that not only were the women ambitious and hard-working, but they could be favorably compared to men as well.55

Fennella G. Crowell of Buffalo, a pianist and piano teacher, who had to give up her chosen profession because of injured arms, bought, and operated for many years, a company that manufactured boiler tube scrapers. She was quoted as saying, "The modern woman can adapt herself to any situation."56 For Crowell, women were able to succeed at any number of occupations, given the ambition or need to do so. Elizabeth Dickinson, who had turned her husband's clock repair shop into a large jewelry store, said, "Women can do anything they desire."57 She, like Crowell, believed gender was no barrier to success. Mabel Lord of Portland was head bookkeeper for Maine Dental Supply until early in 1921, when she went to Pittsburgh for three months to study life insurance. She planned to work for Phoenix Mutual and "hoped to eclipse the record of her brother, 

54 "Don't Stay at the Bottom, More Room at the Top," Zontian II (December 1921), 11.

55 The Evening Telegram (New York), Dec. 9, 1923, ZCB, Scrapbook, n.d.


Harold Lord, one of the Phoenix salesmen who wrote over a quarter million dollars' worth of life insurance the previous year. She clearly believed women could succeed and could compete with men, including with a particular man if need be.

Mary R. Cass, manager of the box manufacturer in Buffalo, reached a position usually reserved for a man. On her thirtieth anniversary with the company, she was "Honored by Her Male Associates and Competitors." A "Famed Buffalo Interior Decorator" became one of the "Few Women Landscape Architects." One headline, "Buffalo Woman Stands Alone In Unusual Engineering Achievements," suggested an elite achievement for a woman, while another praised "Miss B.G. Schwartz, Cincinnati" who "probably knows more about exports than any other woman in Middle West."

Following the rags-to-riches model, success might mean riches, or might have other implications. A Portland headline, "Prosperous Business Woman; Member of Local Club Whose Earnings Were $8,000 Last Year," stressed money. Another club member, however, was less enamored of the idea of monetary wealth. Katherine Walsh, president


61 "Buffalo Woman Stands Alone In Unusual Engineering Achievements; Zonta Member Predicts More Girls In Work," Buffalo Courier-Express, September 1, 1928. ZCB, Scrapbook, 8; Independent Woman III (January 1922), 9.

of the Rochester, New York, Zonta Club in 1926, said at the national organization's annual convention:

We are an organization of business women and business is supposed to enable us to earn a livelihood and to amass property, but we would be only slaves to the inner man if we let food, raiment and luxury rule our lives. Property is indeed sacred, but man is more sacred. Property is sacred because it serves humanity and in our mad rush we must not let the servant become the master.63

The theme was echoed by the national BPW president, Adelia Prichard, in 1924. She told the annual convention that, "As the days go by may we learn more and more of true values, realizing that service rendered rather than dollars made is our standard of true worth."64

Several others were less specific about the meaning of "success": "Helen Ferris and Her Success: How One Clever Girl Mounted the Ladder of Success Through Actual Experience" and "Why Success Came to Eleanor Hayden of the Hampton Shop."65 The lead paragraph from another story sums up the rags-to-riches achievement ideal of these clubs:

Energy, enterprise and initiative are among the prime qualifications of members of the Business and Professional Women's Club, but no one has done more to demonstrate that "where there's a will there's a way" than Mrs. Lillian Cheney ... who is the club's only grocer.66


64 "Sixth Annual Convention, West Baden, Ind., July 1924, NFBPWC," BPW/USA, 25.

65 Independent Woman II (March 1921), 10, 12.

For women, rags-to-riches achievements did not necessarily mean attaining great wealth, and, in fact, might mean rejecting it in favor of a higher goal. It did mean working hard and being ambitious.

These business and professional women believed that the promise of American economic opportunity applied to them. The stories presented the successful woman who focused on her career and sought advancement while retaining "womanly" values and behaviors. But "success" for women could differ in several ways from that depicted in the mythical scenario. First, regardless of how hard a woman worked, how moral her behavior, or how large her talent, her opportunities to rise to the same kinds of jobs men had were limited. The fact that some women, like Mary Cass, rose to those jobs is not evidence that any woman could. Women added their own elements to the myth.

Economic independence was the first major addition. Many club members likely were not opposed to accumulating great wealth, but economic independence was a more realistic goal for many of these women. Independence meant self-support, not separation from men, and was a relatively new concept for women. While marriage and childbirth rates for white women had dropped earlier in the century, by the end of World War I, the

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67 Blackford, *A History of Small Business in America*, suggested that small business offered personal independence, something revered by most Americans. Even as small businesses became less viable in the 1920s, independence remained a goal of proprietors. However, this concept of independence is only partly economic, as was independence for women. Blackford is referring mostly to freedom from supervision and structure. Business women sought economic independence, even if they were not proprietors.
numbers were on the rise again. Women had gained control over their wages and property as the nineteenth century progressed, but marriage was still their most reliable route to economic security. Women's wages were lower than men's; marriage and motherhood, rather than paid careers, remained the norm for white, privileged women. The Zonta or BPW woman's economic independence probably meant ability to support herself and perhaps other family members as well.

Determining economic independence without income figures is difficult, but census data can provide some clues. First, women who lived alone or who headed households likely were economically independent. (See Table 6) A fifth of Buffalo Zonta Club members and a quarter of Portland BPW members headed their own households, as compared to fewer than one out of six of all working women in those cities. In addition, larger numbers of club members than other working women were boarders, meaning that they lived in a room in a family household or larger establishment. While boarding is not synonymous with economic stability, it is an indication that the woman was relatively economically independent of others. Finally, nearly half of the working women in

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69 The Fourteenth Census did not ask about income or provide any other means of determining economic conditions of individuals.

70 Census notations for heading a household may not give an accurate indication of the actual circumstances of the women. A woman who was married and living with her husband in a home with one of their sets of parents would have been listed as "daughter" or "daughter-in-law" in the census. I tried to correct these listings to show her as a "wife." However, a woman raising her children alone who was a boarder, or a single woman who was a boarder would be so designated, even though she effectively headed a household.
Buffalo and more than a third of those in Portland were daughters, living with one or both parents. In each city, at least 10 percent fewer club members than other working women were living with their parents, again suggesting they were more independent than other working women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to head of household of club members, all working women in Buffalo and Portland, 1920 (Percentages)</th>
<th>Buffalo Zonta N=147</th>
<th>All Buffalo N=549</th>
<th>Portland BPW N=188</th>
<th>All Portland N=579</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister*</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarder</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Manuscript Fourteenth Census of Population for Buffalo City, Erie County, New York; Portland City, Cumberland County, Maine; and membership lists of Portland Business and Professional Women's Club, 1920; and Buffalo, New York, Zonta Club, 1919-1920.

* Or in-law.
However, even living with one's parents was not necessarily an indication that the woman was economically dependent on them. In fact, a number of those women designated by the census as "daughters" of the head of the household were the only employed person in the household. This was true in significantly larger numbers for Zonta and BPW members than for other working women in the two cities. Among Buffalo Zonta members, 17 percent of the women listed in the census as "daughters" were the only employed persons in the household, as compared to 7 percent of the Buffalo working "daughters." The differences were more striking in Portland, where 32 percent of the daughters were the only employed persons in the household, as compared to 8 percent of the daughters of all working women in the city.\(^{71}\)

Another indicator of economic independence was women remaining single at older ages. Most historical treatment of working women in the early twentieth century notes that employers, and often women themselves, assumed they would work until they married, probably by their mid-20s. But women who remained single and remained in the workforce at older ages likely were able to support themselves and could therefore be considered economically independent.

However, one cannot assume that because a woman was married, she was economically dependent on a husband. Some women lived with husbands who were disabled or otherwise unable to work, and others, though enumerated as married, did not

\(^{71}\) About 17 percent of Zonta members, regardless of relationship to the household head, were the only person employed, as were about 10 percent of Buffalo working women. In Portland, a quarter of BPW members and 12 percent of all working women, regardless of relationship to the head of the household, were the only person employed.
live with spouses. Those married working women may well have been economically independent, as were some women married to men who earned enough to support the family. In the latter case, the woman may have earned sufficient income to support herself and was working not so much to ensure economic survival of the family as to fulfill her own occupational interests. Therefore, just knowing whether a woman was single or married and in the workforce is not sufficient to determine economic independence. Women who never married or remained single after reaching age 30 may have chosen careers over marriage, may have favored economic independence, or may have remained single by circumstance. However, the combination of being single and in the workforce after age 30, or remaining in the workforce while married with a spouse present, and then joining Zonta or BPW, is some indication of the importance of career and of economic independence. (See Table 7)

Statistics show that Zonta and BPW members remained single longer than other working women, and especially in comparison to all women in the country in 1920, regardless of whether those women worked. In addition to remaining single and working, the women in this study joined organizations for business and professional women, signaling their interest in and commitment to careers and career advancement. The statistics, of course, do not show intent. There is no way to tell from the numbers whether the women described as economically independent sought that independence as a goal or whether circumstances forced it upon them. For the Zonta and BPW members, other information about the individuals and about the clubs in general helps support the conclusion that for these women, whom statistics show to be more economically
in terms of living arrangements, independence was a choice, rather than a necessity; it was part of their pursuit of careers and occupational achievement.

Table 7

Percentages of working women 30 and older who were single in 1920

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Buff Zonta N=125</th>
<th>All Buff. N=280</th>
<th>Port. BPW N=168</th>
<th>All Port. N=345</th>
<th>All U.S. women N=21,066,693*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total single (ages 30+)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* All women in each age category, regardless of employment status.

Independence was important enough to at least some Portland BPW members that the term found its way into a club cheer. There is no evidence to indicate how often or under what circumstances the cheer was used, but some clubs adopted songs and cheers as part of their meeting agendas or to use to identify themselves at conventions. The Portland cheer was:
A final indication of economic independence, at least among members of Business and Professional Women's clubs, was a study undertaken in 1927 for the National Federation of BPW clubs. Researchers from the University of Michigan surveyed all 53,000 members of the organization, receiving some 14,000 replies. The women who responded in 1927 were similar to those enumerated above, whose characteristics are described for 1920. About 85 percent were single, widowed or divorced. Their average age was 38 and some 40 percent lived with parents or other relatives.

The study concluded that, although women in business and professions were not paid large sums, the median income of those who reported their earnings was slightly more than $1,500 a year, enough to make the women economically independent. The median yearly cost of living for a woman with dependents was about $900.

The study concluded that women who had their own businesses earned more than those earning salaries and that higher salaries were much more likely in commercial and

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73 Margaret Elliot and Grace E. Manson, Earnings of Women in Business and the Professions, Michigan Business Studies III (September 1930), 4.

74 Ibid., 1, 11, 14.
manufacturing organizations than educational institutions. The researchers found that women's earnings increased with experience for about the first twenty years they worked, then stayed constant for ten years before beginning to decline. Finally, they found that most of the women surveyed had no income other than their earnings.\textsuperscript{75}

The great majority of members of Business and Professional Women's clubs, the study noted, were economically independent, with many totally or partially responsible for the support of others.\textsuperscript{76} The study confirms the conclusion that club members were economically independent and helps support other data that suggest the importance of such independence to these business women.

Besides adding economic independence and recognizing limits in opportunity for women, one further way in which women rewrote the requirements for "success" was suggested by a Portland newspaper story about two Business and Professional Women's Club members who operated a lunch room.

Members of the Business and Professional Women's club appear to be the type of women who give a hundred cents' value on the dollar. Perhaps that is why so large a proportion of the membership can be counted as genuinely successful . . . the kind of success that really counts -- promptly paid bills and satisfied customers ...\textsuperscript{77}

This article, part of a regular series about the BPW club, defined success by one quality that seems particularly suited to women and traditional notions of women as nurturers:

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 1-3.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{77} "Lunch Room Proprietor One Members," \textit{Portland Daily Press}, May 14, 1921, 3.
satisfying customers. The second part of the definition, paying bills on time, is far from accumulating "riches," but probably much closer to how many women would have evaluated whether they were successful. For a woman to "succeed," she needed to be solvent, not necessarily wealthy, and she needed to demonstrate characteristics that could benefit her pursuit of business, such as satisfying customers, or having friendly, personal contact with employees.

Success for women also included an emphasis on ethical behavior. Many Americans came to criticize big business and big financiers in the Gilded Age for stressing money over needs of workers, and for engaging in questionable business practices. Many of the Progressive Era reform initiatives were in response to the excesses of the post-Civil War era.\textsuperscript{78} Even though most business women were not dealing with large amounts of capital and large corporations, the clubs sought to ensure that women behaved honorably, in whatever level they were engaged. Zonta's slogan, adopted in 1923, was "Fair, square, every time, everywhere." The organization's code, adopted in 1921, included pledges for members to be successful, ambitious, serve others, reject unscrupulousness, and keep in mind the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."\textsuperscript{79}


\textsuperscript{79} "Minutes of Meetings, First Annual Convention of Confederation of Zonta Clubs, May 20-21, 1921, Onondaga Hotel, Syracuse, N.Y.," ZI, 15.
The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, in 1924, adopted a resolution stating that the "business and professional women of America should be the standard bearers of right and advocate the highest ethics in national, state and community affairs," as well as in business dealings.\(^{80}\) Behaving ethically, as well as respecting customers and business associates, would help women gain the trust of the public and of employers. Morality long had been associated with women and it was an important aspect of their identity as \textit{business} women.

A related element of success was promoting cooperation among women. In both organizations, officers and others frequently made comments about the supposed feminine tendency to be jealous of one another and to undermine one another's efforts at achievement. BPW's national president in 1925 told convention-goers to keep the door closed to "personal ambition, petty spite, and jealousy."\(^{81}\) The theme was repeated year after year, nationally and locally. Instead, women were urged to help other women succeed, to put aside their own ambitions if such goals would harm others. National Federation of BPW Clubs President Lena Madesin Phillips, speaking in 1929, summarized the idea when she said, "The success of every woman is the obligation and

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{80} "Sixth Annual Convention, West Baden, Ind., July 1924, NFBPWC," BPW/USA, 450.

\end{flushright}

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opportunity of every other woman." She urged members to rise above envy, jealousy and fear of feminine competition.82

Cooperation as a goal was intended as more than a correction for women's supposed mistrust of one another. It also served as a rejection of the portion of the American myth that venerated individuality and "clawing" one's way to the top. In Phillips' conception of the value of cooperation, women's lack of opportunities and unequal status in society might be overcome if women helped one another.

Finally, for women, success meant perseverance. Clubs and members were proud of women who stayed in jobs for many years or whose shops and other businesses prospered for decades. In the late nineteenth century, women who operated millinery and dressmaking shops stayed in business an average of six years, with more prosperous ones lasting ten years or more. Small businesses have been known for their short durations.83 But many of the small businesses owned by club members lasted many decades.

In Portland, for instance, the Claritys' corset business began in 1906 and continued through the early 1940s. Sarah Blair opened a millinery shop in 1909 and continued through 1945. Lula Bowman operated a lunch room or restaurant, with a few breaks, from 1914 to 1955. Mabel Lord ran her insurance business from 1921 to 1955.


Ruby Jackson ran a secretarial-office services business from 1911 to 1946. Ethel Parkman operated a dressmaking business from 1896 through 1940.

In 1925, the Zonta Club of Buffalo contributed a column to the national magazine detailing the length of business service of club members. They listed only those members who had celebrated 20 years in their businesses. Mrs. Elizabeth Dickinson had managed the "largest jewelry house between New York and Chicago" for 50 years, Mrs. Rose Lawrence had been a hairdresser for 42 years, Mrs. Sophie Bierma managed her tea room for 40 years and brought up a family, Mary Cass had worked at Burt Box Co., which she now managed, for 34 years, Lillian McConkey had been a corsetiere 33 years, Dr. Maude Frye a doctor for 32 years, and celebrating their thirtieth years in business were Harriet Storck, supervisor of the Women's Hospital; Clair Shettleworth, a painter; and Agatha Bennett, an organist.

For 28 years, Dr. Lucy Kenner had been a doctor, and Flora Sherman had worked for a linseed manufacturer. Ann Charlot Cran had worked for Bradstreet for 26 years, and for 24 years, Maud I. Smith had worked for the phone company, Jean Adams had been in charge of the mail order department at Larkin, and Elizabeth Christmann had been in the roofing business with her brother. Rounding out the two-decade list were Philomena Cavanaugh, 23 years as publicity manager for the Shea Amusement Co.; Mary Kelly, 21 years as a buyer for a music store; Helen Glenn, 21 years in the family moving business; and Florence Drake, 21 years in the plumbing business.84

84 "Buffalo, N.Y.,” Zontian V (January, 1925), 9.
For women, success meant achievement, advancement, economic independence, ethical behavior, cooperation among women, and perseverance or career orientation. Several individual stories help illuminate not only these dimensions of success for the business woman, but some of the reasons these women and their experiences have escaped our historical notice. Beyond understanding the gendered nature of the term "success," we can explore how one of the most common tools for examining women's work experiences, the census, has failed to recognize many of the genuine occupational achievements of women.

Mary E. Clarity and Nellie M. Clarity, sisters who lived in Portland, opened their corset business in 1906, the first women in Portland to do so. Before that, Mary had been a corset buyer at a department store where her sister worked as her assistant. Both had taken courses in New York in anatomy and corset fitting. They advertised themselves as personal, scientific fitters providing their customers with both comfort and style. They had clients throughout Maine and in other states. Besides being corset makers, they also must have learned bookkeeping and business accounting, inventory control, sales, and public relations in order to keep their business profitable. As noted above, they remained in business until the 1940s.

The Clarity sisters, daughters of Irish immigrants, clearly had moved upward on an occupational ladder, reaching a place comparable to the traditional top rung: they owned their own business, employed other persons, were financially independent, and

85 "These Sisters Run Establishment on a Definite Plan," Portland Daily Press, April 30, 1921, 11.
were respected in their community. In 1922, they purchased their own home. Their small shop in Portland would not be the grist for rags-to-riches stories in magazines, but the Claritys provide a good example of how women negotiated success and achievement.

Stories such as the Claritys have been hidden in part because the women operated a small business in a small city. But they have been obscured for another reason as well. In the 1920 census, when Mary Clarity was 50 and Nellie was 40, both were coded in the census as "448," a number used to categorize semiskilled operatives in "corset factories." Included in the category were basters, boners and binders, machine operators and helpers, and home corset makers. None of those labels provides an accurate description of the Claritys. In census statistics, one of our major sources for determining what women did for work in the early twentieth century, Mary and Nellie Clarity were grouped with factory operatives, rather than with business proprietors.

This story could be repeated with other Zonta and BPW club members who owned businesses, including two other Portland women, Abba M. Harris and Ruby Jackson. They bought a small secretarial business in 1911. They increased its production at least five-fold by 1921, employed six persons, and were known for their efficient service. Both had been stenographers, but neither had previous experience running a business. They used their savings and a small loan to purchase the secretarial service.86 Harris, 38, and Jackson, 33, had operated Harris & Jackson for nine years when the 1920 census statistics were compiled.86

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census was taken. Harris was coded in the census as "994," a clerk, and Jackson as "999," a stenographer.

Buffalo Zonta member Ruth E. Scott, 33, owner of Scott Direct Advertising Co., was listed in the 1920 census as "980 Agents," a category that included "advertising agents, clerks, men, managers, or writers." Scott clearly was an advertising agent and writer, but she also owned her own business. Another Buffalo business proprietor, Hughie M. Grant, 48, who ran a hydrotherapeutic bath shop, was listed in the census as "936 Nurses (not trained)." As was the case with the Claritys and Harris and Jackson, the census occupational categorization and therefore census summary statistics erase these women's occupational achievements and the success they attained in operating small businesses.

Several historians and economists have written about gender biases in the census, especially the ways it has failed to recognize as "work" many activities of women, such as keeping boarders or being homemakers. Alba Edwards, who created the modern system of occupational categorization, often is cited as having instilled his own social and cultural biases into the census. Edwards saw certain jobs as appropriate for women and various immigrant groups. He instructed census enumerators to change listings that were inconsistent with those beliefs. Occupational categories also reflect his views on the importance of various jobs, determined especially by the sex or ethnicity of the majority of people in the job.87

The 1920 census is particularly useful in exploring occupational categories and how cultural beliefs might have affected placement of people in various categories. After enumerators went door-to-door, asking questions about age, household characteristics, ethnic background, marital status, and occupations, their hand-written forms were sent to Washington, D.C. to be tabulated. There, Bureau of the Census workers entered numerical codes for occupational categories directly on the enumerators' forms. Therefore, it is possible to examine individual entries in the 1920 census and compare the written description of the person's occupation with the added code, and with other available information about the person, as the previous examples of business proprietors illustrate.

Zonta and BPW members are excellent sources for this type of comparison. They identified themselves, at least in the organizations, by their occupations, and the clubs made a point of publicizing information about the women's careers. Therefore, it is possible, as with the owners of small businesses cited above, to begin to develop a more extensive picture than has been available previously of how the census misrepresented women's jobs.

Some BPW and Zonta members' codes under-reported their actual jobs. One especially dramatic example is Mary Cass, who had been general manager of the Burt Box Company in Buffalo since 1913. She was enumerated and coded in the 1920 census.

as a "clerk." Cass was, in fact, among the top women executives in the country, running a company with three factories and 900 employees. Other examples of under-reporting include Zontian Florence Fuchs, 29, who was listed in the census under "894, Librarians' assistants and attendants," a sub-category of "Attendants and helpers (professional service)." Fuchs, a graduate of the University of Buffalo Library School, had gone to law school for a year before switching her interests. She started work at the Buffalo Public Library as an assistant in the Children's Department, moved to the Order Department, and later to Buffalo's reference library. In 1919, she was named head of the Cataloging Department. The census enumerator listed her as a "helper," not a professional librarian, for which another code existed.

Some club members' experiences were distorted in other ways. For example, Mabel Spear in 1920 at age 47 was chief operator and assistant manager of the Rockland, Maine, phone company, where she had worked since 1898. Unlike many of the women they supervised, chief operators were part of management, often were career employees, and were paid decent salaries. A chief operator generally began as an ordinary operator and moved up through the ranks to a supervisory position. Spear was listed in the 1920 census as "674 Telephone Operator," a category that included everyone from junior operators to telephone company supervisors. Not only had Mabel Spear worked her way up the ladder at the Rockland phone company, but shortly after the census was taken, she had translated that experience into a job in Portland, a much larger exchange, where she
supervised some 150 operators and clerks. Later, she was transferred to the Boston headquarters of New England Telephone & Telegraph Co., where she was in charge of rest rooms, or lounges for women. She and other supervisors clearly belonged in a separate category from operators.

The same problem with folding employees and supervisors into one category appeared in other jobs. Zonta Club members Lauretta Burwell Stanton, 48, supervisor of special classes for the Buffalo Board of Education, and Ada M. Gates, 52, principal of School 36, both were listed under census category "862, Teachers (school)." Portland BPW member Helen M. Robinson, 41, also listed as "862," was deputy superintendent of the Portland Public Schools, having risen to that post by way of clerical work. Stanton and Gates had been teachers. The "862" category included everyone from school principals to tutors, governesses, sewing teachers, and assistant superintendents. That grouping eliminates any sense of upward movement by equating managers, supervisors, and teachers of many varieties.

Nursing supervisors were listed with nurses, buyers in stores with sales clerks. Some jobs held primarily by men were grouped in similar ways. In others, though, managers or superintendents were listed separately. Foremen and overseers, inspectors and managers of mines each were categorized separately, apart from mine operatives. The


89 "BPW Photographic Exhibit of Portland Covering West," Portland Evening Express & Advertiser, October 6, 1924, 8.
same was true in manufacturing. While men as well as women were affected by the collapsing of supervisory positions into lower-level jobs, the problem was especially acute for women, where those supervisory posts often represented the top of the occupational ladder available to them. Women were segregated into "women's" jobs in many cases (clerical, teaching, nursing, department stores). Opportunities for advancement for men and women from similar backgrounds were not the same. But these examples suggest that women moved up much more often than occupational statistics have implied.

Perhaps the most startling example of how the census misrepresented women's work is that 19 percent of Buffalo Zonta members and 6 percent of Portland BPW members were listed in the Fourteenth Census of Population as not working at all. Every one of those women appeared in club records as employed outside the home. It is possible that enumerators assumed the women did not work, or that family members, others who provided information to enumerators, or the women themselves failed to mention that they worked. The omissions might have been intentional or accidental, but are curious since the women identified with work enough to join organizations for business women.  

Among the women the census listed as having no occupation was Fennella Crowell, 44, owner and sole executive of the F.G. Crowell Co., manufacturer of boiler tube scrapers, who was quoted previously. The census listed her father as owner of the company; all other sources confirm that the daughter owned and operated it. Also listed

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90 Zonta, unlike the Bureau of the Census, recognized homemakers as workers. No members of the Buffalo Club were so classified, however.
as not working were unmarried Buffalo Zonta Club members Florence G. Danahy, 33, treasurer of the Danahy Meat Packing Co., which bore her late father's name; Genevieve Bachman, 27, bookkeeper for an appliance company; Clara Ulbrich, 40, manager and treasurer of a book store started by her late father; and Emily Heintz, 40, an art objects manufacturer. About a fifth of the "non-working" members were single. The remaining number were married, with spouses present. Of the married women listed as not working, about two-thirds worked in businesses with their spouses.91 Women working in family businesses often had been considered not employed or perhaps just "helping out."92 These numbers suggest that remained the case in 1920.

In Portland, slightly more than half of the "non-working" club members were single or widowed, and several more were married with no spouse present. Only one appeared to work in a family business. The remainder held a variety of jobs. Lou Horne, 37, married to a store manager, was a nurse, as was Jane Prevost, 46, wife of a factory manager. Flora P. Purington, 65, a widow, was a manicurist; Eva Chase, 24, Elizabeth Rines, 69, Annie Gordon, 51, and Julia S. Stevens, 51, all were single bookkeepers enumerated as not working. The reasons these women were not listed as employed remains unexplained. Regardless, such failures distort our view of women's work

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91 This figure is an estimate as it is not always possible from the census itself to determine if husband and wife are involved in the same business. In some cases, other information about the couples helped clarify this.

experiences by over-reporting the number of women, both single and married, who were not part of the paid work force.

In sum, that the census misrepresented women's work is clear on several counts. Women who owned and operated businesses often were listed by the skills or trades performed, not as business owners. Many categories combined supervisors with workers, thus hiding the areas where women (and men) could move up the ladder and gain added responsibilities. Some women's occupations were listed incorrectly or under-reported.

When all types of census misrepresentations are combined, 20 percent of Buffalo Zonta Club members and 15 percent of Portland BPW members were affected. Added to the 19 and 6 percent categorized as not working, an average of 30 percent of census occupational entries for club members were incorrect or misleading. Various historians and economists who have worked with the census have developed statistical methods for correcting biases that treat homemakers and boardinghouse keepers, for example, as not employed. It is possible that, with more research into individuals in the census, such statistical corrections could be made here as well. Nevertheless, what this study shows is that we cannot use summary census statistics about women's work without explaining the potential biases and omissions inherent in those statistics.

The picture that emerges from this study of business women before 1930 is a complex one. Clearly the women who joined BPW and Zonta, overall, would not compete on a traditional "success" scale with men at the very highest occupational levels.

93 See, especially, Goldin, Understanding Gender Bias.
of industry, government, or some professions. Yet that very scale is gendered, based on
men's experiences and therefore not appropriate as a measure to evaluate women. Many
members of the Confederation of Zonta Clubs and the National Federation of Business
and Professional Women's Clubs could and did call themselves "successful." They were
business proprietors, managers, journalists, supervisors, private secretaries, clerical
workers, doctors, or lawyers. Overall, they held "better" jobs than other working women
and they pursued those jobs as careers, seeking advancement, increased responsibility,
and higher pay. Many remained in their jobs or ran their businesses for thirty or forty
years.

Statistics that indicate that some 60 percent of the members of Zonta and BPW
held "medium" or lower level jobs may seem to contradict the clubs' own
pronouncements about their members. These self-proclaimed business women do not
appear to be as outstandingly successful as organizational publicity suggested. Yet, the
very source of those statistics, the census, is suspect. If women who clearly worked, but
were listed as not working are added; if women who were enumerated at lesser jobs than
they actually held are recategorized; and if categories are unpacked to reveal the
management and supervisory positions many women held, then the 60 percent will begin
dropping. In fact, a rough estimate of such changes would bring the total percentage of
Portland BPW members in the upper and highest status categories from 15 percent to 23
percent. In Buffalo, the numbers would rise from 39 percent to 63 percent in those two
categories. If the term "success" is reconceptualized to recognize the values, experiences
and achievements of women as well as men, then corsetiere Mary Clarity will emerge as
a woman's business success story just as private secretary Clara McCollum and general manager Mary Cass do. The 40 percent of members of the Confederation of Zonta Clubs and National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs who might be considered successful using traditional definitions and unedited census statistics would jump to about 50 percent if misrepresentations were eliminated and even higher if gender were taken into account.

One of the major reasons these women formed the Business and Professional Women's and Zonta clubs in 1919 was to announce to the community at large that women were serious, ambitious, career-oriented, and an important part of business life. The clubs were crucial as confirmation and support of women's ambitions in a business world they believed would offer chances for increased responsibility, status and influence. Clubs provided an alternative to professionalization, which was rampant in the 1920s, and was a process that often excluded women or made their participation difficult. By bringing together women of various occupations and backgrounds, the clubs offered a sense of legitimacy to the "business woman" and worked to raise the status of all members, improve conditions for women in business, bring ethical behavior to business dealings, and increase opportunities for all women. Club publicity that extolled its membership as "women who measure up to the highest standard" and "the country's most successful, best informed and efficient women" can then be seen as a clue to the existence of large

numbers of women who identified with business and believed their achievements were comparable to men.

The next chapter focuses on some specific ways in which the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs worked from 1919 to 1930 to promote women's business interests and to support them both in business and social activities.
CHAPTER V

"TO GROW BIG IN BUSINESS WAYS AND SOCIAL WAYS": THE DUAL FUNCTIONS OF BUSINESS WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS

Working for the Buffalo Automobile Club, Jessie Voorhis had mostly male co-workers. She had not been in Buffalo long in 1919 when she joined the group that founded the Confederation of Zonta Clubs, a group she raved about two years later in a letter to her fellow members. The business-related activities were helpful, but she had expected that. What she had not expected were the camaraderie and friendships that developed.

Voorhis recalled walking down a Buffalo street and having a Zonta Club member poke her in the back and say, "Hello, Jessie." Voorhis wrote:

"I hugged her on the spot ... It made me feel happier for the entire day ... When one of you girls call me Jessie, I grin and purr like a Cheshire cat ... It is the feeling back of the "Hello" which is the real thing and sends a warm glow to our hearts."

Voorhis was thrilled to be called by her first name, a sign of friendship among women, who often referred to one another and were referred to by others as "Miss" or "Mrs." and their last names. The companionship of women, the cordial nature of the organization, and learning from other women as they shared conversation and activities were the most important benefit of Zonta for Jessie Voorhis.

1 Zonting Zebra I (August 1921), Zonta Club of Buffalo collection, State University of New York at Buffalo Archives, Buffalo, New York, 5, 7. (Collection hereafter cited as ZCB)
Voorhis was not alone in viewing informal connections among women as significant advantages of belonging to an organization of business and professional women. Many women in the Confederation of Zonta Clubs and National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs commented on the friendship and companionship factor. The founders of both BPW and Zonta recognized and appreciated the value of friendships within the group even as they stressed the important work of gaining recognition for women's achievements, of keeping up with and influencing legislation, of promoting better educational opportunities for women, and, in general, of improving conditions and opportunities for business women.

These dual purposes of personal community and business influence were built into local, state and national groups. In many ways, the two goals were linked. The first and second presidents of the Portland, Maine, Business and Professional Women's Club captured the duality as they exchanged the gavel at the group's first annual meeting in the spring of 1921. Helen King, outgoing president, noted that the club had gotten off to a slow start. Potential members did not know one another and thus were leery of joining together in a new group, she said. To help gain "solidity," the executive committee decided to cater to the "social element." She said the effort had been successful. After all, the club had some 500 members by its first anniversary. But, she reminded those members, they also had to be ready to function in the work of the world and of the city. The new president, Mabel M. Spear, in saying she wanted the club to "grow big in business ways and social ways" envisioned a future in which the two purposes were
inseparable.²

Harriet Richards, the first full-time executive secretary of the Confederation of
Zonta Clubs, also saw the purposes as intertwined. Speaking to the fourth Zonta
convention in 1924, Richards noted that existing clubs had "a happy mixture of good
fellowship and serious thinking." They had combined camaraderie with a "desire for a
program that is not merely amusing and entertaining, but one that is constructive,
instructive, and educational." The combination would "stimulate and arouse" members to
"bigger things."³

Understanding BPW and Zonta, both nationally and locally, requires
understanding that dual nature. The stress on social as well as business contacts and
development allowed these mostly unmarried, work-oriented women to thrive as whole
persons, rather than focusing just on one part of their lives. It allowed them to develop
their ambitions and sense of themselves as successful business women as they associated
formally and informally with like-minded women. The combination of work and leisure
also brought together women of varying class and social backgrounds. Evidence exists in
club records of enduring friendships between teachers and corsetieres, stenographers and
physicians, daughters of immigrants and daughters of elite families. These "business
ways and social ways" were valuable organizationally to the clubs and personally to

² "Up to Women to Prevent War Threatening in Europe Declares Ida Clyde Clarke,"

³ "The Confederation of Zonta Clubs (Incorporated) Fourth Annual Convention,
Buffalo N.Y. May 16th and 17th, 1924, Minutes of Meetings," Zonta International,
Chicago, Illinois, 4-5. (collection hereafter cited as ZI)
many of their members.

The clubs were neither labor unions nor professional organizations, but they sought some of the goals of each: better working conditions and better pay, educational and training standards, ethical or behavioral ideals, and legislation to benefit -- or at least not harm -- women. Yet they also set themselves apart from business, labor, and traditional women's groups in their reluctance to take a stand on issues such as protective labor legislation. The clubs developed a unique type of personality. Patricia Schmidt, a biographer of Business and Professional Women's Club member and Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, suggests BPW members "were looking inward, and trying to survive in a domain which seemed far removed from hearth and home." BPW "was propelled essentially by enlightened self-interest, leavened by an emphasis on a spirit of cooperation and friendship."4

The "social ways" helped members in the domain that was alien to the expected role of women. Clubs' members looked for support and friendships that would help them survive, but they also were looking toward community and national institutions and values that would affect their successes. The clubs' activities could be seen as promoting their self-interests if those interests are broadly defined. They sought to champion themselves and their own economic success or advancement, but were not the rugged individualists of American myth. Equally important to individual success was improving conditions and making changes that would aid other women.

For the National Federation of BPW Clubs and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs, women’s business needs and the clubs’ "business ways" were more about being well informed as citizens of the community and the world, about being exposed to cultural activities and a variety of ideas, about being well-rounded persons, than about specific skills or vocational knowledge that might focus just on individual achievement.

The stated purposes of both Zonta and BPW were general enough that a variety of internal, member-focused, and external, community-focused, actions and activities could be undertaken to reach the goals. The National Federation of BPW Clubs set as its goals promoting the interests of business and professional women and securing combined action by them, gathering and distributing information relative to vocational opportunity, and stimulating cooperation among business and professional women. Zonta adopted goals of demanding fair dealings, high ideals and honest business methods; standardizing and disseminating business principles and practices; serving as a clearing house of possible club work; and promoting the broad spirit of good fellowship among Zontians and Zonta Clubs. Both groups also sought to attract and organize new clubs that would sustain the organizations.

In serving members' needs and meeting their goals, Zonta and BPW, locally and nationally, presented a variety of speakers and activities aimed at increasing members' knowledge about business and topics of interest and use to business women. These types of programs were fairly standard among the clubs, judging by national recommendations and reports of local activities in the official national publications.

Among the topics of meetings in Buffalo were Dante, disarmament, Americanism
and business, Europe, Poland and the Russian Revolution, the function of government,
parliamentary law, censoring motion pictures, law and order, psychology as an applied
science, state legislation relating to women in industry, soap making, the city court, the
role of universities, life insurance, opposition to the St. Lawrence project, Japan,
investments, racism, and crime. Members were encouraged in 1929 to attend a University
of Buffalo lecture series on Municipal Affairs that included sessions on finance, regional
planning, taxation, assessment, the role of citizens in government, school finances, and
recreational facilities. These talks broadened members' knowledge about their own
community and the world, as well as providing some specific ideas about managing one's
self or one's business.

In Portland, similar programs were offered at club meetings. Speakers in the
1920s covered various vocational topics, working conditions for girls, suggestions for
improvement of individual health, the city's employment and unemployment situation,
self defense for boys, a proposed municipal charter, wills and joint deposits, finance and
the business woman, life insurance, investments, savings banks, the city's centennial
plans, analyses of local, state and national legislation, parliamentary law, income tax,
citizenship, conditions in Europe and the Near East, applied psychology, women on
juries, the Constitution, the woman suffrage movement, and the local Chamber of
Commerce.

Portland also offered classes requested by members. These ranged from basketry
and millinery to business English, French, current events, parliamentary law, business
law, public speaking and budgeting for business women. A course in Business
Fundamentals in 1922 included sessions on Business Women and the Community, Thoughts on Management, Salesmanship, Advertising, and Income Management.

Not all advice or knowledge about business came from outsiders. Some of the lectures and courses mentioned were presented by club members. Buffalo had a policy in the late 1920s of including, at each monthly business meeting, a club member speaking on the "Romance of Business," based on her own business experiences. "Romance" apparently referred to "allure" or "excitement" rather than romantic love. Both Zonta and BPW members frequently were asked to talk about their areas of expertise. Similar sharing occurred at national meetings and in articles in the official magazines, the *Zontian* and the *Independent Woman*.

Portland held regular vocational sessions in which club members were divided by occupations. They met as bookkeepers, buyers and sellers, office clerks, doctors and nurses, stenographers, journalists, teachers, and a catchall category of other occupations. The names and configurations of the groups changed over the years, determined by the mix of membership. Sometimes the categories were more general, such as "professionals" replacing groups of teachers, doctors and journalists. At the National Federation's annual conventions, similar vocational meetings were held during luncheon sessions. Members could share common problems, concerns, or ideas. These gatherings provided individuals with information they could use to succeed at their jobs, but they also helped to inspire women to higher achievements and to help them cement an identity as successful career women.
Business success involved more than activity within one's own occupational field. Another important aspect was involvement in civic affairs, which implied both participation in service projects and action on issues and legislation. Zonta had a more defined national service goal than did BPW, which was more focused nationally in legislative matters.

"Service" was an important concept in the early twentieth century. Men's business organizations such as Rotary and Kiwanis stressed their "service" functions, as did many professional organizations. In both types of groups "service" helped to create a perception that the group's members cared as much or more about the community and about individuals in it than about making a profit. The business women's clubs represented women for whom excessive profit or perceptions of it rarely were a problem. Nevertheless, they adopted the ideal of service both to be part of the community and its activities and to help the cause of women in general and business women in particular. Women's clubs had a long record of involvement in community service projects, a record that one historian credits with influencing such activity by business men's clubs. For these new clubs of business women, however, the concept of service was transformed so

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² Charles, Service Clubs in American Society, 25.
that it related narrowly to the interests of women and girls and specifically in many cases to business women and girls. The club members could be good citizens at the same time they were fighting to improve conditions for women.

The effort to insure that future business women were well educated and well prepared for their jobs, the goal of many of the service projects, reflected the belief that individual women influenced opportunities for other women. In other words, if girls and women were well trained, they would succeed and help open up channels for others to follow. If they were ill prepared, they would give business women in general a bad name and contribute to limiting opportunities. One historian has described this as "making better workers of women," and criticized Business and Professional Women's Clubs, in particular, for focusing on improving women themselves, rather than improving salary, hours, and working conditions.7

However, an organization that brought together women of many occupations, who worked at hundreds of different establishments in many different capacities, could not emulate a labor union, nor did business women view themselves as the types of workers who would unionize. Business women's clubs could discuss only in abstract terms such issues as salaries and working conditions. The clubs did do that, constantly seeking better pay, chances for promotion, and other job improvements for women workers. As will be noted below, when the clubs began to discuss working hours and conditions for factory jobs, differences of opinion remained. Yet, it is important to see beneath and beyond the

focus on training and education that constituted many service projects. Seeking to make better workers of women was important in a society that valued individualism and believed, at least on a mythical level, that success was available to all who worked hard enough, well enough, and with appropriate values. The clubs' activities were not limited to such work, but these activities were part of the overall thrust of organized business women who sought to be part of the same system as successful business men. They wanted to climb job ladders, if possible all the way to the top, and see other women and girls do so. Their belief that they could be part of the American system of hard work and advancement led them to take on the task of ensuring the proper preparation of girls and other women for the long climb upward. That theme was the basis for much of their service work. In some projects, the idea of improving working women was foremost; in others, reform of work places or attitudes took precedence.

The Confederation of Zonta Clubs, at a meeting of club presidents in October 1920, agreed to take on "educational and constructive work of girls and young women." At the first annual convention in May 1921, clubs reported on their activities, many of which focused on financial help to keep girls in school or to secure additional training for them. In some clubs, the projects included "adopting" needy girls, taking them on outings, providing music lessons, or engaging in other activities with them. In 1923,

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clubs reported projects such as furnishing rooms at a maternity hospital, donating money to charities for boys and girls, providing clothing to needy girls, and assisting in a girls' detention home.\textsuperscript{10}

The Confederation Public Affairs Committee in 1924 suggested that each club furnish a fund to aid convalescing business women, and establish scholarships and vocational guidance for younger women.\textsuperscript{11} Its suggestions were not requirements; clubs could adopt projects that suited their own interests and their community's needs. The same year, the Toledo, Ohio, club challenged other Zonta clubs to set up vocational guidance committees to determine the status of vocational education and needs in their communities. It offered a trophy to the club that would demonstrate the most worthwhile and constructive activity for women and girls.\textsuperscript{12}

The Utica, New York, Zonta Club won the first trophy with a program to stress the "all-round development of girls, not just jobs." The club held a special week of activities with a luncheon for girls from business schools and business offices, a speaking contest for seventh and eighth graders, a talk to mothers of girls, an exhibit on jobs and vocations, a talk to 1,000 girls on choice of work, and an athletic meet for girls. In addition, the club organized a vocational guidance bureau and surveyed club members on

\textsuperscript{10} "Minutes of Meetings Third Annual Convention of Confederation of Zonta Clubs, May 31-June 1, 1923, Elmira, N.Y.," ZI, 11-12.

\textsuperscript{11} "The Confederation of Zonta Clubs (Incorporated) Fourth Annual Convention, Buffalo, N.Y., May 16th and 17th, 1924, Minutes of Meetings," ZI, 13.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 19-22.
salaries, qualifications, and opportunities for advancement in their occupations. The activities focused on, but were not limited to, careers in business.

In 1928, the Confederation Service Committee suggested a detailed program for aiding "Girls in the Preparatory Period," "Young Women in Business," and "Older Women in Business" with scholarship funds, pushing for vocational training and surveying vocational opportunities, setting up vocational advisory bureaus, establishing a loan fund for industrial and business opportunity assistance, conducting health weeks, advising employers on the benefits of older workers, and establishing special industries for older women. The latter might include needlework, canning, or poultry raising.

The Zonta Club of Buffalo, in 1926, helped five girls with widowed mothers to stay in school. The girls were required to get jobs at age 16. The club helped one girl get technical training. The club also focused on helping business women who were ill or otherwise unable to work. Since few women had work-related insurance or disability income, being out of work meant being out of money. The club tried to assist members and others in difficult situations. Both projects were started in the early 1920s and continued throughout the decade.

Zonta retained its emphasis on service to women and girls throughout the 1920s. The program was flexible enough to meet local needs and changing conditions. Toward

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13 "The Confederation of Zonta Clubs Incorporated Fifth Annual Convention, Toledo, Ohio, May 15th and 16th, 1925, Minutes of Meetings," ZI, 53.

the end of the decade, many clubs and the national organization turned their attention to
the needs of older (often meaning ages 35 and over) women, and later of married women.
Local clubs sometimes participated in other community projects, perhaps joining with
men's clubs. But the women's clubs rarely were attracted by roads and similar
improvements that might help a community attract more companies, the types of projects
men's clubs favored. Instead, their emphasis on the needs of women and girls reflected
the gendered nature of work and their subsequent identity as business women. Even as
these business women sought opportunities and successes comparable to men, they
retained an understanding that such opportunities and successes were gendered. Their
continued focus on women and girls was part of an effort to compensate for the
differences that existed and keep women climbing ladders of success.

The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs had similar
goals of assisting young girls and women, promoting education and vocational training,
and keeping girls in school. In 1924, the national Education Committee recommended
that the federation adopt a policy "to give assistance, through friendly advice, vocational
information, and scholarships, to young girls contemplating business as an occupation."15
The policy was adopted, but did not require local clubs to set up such programs, even
though some clubs already had done so. These vocationally related service projects were
somewhat less prominent within the National Federation and at its conventions than were

15 "Sixth Annual Convention, West Baden, Ind., July 1924, NFBPWC," National
Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Washington, D.C., 179.
(Collection hereafter cited as BPW/USA)
those of Zonta, but they were similar in intent and, often, in execution.

BPW national committees and officers had emphasized vocational education and keeping girls in school for some time. Dr. Orie Latham Hatcher of Virginia, chairman of the national Education Committee, in 1923 undertook a speaking tour in which she stressed the needs of young girls. She spoke to the National Conference of Deans of Women, the National Association of Elementary School Teachers, the National Federation of Commercial Teachers, the National Council of Administrative Women, and the National Association of Classroom Teachers, hitting every possible level of influence over girls' education.

Hatcher saw the effort on behalf of proper training for young girls as one that would "reduce inefficiency, waste, vocational misfits, and blind alley results." She wanted local clubs to befriend and advise young girls. She said BPW was interested in whatever type of study prepares women to be "efficient in business, build themselves up, and so build up business and through business the community."\(^{16}\)

Also in 1923, Mercia Hoagland, speaking for the national Research Committee, suggested that vocational work and the push for better training needed to be extended to factory workers and potential factory workers. She noted that lack of training and skills kept wages low and that women needed to be trained to move up in factory work as well as in business occupations. "Women should not be content to remain at the lower rungs of the industrial ladder," she said. "Through technical training, they should seek to rise to

\(^{16}\) "Fifth Annual Convention, Portland, Ore., July 1923, vol. I of 1, NFBPWC, Inc.," BPW/USA, 50, 56-57.
higher levels of achievements."17

In 1929, the national Education Committee reported that 400 local clubs had
scholarship funds, and that local clubs had aided 999 girls and one boy the preceding
year, with a total of $155,425 distributed.

Portland's BPW Club had a scholarship fund to help girls, which began in 1924,
when a member willed the club $100 for educational purposes. The fund remained fairly
small and the first disbursement was not made until 1930. Needy and deserving students
were given sums ranging from $12.50 to $150. During the 1920s, the club raised money
for causes such as the Red Cross, Near East Relief and a free milk program for school
children.

An important part of BPW's emphasis on training intersected with its promotion
of business women's achievements and interest in helping women gain access to better
jobs. The organization nationally and locally stressed research. Knowing what
educational opportunities and services were available in each community, knowing what
club members did for work, how they viewed their jobs, and how much they were paid,
and knowing other demographic information about members or potential members all
were crucial to the clubs' achieving their stated goals. Local clubs, state federations, and
the national group took on research of varying degrees of sophistication. Among the
better known national studies were those done by University of Michigan researchers
beginning in 1926 in which questionnaires were sent to more than 46,000 BPW members

17 Ibid., 32-35.
nationwide. More than 14,000 were returned and two studies were published from the data. This was the first large-scale national survey BPW undertook, but others followed.18

Many of BPW's service programs, like Zonta's, stressed improving girls and women to make them better workers, not just for the overall efficiency of business, but so the women themselves could share in the American ideal of hard work and success. Getting women onto the ladder of success was, in itself, a way to improve women's salaries and working conditions. Well-trained and prepared women would be in positions to influence conditions for themselves and others.

The category of young girls and women the clubs sought to assist included club members themselves. Members often were reminded that their personal actions and attitudes could affect the success of others. Lena Madesin Phillips, first director of the Federation of BPW Clubs, and later president of the group, captured this concept in a 1929 talk. She told the national convention, "Principles are in my opinion more important than personalities, but when no economic or political principle is involved, the success of every woman is the obligation and opportunity of every other woman."19

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As Phillips's comment suggested, a business woman's success depended on more than mutuality and good feelings. Sometimes, political and economic principles were involved. Those realities required an approach different from service projects. Direct political action also was an important part of the goal of "growing big in business ways." Both national groups and their local affiliates, to varying degrees, recognized the need for political action, for speaking out on behalf of women and women's concerns. Improving themselves and others could not address all of the barriers business women faced. Broader societal and systemic changes also were important. Individual members and local clubs often could not agree on what legislative actions the groups should take as national organizations. Local clubs, however, faced less dissension when considering actions on local issues.

In the Confederation of Zonta Clubs, for example, concern about non-partisanship often was raised whenever controversial legislation was discussed at national meetings. The organization's bylaws stipulated that the group be non-partisan, but many members believed that meant the group should not get involved in any legislative action. In 1921, a poll of Confederation member clubs about legislation elicited responses like: "keep out of things that aren't essential," "go slowly," "avoid party politics," strive to keep informed, and be informed as a group, then act as individuals, not clubs.20 "Party politics" often was interpreted as any issue that parties took sides on, or in other words most bills that went before legislative bodies.

The Confederation had a Public Affairs Committee, and local clubs, whose structures often followed that of the national, formed similar groups. Yet national officials and local members often had differing views about the meaning of "public affairs." In 1925, for example, Confederation Public Affairs Chairman Genevieve Lacey of Binghamton, New York, reported on her survey of club efforts. Elmira endorsed increasing the federal income tax exemption for single persons and disapproved of an effort to make income tax information public. Jamestown, New York, assisted in a get-out-the-vote drive, and spoke out for visiting nurses in the county. Binghamton provided funds for Near East Relief, aided the YWCA fund drive and helped reorganize the Chamber of Commerce. Ithaca influenced the city government to keep police women on the force, canvassed for the Community Chest, and endorsed the income tax exemption measure. Buffalo helped with a city zoning plan, continued its convalescent fund for business women and girls, and endorsed the Girl Scout movement. Public Affairs could mean a variety of things.21

The 1926 Public Affairs Committee Chairman, Kate Deane Andrew of Elmira, New York, wanted to narrow the definition of "public affairs," to focus it on governmental or legislative activity. She commented that the Confederation could "hardly dictate" which local, state or national legislation clubs might endorse or work against, but she suggested that taking sides was not the issue. She urged clubs to be informed about

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21 "The Confederation of Zonta Clubs Incorporated Fifth Annual Convention, Toledo, Ohio, May 15th and 16th, 1925, Minutes of Meetings," ZI, 17-18.
such legislative matters. Working with Girl Scouts, she said, was not "public affairs."\(^\text{22}\)

Specific legislative suggestions that went before national conventions included a recommendation in 1923 that Public Affairs committees inform themselves about legislation that would affect business women, paying special attention to the pros and cons on minimum wage and universal eight hour day laws.\(^\text{23}\) This issue, protective legislation, which will be discussed below, was the most frequent and most contentious for both Zonta and BPW. In 1925, the Confederation asked each club to pass a resolution against the publicity amendment of federal income tax and to get behind the idea of increasing tax exemptions for single people.\(^\text{24}\) Such exemptions already had been increased for married couples.\(^\text{25}\) In 1927, 1928, and 1929 protective legislation was discussed, but no action taken. In 1929, convention delegates also tabled a resolution seeking universal jury service for women.\(^\text{26}\)

During the 1920s, the Zonta Club of Buffalo focused primarily on many local issues. Their forays into national legislative issues often were brief. For example, in 1920,


\(^{23}\) "Minutes of Meetings, Third Annual Convention of Confederation of Zonta Clubs, May 31-June 1, 1923, Elmira, NY," ZI, 1.

\(^{24}\) The publicity amendment was a proposal to make the amounts of income tax people paid public information, which could then be published.

\(^{25}\) "The Confederation of Zonta Clubs Incorporated Fifth Annual Convention, Toledo, Ohio, May 15th and 16th, 1925, Minutes of Meetings," ZI, 16-17.

the club discussed the legislative maneuverings around minimum wage and eight-hour day bills, recommending that they be taken out of committee. Members did not discuss the merits of the bills, however. In 1921, the group tabled a motion by the club's Public Affairs Committee to endorse censorship of motion pictures, and voted to oppose a state bill that regulated handling of food in restaurants.

Local issues garnered more interest and attention. The Buffalo club in 1928 endorsed raises for local teachers, lobbied the mayor to appoint a woman lawyer to an open city court judgeship and endorsed a state bill requiring women on juries. In 1929, when city finances were tight, the club asked the city to keep pools open for summer and provide supervision; recommended that the state department of education appoint a woman to the state board of regents to replace a local representative who had died, and asked the Buffalo Historical Society to consider naming a woman to fill a board vacancy. In 1930, the club asked the mayor to name a woman as city lawyer and asked that women be considered on any civic boards or committees when positions were open.

Buffalo Zonta members could see the direct benefit and impact of local issues, especially issues such as the appointment of women to various boards and positions. The impact of national issues on local communities, especially such controversial issues as protective legislation, was much more difficult to assess and therefore less likely to

28 "Minutes 1920-1922 (Directors meetings)," May 13, 1921, ZCB, n.p.
29 "Minutes 1929-1930 (Directors meetings)," December 12, 1929, ZCB, n.p.
receive the attention of local groups. Such large issues also seemed less pressing to local
groups, who spent their time and energy focused on more local concerns.

The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs had a much
more active legislative agenda, although local groups often reacted as did Zonta's,
foregoing lobbying or extended discussion of national legislative concerns. The national
Legislative Committee regularly reviewed proposed legislation and urged local clubs and
state federations to study and take action on such bills. In addition, the federation was
among the ten women's clubs that founded the Women's Joint Congressional Committee
in 1921. Suffrage activist Maud Wood Park, president of the League of Women Voters,
organized the group that lobbied for or against legislation that a majority of the member
groups targeted. Park also was a summer resident of Maine, and for several years during
the 1920s, a member of the Portland Business and Professional Women's Club.

Mary Stewart, BPW national legislative chairman and a resident of Washington,
D.C., fought for BPW action on a variety of bills through the 1920s. She, like others
involved in national legislative work, went to annual BPW conventions armed with facts,
figures, outside speakers and other enticements to gain membership support for
legislative efforts. Even if local groups were not interested in lobbying, the national
committee wanted the members' blessing to carry out the effort themselves.

The recurring concerns at legislative sessions at national conventions in the 1920s
were the Sheppard-Towner Act, approved by Congress in 1921, which sought funds for
maternal and infant health programs; support for independent citizenship for married
women, which was approved in a modified form in 1922; bills that would provide
vocational training in home economics on the same basis as it was provided in agriculture and industry; calls for a federal department of education; support of peace activities; efforts to restrict child labor; and a permanent federal employment service.

The question of protective legislation

Another recurring type of legislation, and the single most controversial category of legislation considered by either Zonta or BPW, was protective labor legislation. Laws that would limit the hours or times of day women could work or that sought to ensure women's reproductive health were as controversial within the clubs as they were in society as a whole. Ever since the Supreme Court had in 1906 upheld, in *Muller v. Oregon*, an application of Oregon's 1903 law prohibiting women from working in factories or laundries for more than ten hours a day, women and women's organizations had debated the pros and cons of protective legislation as a category, and discussed specific bills.

The National Women's Party, which fought for an Equal Rights Amendment, opposed the legislation. The Federation of BPW Clubs first president, lawyer Gail Laughlin, also an active member of the Women's Party, was a strong voice against protective laws that singled out women for occupational restrictions. The National Consumers League, Women's Trade Union League, League of Women Voters, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, by contrast, all favored some forms of protective
The debates not only raised issues of personal and group beliefs about class and womanhood, but also revived older disagreements within the suffrage movement. The National Women's Party, an outgrowth of Alice Paul's militant suffrage group that practiced confrontation and direct action and that had picketed the White House, had upset and embarrassed other suffrage leaders. Maud Wood Park of the League of Women Voters had been, in particular, an opponent of Paul. Protective legislation divided women's groups along similar lines and kept old animosities alive.

Groups that favored protective legislation argued that women in industry and similar occupations generally had worse jobs than did men and earned less as well. Many reformers wanted protective legislation for men as well as women, but the courts rejected that option in many cases. Reformers who favored protective legislation argued that women were disadvantaged in the workplace, that men and women were different and, given both women's reproductive function and their lesser abilities to protect themselves, government needed to step in and insure better conditions for women.

The debates within the Confederation of Zonta Clubs and National Federation of


BPW Clubs are revealing because they went to the heart of what the groups and their members believed about activism, feminism, gender differences, and class status, including the members' relationships to less privileged workers. The debates did not resolve those issues, but did help to position organized business women somewhat apart from both big business (or male business) and women's groups on either side of the issue. The clearest message delivered by protective legislation debates was that organized business women were different from factory workers or manual laborers and sought to ensure that they were not grouped with them if such legislation was enacted.

Neither Zonta nor BPW ever resolved their relationship to protective legislation during the 1920s. When the National Federation of BPW Clubs endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment in 1937, its debate over protective legislation was ended because the ERA sought equality, not special protections for women. But the failure of the groups to take a stand during the 1920s is not an indication of their ineffectiveness nor of any lack of commitment to legislative action. Rather, the nature of the organizations and the diversity they represented made such broad philosophical action difficult. On the local level, if a law were proposed regulating women's hours or wages in a particular arena, local clubs might have been able to reach consensus. On the large issue of whether women as a group needed special protection in industry, the class, regional and personal differences of club members prevented any agreement.

The Confederation of Zonta Clubs brought up the issue of protective legislation at three annual conventions. In 1923, the Public Affairs Committee had recommended studying and promoting legislation affecting business women, "paying special attention
to the argument for and against the minimum wage law and the universal eight hour day." However, no discussions of the issues were held at that convention. In 1927, the group discussed a resolution that all women in business, the professions and industry should be free to work and be protected as workers on same terms as men. It suggested that any legislation should be based on the nature of work, not the sex of worker. But as it was later interpreted, the resolution that passed supported studying the issue, rather than supporting one side of the debate.

In 1928, presentations for and against protective legislation for women were accompanied by lively and sometimes angry arguments. Nina Broderick Price of New York, who had been an organizer for the National Federation of BPW Clubs during its first few years, spoke against the legislation. She argued that protective laws often prevented women from securing certain types of employment, and some women from being hired as executives in mercantile establishments. She also argued that self-supporting women themselves were opposed to the laws. She said the California legislature in 1927 "almost succeeded" in passing amendments to restrict all women workers except nurses and domestics to eight hours a day. Price said that women who asked for protection were admitting their weakness and inadequacy in coping with conditions as they found them.

33 "Minutes of Third Annual Convention of Confederation of Zonta Clubs, May 31-June 1, 1923, Elmira, N.Y.," ZI, 1.

Florence Monahan, a member of the St. Paul Zonta Club and superintendent of the Reformatory for Women at Shakopee, Minnesota, presented the other side. She said that women in labor unions had endorsed protective legislation and employers hired or did not hire women based on personal preferences, not legislative restrictions.

"Opportunities of women in industry seem to have been unaffected by daily and weekly hour regulations," Monahan said. Then she added that business women would not be hurt by such laws. "Women highly enough trained and well enough organized" could get exemptions, she said, clearly separating the needs and interests of business women from those of factory workers.35

The question of the relationship of business women to less privileged workers was central to much of the debate about protective legislation in both Zonta and BPW. In many cases, business women did not want to equate themselves with factory workers. In other cases, they questioned their right to determine what was best for other women. Because the legislation did not directly apply to them, business women could justify taking no action. Some members argued that solidarity among women was important, while others suggested that the laws could easily be applied to business women, a possibility they disdained. Women who sought to get ahead in the world could not easily do so if they were restricted to certain types of jobs or to working certain hours.

In Zonta, the debate in 1928 brought forth objections to the organization taking part in "politics." The parliamentarian was asked to rule on whether the organization

could endorse legislation. She ruled it could. The convention delegates voted to table any action and send the issue back to clubs for further study. Suggesting the motion to table,

Mabel Matthies of Chicago said, "This ... is going to bring forth a great deal of expression of opinion and I therefore move it be laid on table until the regular business of the morning is out of the way." It was never removed from the table.36

By 1929, many clubs had studied protective legislation, but convention delegates decided that since some clubs had not and new clubs were unaware of the study initiative, it would be unfair to take up the issue. Protective legislation was sent back to clubs for further study. Mabel Sellvin of Jamestown, New York, commented, "If we wait for this thing much longer there won't be any need for passing a resolution." Her remark drew applause, but the issue was never discussed.37

Gaining consensus on protective legislation was no easier for the National Federation of BPW Clubs. In 1920, the National Federation took its first stab at protective legislation, passing a resolution of general principles, but agreeing only to study the matter carefully. Delegates voted to appoint a committee to study such legislation to aid in development of a future policy that would be "based solidly upon facts and figures." Preceding that statement was a resolution stating that the ideal condition was legislation based not on sex, but that under certain conditions, such laws


might be necessary. "In view of these facts we think it would be unwise either to endorse or condemn special legislation for women as a whole," the resolution explained.38

Convention delegates, at the suggestion of outgoing national President Gail Laughlin, an opponent of such laws, had agreed that, in general, shorter work days and more sanitary and humane conditions in industry were preferable, with equal rights for all and special opportunities for none. They saw these statements as "guiding principles," not policies for the federation to follow.39

A journalist's coverage of the 1921 national BPW convention summed up the protective legislation arguments.

There are two factions. One believes women employed in industrial life deserve and need special protective legislation for the regulation of hours and conditions of working. The other believes women will only stride forward if they work under the same handicaps and privileges as do men workers of the country.

At that convention, nationally known figures debated the issue. Mary Van Kleeck of the Russell Sage Foundation urged support of protective legislation and substitution of the term "labor legislation." Elinor Byrns of the Equal Opportunity League of New York spoke against it, calling protective legislation a "violation of legal, moral and economic principles."40


39 Independent Woman I (August 1920), 4.

Byms had three objections to such laws: that they were special privileges and that women, having gained the vote, should be equal under the law; that such laws had barred women from certain lucrative types of work, such as overtime; and finally that such laws posited women as inferior. "A protected sex is going to always mean a crippled sex and an inferior one," Byms said.41

Van Kleeck argued that there were not two sides to the question, only one issue: the economic position of women. She argued for removal of "barriers of custom and prejudice" in choice of jobs, training, pay, and chance for advancement. Those barriers, though, helped create the need for protective legislation. She told the business women, "the injury of one becomes the concern of all, and the concern of all becomes the injury of one." She hoped that such laws would not always be necessary, but that "social exigencies" of women's dual roles made their protection vital.42

She further argued that "every national organization of women in industry representing the industrial worker that has taken any action on this, has gone on record in favor of legislation for women" and that working women themselves had endorsed it. Opposing such legislation, she suggested, would be "taking the side of employers who oppose improving conditions for women."43 Her statement placed the business women in the awkward position of choosing sides between employers, who they might work for,

41 "Third Annual Convention, NFBPWC, July 19-22, 1921, Hotel Statler, Cleveland, Ohio," BPW/USA, 262.

42 Ibid., 223-226.

43 Ibid., 241-243.
might actually be, or might aspire to be, and themselves as a class of women. Van Kleeck suggested that their identification as women was more important than their aspirations as members of the capitalist business class.

Byms also appealed to delegates' sense of themselves as women. She said:

If you stand for special protective legislation for women, you do stand for that right of the state to interfere with your morals and you stand for the implication that the primary function of women is to preserve the race and bear children ... It would seem to me that we ought to agree that our primary duty is to be the finest kind of individuals that we can possibly be with a right to determine our own standards and our own morals and the right to our own ideals in life.44

The two speakers had raised the issue of protective legislation far from its origins in the conditions for factory workers. Taking a stand on protective legislation was framed in terms that required taking a position not only on the role of government, but on the role of women in society and their identities. Would they identify as by social class or sex? How was sex to be defined? What was women's primary role in society?

In an ensuing discussion, delegates struggled with those issues. Some suggested that the group pass a resolution making clear that the National Federation represented primarily business and professional women and "in no sense adequately represents wage-earning women in industry." Legislative Chairman Mary Stewart of Washington, D.C., commented, "I think we have their interests at heart, but do we represent their interests?" Several members said that among the delegates were personnel workers and others who did represent factory workers' interests. Miss Marie Wing, executive secretary of the Cleveland YWCA, disagreed, and her argument convinced the delegates to revise their

44 Ibid., 250.
resolution on protective legislation. She said:

We are not giving up ... the opportunity to back up organizations of industrial workers in whatever they may decide. We may always cooperate ... but we do not represent them. We are fond of them, we love them, we like to work for them and be good to them, and we may think we know what is good for them, but I believe they know better what is good for them than we do.45

The delegates passed a resolution that the National Federation would only consider specific bills that were proposed or introduced and take action on specifics, considering industrial and economic conditions in the states affected, not on the general idea of protective legislation.46

In 1923, the organization went a step further, calling for conferences with National Women's Trade Union League branches in various communities or states to discuss protective legislation and WTUL members' views of various types of protection. The WTUL, which brought middle and working class women together in a union-like organization, supported protective legislation and belonged to the Women's Joint Congressional Committee with the National Federation of BPW Clubs and other pro-protective legislation groups such as the League of Women Voters and National Consumers' League. BPW records give no indication of whether such conferences were carried out, nor of any outcome.

One delegate, Mercia Hoagland of Indiana, chairman of the federation's Personnel Research Committee, suggested that personnel practices such as rest times and specific


46 Ibid., 387.
rest and health programs in industries could take the place of protective legislation.

Further, she warned, espousing protective legislation could be "aiding and abetting the agents of communism," or giving too much power to "those women of foreign birth." She may have been referring to various leading members of the WTUL or other unions, many of whom were foreign born. Her comments were largely ignored by the convention, however.

Whatever the result of the 1923 resolution, the issue of protective legislation was not resolved. It came up again in 1926 when the delegates agreed to seriously study the issue and take action the following year. In 1927, the 1923 resolution to take no action on the broad issue, but consider individual initiatives, was re-endorsed. The action did not come without debate, however. Some delegates suggested it was better to take no action because either decision might antagonize men, or might bring the group negative newspaper publicity. Others suggested a vote for or against protective legislation would not be binding on local clubs, anyway.

In 1929, Legislative Chairman Martha Connole of Illinois told the annual convention that she believed it was important to discuss and debate issues such as protective legislation so members could learn about them and become more tolerant of


49 "Legislative Committee Meeting, Oakland, California, July 1927," BPW/USA, 57-95.
other opinions, even though the group would not endorse either side. She said mentioning protective legislation was "just like waving a red rag in this kind of a convention," but said she wanted the convention to "have some place where you can listen to everything, and particularly those things that people say you shouldn't listen to."50

While some protective legislation was upheld by courts, other laws were not. Maximum hour laws were enacted in many locations, but minimum wage laws often were struck down by courts, including the 1923 Supreme Court decision against such laws in the Adkins case.51 As one historian noted, minimum wage cases continued in the courts, "but the argument over protective laws now spun out of the judicial system and into the women's movement."52 The debates did not exactly split the movement, for suffrage and other issues already had done that, but they did keep divisions alive and open new ones.

The National Federation of BPW Clubs and Confederation of Zonta Clubs were part of those debates, but declined throughout the 1920s to take sides. They might have sided with the employers and industries who were more focused on profits than human concerns, although such an allegiance would have been unlikely, given the level of jobs most club members held. They saw themselves as successful, but they rarely employed large numbers of other women. They might have sided with middle class women's groups

50 "Board of Directors Pre & Post Convention Meeting, Mackinac Island, Mich., July 1929," BPW/USA, 92-95.


52 Woloch, Muller v. Oregon, 57.
and some unions who favored the laws, seeing benefits in wages, conditions, and protection of women's reproductive futures. Their reluctance to do so reflected sensitivity about not speaking for other women, lack of identification with factory workers, and their fears that such laws might apply to their own jobs. Finally, they might have sided with Alice Paul's National Women's Party and other opponents of protective laws, favoring an argument that men and women were equal and should be treated equally under the law. But even separated from the question of protective legislation, equality vs. difference was a controversial issue.

Not taking stands on such legislation did not appear to affect the organizations. Zonta was not seen as a national legislative player in any event and BPW continued its active legislative program and alliance with other women's groups on other issues. The importance of the debates, though, is the insights they provide on how business women defined themselves in relation to other women's groups, to other types of workers, and to the larger community of business.

Despite their primary identification as women, and with young girls and women in their service projects, the clubs did not extend that identification to factory workers or other manual laborers. They joined with other women's organizations in various pursuits, but not in this one. The members separated themselves from the question of protective legislation in part because of their primary identities as career-oriented and ambitious and in part because the diversity of the groups' memberships made agreement on such a contentious issue difficult. As with much legislation, regional and personal differences were too strong to overcome. The business women's lack of allegiance to factory workers
was an issue of class and status, buttressed by a related issue of the nature of one's relationship to her job. Business women wanted to be seen as career women who were more closed allied to professionals than laborers. They were "salary" not "wage" workers, in spirit if not always in reality, and therefore could distance themselves from protective legislation debates. In addition, they did not side with employers or big business interests, a choice that would have favored class over gender identification. These business women were not a part of big business or big management; they were not a part of the wage labor force. Organized business women stood in a position apart from both interests, and apart from the women's reform tradition that saw itself protecting and speaking for less-privileged women. Business women's gender and occupational identities combined to separate them from all sides of the protective legislation question. Some individuals within both Zonta and BPW took sides, but many more, and the organizations as a whole, remained separate, helping to forge an identity for themselves that was neither traditional woman, New Woman, nor man.

Martha Connole of Illinois, National Federation of BPW Clubs national legislative chairman in the late 1920s, captured that sense of the organization and its members being in a unique position. She told a regional gathering in 1927 that if BPW did the same things as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, it would not be fulfilling the purpose for which it was created. "On the other hand," she continued, "we can not be like the Rotary Club because the Rotary Club is a kind of play ground for the men. I know they have wonderful ideals written in their books. We can not be that
because we have passed that state.” She was afraid BPW might be like other groups that passed resolutions, but did not do anything. She wanted the organization to focus on cooperation that would help everyone succeed. She envisioned a national network that would allow members in one city to call on someone from anywhere else to help with a particular problem or idea.

Connole concluded, "Ours is a distinct purpose. It is not with the men in all things and not against the men; it is not with women. It is a particular thing." BPW and Zonta both worked throughout the 1920s to define their "distinct purposes." Focusing on the business side of members' needs was part of that purpose. "Business ways" included informative and educational talks at meetings, sharing ideas and concerns about particular occupations, sharing achievements, studying civic issues, undertaking service projects, and getting taking stands, or becoming informed, on local, state, and national legislative issues.

The spirit of good fellowship

The other important aspect to being a successful business woman was the "social ways." Both clubs, nationally and locally, stressed friendship, informal connections among business women, leisure activities, and fun. It was what Zonta called in one of its

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53 "Mid-West Interstate Conference - St. Louis, Mo., Feb. 1927," BPW/USA, 5. The General Federation of Women's Clubs, formed in 1890, stressed civic reform or public work. Members were primarily middle- and upper-class women who did not work outside the home.

54 Ibid., 6.
goals "the broad spirit of good fellowship." That fellowship would help women succeed in business because it would provide contacts, but, more importantly, it would allow women to develop as whole persons.

Ruth Chapin, president of the Zonta Club of Buffalo in 1926, told a newspaper reporter that one failing women had in business was "the lopsided development of the personality, the business side being beautifully developed and the other shrunken." Her suggestion was improved understanding of the need for leisure activities and learning how best to spend leisure time. That theme had been raised by a St. Paul, Minnesota, city official in welcoming the National Federation of BPW Clubs to his city in 1920. He told the assembled delegates that while they were considering "the great questions of the day" he hoped they also would look at a question the country needed to be most interested in: play. Relaxation was stressed as a vital component to American life.

The social activities of Zonta and BPW were both formal and informal, planned and spontaneous, club-wide and more intimate. Such activities contributed to women's good health and vitality, important factors for career women. They also helped members get better acquainted, which, in turn, helped them work together on club concerns. Finally, many of the women who belonged to BPW and Zonta clubs were single and therefore lacked outlets for social and emotional support. The social elements of the club

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provided such support among women with similar interests, stresses, and time constraints.

"Playtimes began soon after the club was organized," a report of the Zonta Club of Buffalo Service Committee noted. Among those organized activities were fall corn roasts, classes in dancing and indoor golf, theater parties, teas, bridge parties, evening gatherings, visits with clubs from other cities, picnics, and sports competitions. They challenged other clubs to baseball games and organized bowling lessons and bowling parties.

The Zonta Club of Buffalo and Portland BPW Club described some of their fun activities in similar ways. A Zonta report noted:

You may think that bubble gum is a new product, but listen girls, it may be that the idea originated in Zonta. The record tells us that at a picnic held in 1922 Wilhelmine Hamelman won first prize for stretching her gum from her teeth to her full arm's length and that Mary Gram was second, losing only by a thumb's length.

The Portland BPW Club reported on a sports night in the following way:

Members of the Business and Professional Women's Club forgot their dignity -- those of them who had dignity to forget -- last evening and romped like children at the first "sports" night ... [they] roller-skated, played ball, participated in relay races and peanut races and the like as if they had been children on a summer playground.

Playing like children, participating in games, laughing while relaxing, all were important

58 Ibid.
59 "They Romp Just Like Children," Portland Daily Press, May 17, 1921, l.
to the business woman. In descriptions that express the excitement and abandon of play, these business women's groups are presenting valuable clues to their lives and philosophies. A Buffalo Zonta newsletter in 1929 stated directly why play garnered such enthusiastic comments from the clubs:

Play is necessary in the lives of busy Zontians. Play stretches the muscles, rests and soothes the nerves, stirs the blood, and clears the brain. Play stays the hand of age and transplants youth all through the advancing years. Play lifts the burdens from people's shoulders -- smooths out the wrinkles from their faces and starts smiles and joy anew. Play is a stranger of worry, an enemy of ill-health, and a mighty force in the creating of clean, strong thinking. Play is insurance against failure.60

The Portland BPW also stressed play, leisure, recreation and friendship-centered activities. With an average of 500 members throughout the 1920s, the Portland Club could sustain a large number of organized lessons and events, some of which were similar to those of the Buffalo Zontians.

The Portland BPW Club had an active bowling league throughout the 1920s, with upwards of forty members some seasons, held regular club-wide bowling parties, picnics, outdoor sports programs, various outings, dance lessons, dances and snowshoe hikes. Members frequently organized card parties that served as both recreation and fund raisers. In 1922, the club made more than $130 on whist games. They had horseback riding lessons and swimming lessons and sometimes held weekly hikes during spring and summer. A club basketball team lost every game in 1924, but showed "great

60 Ethel Munsey, president, quoted in "Zonta Club Bulletin #2, July 13, 1929," ZCB, 1.
improvement.\textsuperscript{61} The club also had an orchestra composed entirely of club members, a first among BPW clubs; a dramatic club and a glee club.

Whether it was games, music, theater, or organized outings, the clubs stressed what one member called the "get acquainted function," along with relaxation, health, exercise, and companionship.\textsuperscript{62} To insure that everyone felt a part of the group, the Buffalo club even assigned members as monitors, one at each luncheon table. They wanted to insure that "good fellowship prevails."\textsuperscript{63}

The national BPW president in 1924 waxed poetic when she discussed the good fellowship and important social aspect of the organization. BPW was:

... [T]hrowing out its light of understanding of friendship, gladdening the hearts of lonely women, filling the lives of tired girls, giving ... and may all the lonely women everywhere find the way to our fireside, where warmth, friendship, love and understanding wait.\textsuperscript{64}

As important as organized activities were, the informal connections among members elicited even more passionate raves from BPW and Zonta members. The letter from Jessie Voorhis that opened this chapter is one example of the meaning to members of informal connections. The women who joined BPW, Zonta and similar organizations


\textsuperscript{62} Dr. Caroline Colvin, University of Maine dean, quoted in "Women Should Qualify for Jobs in Business or Matrimony," \textit{Portland Evening Express & Advertiser}, May 29, 1922, 5.

\textsuperscript{63} "Minutes 1921-1922 (Directors meetings)," May 21, 1921, ZCB, n.p.

\textsuperscript{64} Adelia Prichard quoted in "Sixth Annual Convention, West Baden, Ind., July 1924, NFBPWC," BPW/USA, 24.
were women who intended to devote considerable time and energy to careers, and therefore were women who were removed from traditional women's realms of family and the social entertainments that often occupied middle or upper-class women. As the previous quote suggests, such women often could be lonely. In addition, the clubs' members were predominantly single. In 1920, about 75 percent of Buffalo Zonta and 90 percent of Portland BPW members were single, widowed, or divorced. They're being single further removed the club members from traditional social arrangements. While some of these women did marry and sometimes leave their jobs and the clubs, many remained single throughout their lives. Other women, especially those who shared interests in careers, became their primary source of social activities and social and emotional support.

These more informal liaisons bubbled forth from the pages of the Zonta Club of Buffalo's newsletter, the *Zonting Zebra*, published from October 1920 to January 1924; club columns in national magazines, and the weekly newspaper column of the Portland BPW Club. The publications discussed members dining together, traveling together, going on picnics or other short outings together. Frequently, especially in the *Zonting Zebra*, the references to club member activities were laden with vague references and humor that suggested knowledge about one another and jokes known only to members or

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65 A history of the Buffalo club noted that the *Zonting Zebra* was discontinued in 1924 because it was "not dignified enough." The club had no other newsletter until 1928 when it started a series of mimeographed monthly announcements called "The Zonta Bulletin," or "The Bulletin." In 1934, the newsletter was renamed "Zontafax." "The History of Zonta by Dr. Margaret Warwick Schley for the Thirty-Fifth Birthday of Zonta, November 8, 1954," ZCB, 18.
groups of members. This type of humor suggests a deep level of intimacy among members, a familiarity beyond contact at meetings or on a professional level.

Two examples of this type of personalized humor and affection were serialized stories that appeared in the Zonting Zebra in 1921. Different club members wrote each installment of the stories so the plot took unusual or unexpected twists each month. The first story involved illegal alcohol, counterfeiting, a romance gone bad, references to pets, and members' businesses and personalities. Understanding many of these scenes requires additional knowledge about members.

The second story began with a cast of characters, described by vague but personal phrases. For example: "Alice: Some folks think she's tender and true, but you'd better ask Allen," "Mai: Who loves music, but isn't averse to cooking, canning and sewing in and out of concert season. Ask Marion why she just naturally has to stay fat," and "Bell: A shrinking violet. Guess again, but try her out at a Piercing moment."66

Alice Jackson, 32, was married to Allen Jackson and worked with him in his mining business. Mai Davis Smith, 55, a concert promoter, lived for many years with another character in the story, the club's first president and founder, Marion De Forest. Bell Lake, 51, worked for the Pierce-Arrow Motor Co. The "tender and true" and "shrinking violet" references remain unexplained, although the cooking comment positions Mai Smith, who lived with another woman, as clearly feminine and womanly.

The conclusion of the serial found Zontians in New York City ten years in the

66 Zonting Zebra I (September 1921), ZCB.
future. Marion De Forest was sitting on a curb with her cat, Samaroff Smith De Forest, that she owned with Mai Davis Smith. Other Zontians arrived and began reminiscing about the early days of Zonta. Among their comments was one about Lockport, site of another Zonta Club, and the bad food, including rice and cabbage, that must have been served at a club luncheon. Other jokes referred to previous club presidents, moonshine, Rotary, and clothing. De Forest, crying at one point about the good old days of Zonta, was reassured by fellow journalist Kate Burr, who also held an elderly cat. Burr told De Forest:

Don't cry, Marion. Clara Ulbrich's twins, the Bookman girls, are running the club now in the most approved fashion. Yes, Clara married. I did, myself, once, so I can't judge her too harshly.  

Burr was the pen name of Eleanor Lane, 49, who was married and lived with her husband in 1920. Clara Ulbrich, 41, never married, but the reason for the joke is unclear. Ulbrich operated a family bookstore, the apparent explanation of the fictional "Bookman" children.

Similar humor appeared in a membership list printed in the national magazine in 1924 by the Detroit Zonta Club. The two-page list was entitled "What would happen if-.

Some of the references are rather obvious comments on members' occupations, such as: what would happen if "Ethel M. Francis, Francis Advertising Agency - Had writer's cramp" and "Dr. Maud Brokaw, Osteopathic Physician - Worked on Wednesday afternoon?" Others were somewhat more obscure. "Dr. Eleanor Stuart Harvey, 

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67 Zonting Zebra II (May 1922), ZCB, 9-11.
Osteopathic Physician - Became an actress," "Edna Raybould, School & Industrial Thrift Service Corp. - Should bob her hair again," and "Charlotte Judd, Office Manager and Estimator - Should not fix the plumbing."

The humor is aimed at members, intended to remind one another of their bonds of friendship and of an intimacy that allowed both knowledge of each other's interests or quirks and permission to laugh at one another.

Some of the friendships and relationships among club members certainly began before 1919 when the clubs were formed; others resulted from club connections and activities. Whatever the source, these affinities among organized business women created many opportunities for travel, for fun, and for general companionship. The automobile, which began to dominate American travel in the 1920s, often provided the source of entertainment or the means of relaxing escapes.

In 1920, two Buffalo Zontians, Emma Heintz, 40, manufacturer of metal art objects, and Hughie Grant, 48, operator of a therapeutic bath business, went on a nineteen-day motor trip to Seattle, Yellowstone Park, San Diego, Tijuana, and Hollywood. They traveled 8,000 miles.68 In 1922, club members Elizabeth Cristman, secretary-treasurer of a roofing company; Hattie Bernhard, treasurer of a furniture manufacturing firm; Mary Gram, assistant credit manager at a bank; and Wilhelmine Hamelman, an advertiser executive, motored to Thousand Islands, Ontario, for a three-day trip. Bernhard drove and Cristman gave directions and entertained the two back-seat

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68 "What's My Name?" I (October 1920), ZCB, 3.

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Also in 1922, members Clara McCollum, 48, private secretary and corporate officer of the Buffalo Specialty Company, and Emma Wagner, 40, an accountant, went on a two-week motor trip. The club newsletter referred to them as "the two queens," adding, "the Zebra knows a lot about these two and their doings -- maybe we'll tell you some time -- if they don't make it worth while to keep still." Another notice highlighted a trip to Lockport that a number of members took. Three remained overnight at one member's cottage. "They had a fine time, but we hear confidentially that they did not get home till the wee hours of Monday morning." Announcements of the trips confirmed the "social ways" function of the clubs, and suggested the independence these business women enjoyed. In some cases they furthered the humor and sense of intimacy that brought the members together.

In its early years, the national Zonta magazine also featured such announcements of club members' outings. One such item announced that national President Ethel Francis of Detroit and "her pal," Minerva Egan (also a Zontian), had vacationed in Cheboygan, Michigan, and "Ethel returned with her tresses sheared to a boyish bob." Another item in the same issue featured the vacation of Professor Flora Rose and Professor Martha VanRenssalaer of the Ithaca, New York, club, who spent the summer at their cottage on Long Lake in the Adirondacks. May Peabody served as their "chauffeur, driving a

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69 *Zonting Zebra* II (September 1922), ZCB, 1.

70 *Zonting Zebra* II (July 1922), ZCB, 2.

71 *Zonting Zebra* I (September 1921), ZCB, 12.
Packard sedan between Boston, Washington, and Ithaca." Peabody, the article stated, now claimed to be a "regular 'guy' and could take on any kind of job.\textsuperscript{72}

Portland's Business and Professional's Women's Club members also frequently vacationed together and socialized together, although such announcements in the club's newspaper column rarely contained the same type of personal humor as did Zonta's. The difference probably can be attributed to the difference in forums: Buffalo's was an internal newsletter, Portland's a public newspaper. Lucia Hannaford and her friend, Margaret B. Haynes, a cashier, along with osteopath Dr. Mary Warren Day, often traveled together on car trips, frequently in Hannaford's Cadillac. They drove to Bridgton, Maine, for a weekend, took a ten-day trip to Bar Harbor, Maine, and visited friends in other locations as well. The trio also rented a summer cottage on the shore near Portland and often invited other club members to visit.\textsuperscript{73}

In 1921, Mrs. Rubie M. Dorr, and Mrs. Florence Dewey, a section manager at a department store, took a fall motor trip to the Adirondacks.\textsuperscript{74} Miss Maybelle Fagan and Miss Helen Googins, proprietors of the Pine Tree Tea Room, returned to Portland in October 1921 from an "extensive" motor trip.\textsuperscript{75}

Even when the topic was not trips club members took, cars figured prominently in

\textsuperscript{72} Zontian V (October 1925), 14.


\textsuperscript{74} "Dean of Phone Traffic Force Among Members," \textit{Portland Daily Press}, September 17, 1921, 6.

\textsuperscript{75} "She's Efficient - But Not Effusive," \textit{Portland Daily Press}, October 1, 1921, 7.
BPW and Zonta announcements and newsletters. Maud Irving Smith, chief toll operator of the Buffalo telephone company, had a car named "Henry" that appeared as a character in the serialized drama, discussed as affectionately as Marion De Forest's cat. In another item, Smith, who lived with her mother, went out one night to "tuck in her car." Her mother complained that she was going out again. Smith went to visit a friend, also a Zontian, and ran out of gas on the way home. A man stopped to help her, but had disappeared when she returned. His disappearance prompted a joke about Smith's disappointment at losing the man.\(^7\)\(^6\) Smith's car was a source of independence, and, perhaps of meeting men.

Another Zontian, Clara Witt, worked at a job where her boss wanted her to have a car and planned to buy her one. The year was not specified, but was between 1900 and 1917. The boss consulted a number of auto dealers, none of whom would sell him a car for a woman to drive. Witt was credited with being the first woman to drive a car in Buffalo, and with saying she received many insults from men standing on street corners when she was driving.\(^7\)\(^7\)

The Portland BPW newspaper column sometimes announced who was buying new cars and what types of cars members drove. A 1922 item noted, "the number of club members who own their own cars is rapidly increasing." It then specified who had

\(^{76}\) Zonting Zebra I (March 1921), ZCB, 11-12.

\(^{77}\) Virginia M. Hodgson, speech given at the Buffalo Zonta Club's 68th birthday party, November 17, 1987, ZCB.
ordered or purchased various cars.  

The frequency of items concerning informal social gatherings in local and national publications of both Zonta and BPW attest to the importance of such liaisons to career-oriented business women. Even business women who were married and living with a spouse needed the social network the club provided. A woman whose life centered around work did not fit into family or homemaker social realms. This point was stressed in 1926 by Buffalo Zontian Helen Z.M. Rodgers, a married lawyer with a child. "Zonta stands for fellowship," Rodgers wrote, adding that Zonta had tried to change the stereotypical dynamic of women competing in a negative way with other women. She continued:

Friendliness between business and professional women, cut off from the traditional social life of women and not yet fully assimilated into the predominantly masculine world of business, is an achievement of Zonta.

Growing big in "social ways" meant bringing women together, providing encouragement for physical activity, healthy entertainments, cultural events, informal social gatherings, and friendships among women. Skill in operating a business, efficiency as an employee, and ambition all would help a woman succeed, but were not enough. "Social ways" were equally important.

The supportive social realm afforded by the Confederation of Zonta Clubs and

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79 Helen Z.M. Rodgers, from a "Boss Day" talk, quoted in Zontian V (January 1926), 43.
National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs stretched beyond informal or casual friendships. A number of members spent many years living with one other woman. These relationships certainly varied in meaning to the women involved and in their nature. Nevertheless, the fact that some women devoted their lives to one other woman, and that these relationships were acknowledged in various ways by the clubs is significant.

As several historians have noted, intense friendships among young girls and women in the nineteenth century were seen as normal aspects of women's lives. By the early twentieth century, however, these relationships became more suspect. The work of sexologist Havelock Ellis and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, intended in part to bring sexuality into the open and to expand understandings of sexual pleasure, also contributed to a climate where intimacy between women was seen as deviant. Many women who lived with other women apparently had chosen such relationships because they were more equal that the hierarchical male-female relationship. These relatively unproblematic

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81 Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 15, describes such relationships by noting that some women preferred "relationships with 'kindred spirits'; other women who were interested in following the same dreams, with whom they thought it was far more possible to have a loving connection of equals than it was with a man."
"Boston marriages" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, by post World War I were suspect as homosexuality became an identity and therefore constituted "difference."82 Ambitious women who chose to focus on careers probably would have seen more opportunity and support in liaisons with other women, and the business women's organizations, on the whole, provided a supportive environment for these relationships.

Marion De Forest, founder of Zonta and the first president of the Zonta Club of Buffalo, lived for about twenty-six years with fellow Zontian Mai Davis Smith. De Forest, a journalist and playwright, and Smith, a musical impresario, are buried side by side, along with their housekeeper, at a Buffalo cemetery. When Smith died in 1924, De Forest gave up her other jobs to run Smith's concert business. Their relationship, which had preceded the founding of Zonta by some twenty years, was well-known to club members and frequently mentioned, in terms similar to those used for married couples.

In the serialized play previously described, the cast of characters includes Smith and refers to De Forest in the same way other characters' introductions refer to their spouses. In another item in the club newsletter, De Forest is referred to as Smith's "swornest chum." The item continues, "and they've lived together long enough to shatter the old adage that two women can't get along in the same house in peace and quietness."83


83 *Zonting Zebra* II (January 1922), ZCB, 8, 10.
Their cat, Samaroff Smith De Forest, often appeared in newsletter items.

The De Forest-Smith relationship was not the only such liaison in the Zonta Club of Buffalo, but was the most prominent in the club’s early years because De Forest was club president. Other women’s relationships often were referred to in items about vacations or in humorous articles. Within club publicity, these relationships were viewed warmly, affirmed in the same way as other friendships and companionships among members. The club’s goal of providing support and encouragement for business women extended in many ways to women’s social and personal lives.

At the national level, the same acceptance appeared in newsletters and other communications. For instance, the already mentioned travel item about national President Ethel Francis of Detroit referred to "her pal," Minerva Egan. A letter from retired national executive Harriet Richards, written in 1966 about the death of former national President Harriet Ackroyd of Utica, New York, noted, "You perhaps know that she and Florence Curtis, a former Zontian, have lived together for nearly twenty years ..."84 Ackroyd, who had run an insurance business, died at age 94.

The Portland Business and Professional Women’s Club also contained many references to long-term relationships. Among the many social items in the club’s newspaper column were references to Miss Margaret B. Haynes and Miss Lucia Hannaford, who lived together and traveled together, until Hannaford’s death in 1926; and to Leonie M. Landry and Lula Bowman who lived together and operated a business

84 Harriet C. Richards, LS to "Pauline," April 9, 1966, PIP files, ZI.
together until Landry's death in 1923. Bowman and Landry operated a lunch room together, moved to Florida together, returned to Portland together and opened another business together. They shared a home as well as a business. Other similar relationships also were mentioned.

The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was no different. Lena Madesin Phillips, the federation's first executive director and later president, lived for 35 years with Marjory Lacey-Baker in what a biographer referred to as a "devoted friendship." Before that, she had lived with or been close to several other women in New York City. Her relationship with Lacey-Baker was well-known within the federation. She received cards and letters from various members who referred to Lacey-Baker or sent greetings to her. Phillips wrote to one BPW member and admirer, addressing the greeting to "dear Grace Bowman and her side partner." A greeting card to the same woman was addressed to "you and your Buddy."

Both organizations, at the local and national levels, affirmed women's relationships with other women, whether casual and informal, or long-term and more intimate. Fostering relationships, friendships among women, opportunities for activities, and sources of support were important aspects of the clubs. Such "social ways" were intended, not accident results. Bylaws and goals stated the necessity of goodwill and


camaraderie among women. Because the business women did not follow traditional paths of devoting their lives to domesticity, these friendships and supports were crucial. They were crucial to business success as well as personal happiness.

The national committee chairman of BPW expressed the connection. She said:

[T]his intermingling of friendships that makes us stand shoulder to shoulder; this loyalty of woman for woman that brings a strength, a faith and an understanding that makes each of us a finer, better and more intelligent citizen; that urges us ever upward and onward, economically, professionally, and politically.87

Not only did friendships among women help them socially and personally, they were directly linked to jobs, citizenship, and even to political progress. These business women may have been "different" because they chose to put their time and energy into occupations instead of domestic pursuits, but their relationships with one another, through the clubs, would make up for anything they might have missed by not focusing on home and family.

As the next chapter indicates, business women devoted considerable time, and often humor, to exploring their identities as rather non-traditional women. Combined with increased skills, educational programs on business and on community and world affairs, and activism locally and nationally, the clubs helped to fashion the business woman.

"THE ALMOST INEVITABLE STRUGGLE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS": BUSINESS WOMEN AND WOMANHOOD

An article in the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Club magazine in 1930 reviewed the state of fiction about business women. Business women had appeared in fiction as far back as the Elizabethan era, but, the author noted, not until the twentieth century did writers recognize "that competency is not necessarily at war with woman."

Before that, many of the portrayals had been "hopelessly outnumbered and cast into oblivion" by writers who preferred "the heroine in diaphanous draperies and clinging negligees." The issue was women qua women, not women and their occupations. It probably was natural, the article continued, that men, "in many ways more conservative than women," clung to the traditional idea that woman's place was in the home. "Women, notwithstanding long and careful training in sex humility, always have been privately dubious" about the validity of the idea of women's exclusive domesticity.1

The article, which commented on and recommended fiction about business women, captured several themes important to 1920s organized business women such as

members of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs. First, business women were interested in how women like themselves, *competent* business women, were portrayed in fiction. They looked for familiar images, either as inspiration or as confirmation of their abilities and lives. Second, they continued to grapple with issues that often had dominated pre-World War I expressions of the identity of the business woman. Regardless of whether the business woman, publication, or club was discussing legislation, business practices, social events, or internal club business, the underlying concern was the very meaning of women identifying themselves by their career orientation, of being *business women*. Those questions were about womanhood or what it meant to be a woman could be asked or discussed overtly or mixed in with conversations about other topics. The traditional conflation of business with "man," and of work outside the home with men, along with traditional assumptions about women's roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers prompted business women, the organizations they joined, as well as magazine and novel writers to explore the relationships of business women to men, to other women, to marriage, to motherhood, and to womanliness and femininity. There would be no model for these relationships; the very notion of womanhood was in flux in the post-war years. Yet the persistence of the discussions is an indication of the importance of gender and gender roles in American society, and of the effect such an emphasis had on women whose lives were focused outside of domesticity.
Historian Angel Kwolek-Folland believes American culture has an "obsession with the categories of maleness and femaleness as signifiers of difference." Writing about office work between 1870 and 1930, Kwolek-Folland notes that gender difference was important to corporate officials. The traditional ideal of women as dependent and therefore good at taking orders was perfect for offices that needed large numbers of "subordinates." She argues that offices kept alive the nineteenth century notion of womanhood in the form of the "office wife," because the twentieth century "companionate wife" was too challenging for a corporate environment. Much of what Kwolek-Folland saw in insurance and financial offices reinforced traditional notions of gender, of appropriate roles and behaviors for men and women, but at the same time changed the way gender worked. Similarly, as business women, their organizations, and literature about them sought to find a way for "business" to modify "woman," they too often reinforced longstanding notions of gender. Kwolek-Folland believes the corporations encouraged gender roles that fit their needs. Business women and organizations they created and joined, however, believed the gender roles they appeared to adopt would promote a much different purpose. Self-defined business women sought ways to reconfigure gender that would support their ambition, their identities as career women, and the opening of opportunities for other similar women. In this sense, their attention to proper womanhood served a subversive purpose: gaining access to

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3 Ibid., 66-68, 179.
"unwomanly" pursuits. Their accession to gender requirements may have helped, on some level, serve the kinds of ends that Kwolek-Folland identified, but many of these business women also sought to re-form gender.

To help explore the possibilities of revised or rejected gender roles, the women sometimes turned to fiction. Reading fiction was part of the clubs' programs of relaxation and intellectual improvement, but some reading also helped business women and potential business women to envision their lives, to imagine careers, relationships, and family responsibilities. As Barbara Sicherman suggests, non-traditional women have often turned to fiction for models for their lives because few other models of such womanhood existed.4 Another important aspect of books about business women was that they affirmed, for many women, their choices and their achievements, even when the real-life women were more successful or ambitious than their fictional peers. National magazines of both the National Federation of BPW Clubs and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs carried articles and regular columns about books and reading. In one regular Zonta column, "On the Library Table," the writer noted that business women should read novels, not nonfiction about business, so they would have more to discuss with clients and customers. Among the books suggested were several novels about business women.5


Individual clubs frequently published recommended reading lists in the national magazine. These columns often included a variety of types of books, but frequently, at least one or two books about business women were on the list. These included books by Ellen Glasgow, Booth Tarkington, Edna Ferber, Esther Forbes, Fannie Hurst, Louis Bromfield, Kathleen Norris, and Charles Norris, among others. Some of these authors and their business women's novels will be referred to below.6

The BPW magazine also featured a regular book column, "She Who Runs May Read," which urged women to take time to read and offered suggestions. The name was later changed to "The Business Woman's Bookshelf." Some recommended books were nonfiction about business women, such as Elizabeth Kemper Adams' Women Professional Workers or Edith Johnson's To Women of the Business World. Some suggestions, as with the Zonta lists, were general, entertaining fiction. Others were books about business women, frequently accompanied by brief reviews or comments. For instance, a note about Alice Adams by Booth Tarkington noted, "One may not like Alice Adams, but one should read the book."7

6 Among the books that appeared on reading were Louis Bromfield, Possession; Dorothy Canfield, Brimming Cup and Rough-Hewn; Edna Ferber, The Girls and the Emma McChesney series, Roast Beef Medium, Personality Plus, and Emma McChesney and Company; Esther Forbes, O Genteel Lady!; Ellen Glasgow, They Stooped to Folly and Romantic Comedians; Fanny Hurst, Lummox; A.S.M. Hutchinson, If Winter Comes and This Freedom; Charles Norris, Brass and Bread; Kathleen Norris, Butterfly; and Booth Tarkington, Gentle Julia, Women and Alice Adams.

7 Independent Woman, Vol. II, No. 11 (October 1921), 24.
Local clubs encouraged reading in various ways. The Portland, Maine, Business and Professional Women's Club, for instance, had its own library. In 1929-30, the library reported that eighty members had checked out about 400 volumes. The library regularly bought new books, sold old ones, accepted donations of books, and, in general, urged members to read. The librarian said she "tried to avoid the morbid and sensational, no matter how well written."\(^8\)

Reading was important and the 1930 review of "Business Women in Fiction" mentioned above is one indication that the organized business women enjoyed reading books about business women, and that they hoped those books would contain positive images. Books of an "earlier day," the review stated, "may have approximated the truth, but they did not fully attain it." The writer attributed the failure to "all the social world of their creators arraigned against such 'unwomanly' women."\(^9\) The review concludes:

The Business and Professional Woman is here to stay, and the more open-minded, wide awake and progressive the writer, the more swift and sure that writer to recognize at once her existence, her right to existence, and her augmenting importance as effective novelistic material.\(^10\)

Ethel M. Colson Brazelton, the reviewer and herself an author, noted that women were happy, regardless of the content of the books, just knowing that business women were the subject matter. But the ideal was a more enlightened, sensitive approach, one that did not

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\(^10\) Ibid., 140.
criticize business women's right to exist, but that explored her concerns. Laura Hapke, in a study of fiction that depicts working women, notes that before World War I, most fiction focused on questions of morality, whether work was corrupting young women or vice versa. After the war, characters might strive for job mobility. "The threat of her competence replaced the threat of her sexuality," Hapke writes. It was just that threat that inspired business women.

Among the books that drew praise from the BPW review was one that "poignantly crystallizes the almost inevitable struggle between the business and professional woman's two worlds." It was the presence of those two often competing worlds -- business and domesticity -- that business women faced in fiction and reality. How could they be innately domestic and yet involved in the non-domestic, "masculine" world of business?

Manhood and womanhood were seen as opposites. It could be dangerous for women to be labeled as unfeminine or unwomanly, or worse, as manly or wanting to be a man. Such "abnormal" women could be considered untrustworthy or unsuitable for business or other pursuits. The belief that men and women had "natural," and often opposite, tendencies had led over the decades to a variety of configurations of how women should behave and of women's roles in America. In general, though, "woman" meant dependent, passive, nurturing, and weak. By the 1920s, women and especially their behaviors were changing. Although domesticity remained most women's primary goal


12 Hapke, Tales of the Working Girl, 139.
and focus, young women now acted upon their own interests more often. They smoked and danced in public. They drove cars. They had jobs, usually until they got married. They might use alcohol, go to movies, and discuss birth control. Yet, despite these changes, ideas about respectable womanhood remained. The popular new psychology, introduced in part by Sigmund Freud on his 1909 visit to the U.S., opened discussions of women's sexuality and women's lives in general. Yet, for women to be seen as "normal," they still needed to behave as "women," which usually implied showing an interest in men, marriage, and motherhood. For business women, who wanted to be accepted in an alien environment, adhering to respectable and "normal" standards was crucial, and often challenging. If it was "natural" for men to be aggressive, competitive, rational, active, and independent, all qualities central to success in business, then what happened when women took up business pursuits? How could they signal their seriousness, ambition and interest in careers without being manly or being accused of trying to be men?

One way was to insure a "womanly" exterior, a mien that appealed to many men as well as some business women. For example, an anonymous member of a male Rotary Club in Utica, New York, in 1922, described members of Zonta as "truly feminine, yet they are also genuine business women." He said they had "sentiment evenly balanced with wisdom and high character." Sentiment and character both were trademarks of "woman." The "truly feminine" aspect gained his respect, and he seemed to want to press

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14 "A Rotary View Point of Zonta," *Zontian* III (November 1922), 17.
the point that they could be "genuine" business women and still be feminine. He never
criticized "masculine" business women, nor staunch feminists, but his point was clear.

The clubs often warned members against appearing too masculine, or issued
denials that the organizations and their members were trying to *be* men. For instance, in
1922, Margaret Starrett of Boston, an organizer for the National Federation of Business
and Professional Women's Clubs, told members of the Portland BPW Club to "not let
themselves become masculine in any way simply because they were competing with men
in the business world."\(^{15}\) Fern Bauersfeld of Kansas City, speaking about BPW in 1927,
insisted that, "This group is not in any way trying to imitate men."\(^{16}\) Similar statements
frequently appeared. The speakers did not have to be specific about what "masculine"
behavior or clothing was. Merely invoking the terms sent the intended message both to
members and the public: organized business women were womanly. However, being too
"feminine" also could be a problem.

If women were too feminine in behavior or attitude, they might be accused of
using their feminine wiles to get ahead. Both men and women criticized women who
were perceived as using sex appeal for business advantage. BPW member Martha
Connole of Illinois acknowledged the problem during a regional BPW meeting. "We
business women must make the men feel that we are not traveling on sex appeal," she

\(^{15}\) *Portland Press Herald*, January 14, 1922, 15.

\(^{16}\) "Mid-West Interstate Conference, St. Louis Missouri, February 1927," February 5,
1927, Marguerite Rawalt Resource Center, BPW/USA, Washington, D.C., 3. (Collection
hereafter cited as BPW/USA)
said, suggesting that everyone probably knew women who used such an approach, especially to sell insurance. Instead, she hoped business women would make business alone the basis of male-female business relationships. "If we are going to be successful because we are women, how can we raise the standard of business women?" Business, Connole believed, required women to be seen not as women or as sexual beings, but solely as representatives of a business. Some people assumed that successful women were having "immoral" relations with men to gain their success, Connole said. Women needed to resist using sex appeal as a business tool. She also urged members not to assume that was how other women succeeded.17

A man who spoke at the 1919 convention echoed the concerns about both sex appeal and womanliness. Louis E. Van Norman, the chief business specialist for the Department of Commerce, said men did not like to see women using "womanliness" to accomplish business goals, nor did they like women behaving ruthlessly or too aggressively to take away what men considered their rights. His comment was met with applause and laughter. As he continued, he indicated the latter comment was supposed to be humorous. His most serious concern was about women behaving like men.

[Men] are firmly convinced of the fact that women have gifts of mind and character and temperament that make their contributions to the business world much more valuable as women and as done by women than they could ever be in a cheap imitation of men.

17 Ibid., 6.
He described the womanly traits as "sense of detail, interpretation of values, intuition, trained and consecrated imagination and tact." The pitfalls for business women were many. They had to find ways to be womanly, but not too feminine, and to avoid being seen as "cheap imitations of men."

This was tricky territory. Women did not want to appear masculine or manly, but neither did they want to seem too feminine, or to be trading on their feminine charms. In a society where there was little space for gender neutrality, the members of business women's clubs, as well as characters in novels, needed to find some way to pursue careers and not be threatening, either as women or male imitators. Physical appearance could be crucial to success.

Clothes Make the Woman

Clothing was one of the most obvious signifiers of womanhood, and while it could mark a business woman as a proper woman, it also could lead her either to the masculine or feminine extremes she had been cautioned to avoid. Women who wore starched collars and ties, who dressed in suit jackets and skirts, may have done so to indicate their seriousness about business or may have been trying to bend gender expectations. Organized business women and fictional characters alike often focused on dress and hair styles.

Serious business women were admonished to dress tastefully. They could look neither like business men, nor like women operating on sex appeal. A 1916 advice book believed that the time had passed for women to wear "... a striped blouse, a stiff, mannish collar, a four-in-hand tie, and ugly rainy-day shirt..." Instead of wearing manly clothes, the book noted, business women in cities were imitating the dress of society women.19 Some business women in the 1920s did wear starched collars, and were successful in business, but the mannish look was denigrated by many observers. A newspaper story about a Buffalo Zonta member attributed her success, in part, to her not looking "masculine." When Mary R. Cass, general manager of the Burt Box Company in Buffalo, was honored by her fellow workers and competitors (mostly men) on her thirtieth anniversary with the company in 1921, a newspaper headline called her a "womanly woman." The story noted that Cass, a "woman's woman," did not wear "tailored suits, collars and cuffs, mannish shoes, or a portentous frown."20 But neither could you find knitting needles in her office. She was clearly a woman, since she did not wear any of the items marked as "masculine." But she was not, perhaps, a stereotypical woman since she had no knitting needles. She dressed like a woman, but held a man's job. She had risen to the top, but her outward appearance was not threatening.


Appearing masculine could signal a variety of aberrations in a real or fictional business woman. Dr. Emma Harpe, of Caroline Lockhart's *The Lady Doc*, "affected the masculine severity of some professional women." To attend a wedding in the town to which she had recently moved to set up practice, Harpe chose a "plain cloth skirt and a white tailored waist with stiffly starched cuffs, and a man's sleeve links." She added a "man's linen waistcoat with a black silk watch-fob hanging from the pocket." Lockhart describes her intended effect as "unfeminine." The clothing was but one sign.

Throughout the book, Harpe is devious and dishonest, appears to be having affairs with other women, and is more interested in money than serving humankind. She is definitely "unfeminine," and is run out of town at the end of the book. Her choice of clothing is one indication of the problems she will encounter.

It was not only masculine attire that could create problems, however. Mary Seymour's *Business Woman's Journal* in the 1890s had focused on the dangers of corsets and heavy, long dresses, but the concerns of the new century were more directed to low-cut blouses or party clothes. In Edna Ferber's 1913 novel about a traveling saleswoman, *Roast Beef Medium*, the woman in charge of welfare work at a department store cautions two store employees on their dress. One wore "too many braids, and puffs, and curls." The other ignored store rules about "short-sleeved, lace-yoked lingerie waists." In this fictional and many real-life cases, the overly feminine attire pointed to women of lower-


class backgrounds or questionable values. Womanhood implied a certain class standing or aspiration. Women needed to be both "proper" and "respectable," especially if they intended to pursue business careers. In the era around World War I, this meant shirtwaists or tailored suits for women, hats, and often, gloves. At work, women were supposed to dress neatly and fashionably, but modestly. Department stores were a prime site of this type of class distinction, as many sales clerks were working class women; store management tried to "uplift" them to more acceptable middle-class standards.23 Ruth Chapin, the newly elected president of the Zonta Club of Buffalo, hinted at class when she spoke to a newspaper reporter in 1926. If everyone had good taste, she said, there would be no need for dress regulations for business women. Chapin was a department store executive. She said stores that employed many "girls" always experienced clothing competition among the employees, necessitating "certain rules for the girls to conform to." Chapin separated herself from the "girls" who worked at the store. She clearly was one of the "women" with good taste. The Zonta Club of Glens Falls, New York, in 1929, summarized the concern by holding a round table discussion entitled, "Does Dress Indicate the Woman?"24

In novels about business women, the typically ambitious heroine is distinguished from run-of-the-mill stenographers, office workers, or employees in other fields, most of


whom are seeking dates or husbands. Clothing, along with general manner, often differentiates the two. Sinclair Lewis, in *The Job*, comments several times on office workers who wear low-cut blouses, apparently a stereotype of a less desirable and lower-class worker. One stenographer says she does not want to "go wrong," but she does want to have fun. She has "a proud new blouse with a deep V, the edges of which gaped a bit and suggested that by ingenuity one could see more than was evident at first." Una Golden, the book's heroine, had seen the boss, an architect, peering at the V. Una was so embarrassed that she stopped working to "clutch at the throat of her own high-necked blouse."25

It was not only clothing, but overall appearance and behavior that qualified a woman as "womanly" and as proper and respectable, or of the appropriate class. One critic of business women made it clear that proper clothing did not make up for bad behavior. Kate M. Tucker thought most business women were too aggressive and argued for a more genteel approach. She wrote in the BPW national magazine, "They may dress in those frills and furbelows or they may be comfortable in suits and collars ... but if they do not possess the wearing qualities of human intercourse, courtesy and gentleness, they are non est."26 Others agreed that clothing was only part of one's overall appearance. Jeannette Sturgis, in Charles G. Norris's *Bread*, believed she was superior at business


school to most other girls, many of whom were foreign-born or chewed gum. At her first job, only one other clerical worker appeared as a possible friend, because she was not "the riff-raff of girls that surged in and out of the office, cheaply dressed, loud-laughing, common little chits." 27 Women not only needed to look like women, they needed to look like the proper class of women.

Apparently, the delegates at the second national convention of the National Federation of BPW Clubs did just that. Exhibiting a note of surprise about the women he found at the convention, Keith Clark of the New York Evening Post, wrote:

There's nothing these women can't do. And yet they remained and they looked feminine. 'They're so good looking,' 'They're so well dressed,' 'They're so well groomed' was heard on every side ... There wasn't one head of short-cut hair, and scarcely a head of straight hair ... There were 'just women,' and they looked the part. 28

He did not need to describe their clothing, he merely noted that they were dressed and groomed "well" to mark the BPW delegates as "proper women." Short or bobbed hair was the symbol of the New Woman, as well as of the 1920s flapper, apparently not the type of women Clark admired. Short hair may have been a sign of the woman who would go too far in challenging the accepted order. The long, curled and coiffed hair might have represented a woman who would acknowledge gender rules.

Members of business women's clubs wanted to make the best possible impression that would help promote the image of all business women, yet they also could joke about


28 "As Others See Us," Independent Woman I (August 1920), 8.
appearance. At the 1924 national BPW convention, for instance, members held a "bobbed hair" breakfast, celebrating the fact that a number of members now sported the short hair cut. At another convention, Martha Connole of Illinois commented on a newspaper article that followed an appearance she and Lena Madesin Phillips made before the Congressional Ways and Means Committee. The New York Times, she told delegates, reported that "Two boyishly bobbed and mannishly dressed women appeared before the Committee." Connole said she wore a dress with a buckle in the front and Phillips had worn a beaded dress. She acknowledged her hair, which was covered with a hat while she gave her report, was cut in a "boyish bob," but she pointed to Phillips and said, "boyishly bobbed can certainly not apply to the president of this organization." The incident brought laughter to the room, but the underlying message was serious. The women's testimony might be dismissed by many people because they were seen as "mannish" or perhaps as acting outside the norms of what women were supposed to do. They were the first women to testify before a Congressional committee on revenue matters.

The humor about personal appearance usually did not go beyond club meetings or publications. As evidenced by an article in the national BPW magazine in 1920, members

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29 Martha Connole, quoted in "Tenth Annual Convention, New Orleans, La., July 1928, Vol. II of 2, NFBPWC," 312. The microfilm edition of the New York Times coverage of the appearance does not mention dress or hairstyles of the two women. It is possible that Connole saw a different edition of the paper or saw the reference in another publication. She did mention other coverage of the testimony. She might have created the image to make her point about how she and Phillips appeared to others, but that seems less likely given the manner in which she made the comment.

30 "BPW Club to Discuss Holding Stunt Night Earlier in Season," Portland Evening Express, November 7, 1927, 5.
knew that their image was not to be trifled with in public. The article, "The Unconscious Standard of Dress," noted that dress standards were different for men and women and that women were more likely to be judged on their appearance. It suggested business women go for safe, simple and practical clothes. They did not have to dress like men, however.31 That theme was echoed in a 1928 talk to the national BPW convention. The speaker said that business women had once tried only to be "efficient" in their appearance. Now, she said, women could "complement the efficiency of business with the charm that naturally belongs to her as a woman." Feminine clothing was no longer taboo. The younger business woman, the speaker said, "is a woman and she is interested in her appearance as that of a woman."32

The temptation for women, according to both fiction and items in club publications, was to focus too heavily on clothing. The national Zonta magazine carried an article in 1922 warning women not to be slaves to the fashion industry. It noted that women had dressed more sensibly during the war, but that the fashion industry planned to lengthen dresses, which was impractical and a waste of fabric. The article asked the reader to imagine an "up-to-date" business woman calling on customers in clothing with "angel sleeves, sweeping draped skirts, topped with an arm-enfolding dolman and a long


feather hiding one eye." Such were the fashions of "leisure" women, not working women.  

**Marriage and Careers**

Other signifiers of womanhood probably were more important than physical appearance, even though that was what potential customers or employers first noticed. Most women expected to marry and social convention put marriage at the top of the list of what constituted "normal" behavior, especially for women. In fact, one literary critic calls marriageability the conventional definition of femininity or womanliness.  

Especially in the post-war era with societal anxiety about economic disruption, racial and labor unrest, and world conflict, marriage, children, and women staying home to care for both children and husband provided a sense of security and routine for middle-class America.  

With marriage a norm, and an indication of normality, members of BPW and Zonta clubs were predominantly single. As Chapter IV indicated, most remained single through their forties and probably for the remainder of their lives. Nevertheless, they found ways to assure the "public" that they believed in marriage and motherhood, that  

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34 Shirley Marchalonis, *College Girls: A Century in Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 32. In addition, see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 147-48, who notes that anxiety over race suicide, the idea that immigrants and African-Americans had more children than more desirable native and European whites, continued in the 1920s, but with somewhat less vigor since marriage rates were rising.
they were neither aberrant nor undesirable, even though they may not have married. Club members, as well as novels and stories about business women, frequently discussed marriage or singlehood. At BPW and Zonta meetings, humor often entwined such discussions. In most novels about business women, marriage was more problematic -- and more central. Frequently, novelists presented business women who wanted to be married, or sometimes, who regretted decisions that had ended marriages. Many novels about business women depicted marriage and women's relationship to men as larger issues than their business lives, as woman's primary goal. Seeking happiness and fulfillment often meant seeking a husband. In the clubs, members might well pay homage to marriage, but they less frequently discussed it as a goal.

Except in public settings, BPW and Zonta members joked frequently about being single. They often expressed pride in their singlehood or acknowledged the large number of single women in the clubs. For example, at BPW's founding convention, the chairwoman of a session introduced Judge Gratia L. Rice of Bridgeport, Connecticut, as "Mrs. Rice." When Rice stood to speak, her first comment was, "Miss Rice, if you please. A regular old maid, but not a spinster." Spinster, apparently, connoted a woman who was unhappy about her single state. Rice wanted her single state to be clear, to be a title that announced who she was. Many others held similar views and made similar remarks.

At BPW's 1922 convention, Director Lena Madesin Phillips, who lived for 35 years in a "devoted friendship" with Marjory Lacey-Baker, noted that the Hartford

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35 Ibid., 274.
chapter raised money by selling black cats made out of discarded stockings. "Now there is another club that is able to furnish a very necessary asset for any unmarried business or professional woman and that is a cat ... if the Hartford Club will furnish me with a black cat, I will guarantee to remain an old maid for the next fifty years of my life." The relationship of cats to singlehood was never explained, but Phillips' pride in being single and intention to remain so were clear. Another BPW member proud of her singlehood was Mary Stewart of Washington, D.C. At the 1923 national convention, she introduced her remarks by saying, to applause and laughter, "I doubt if there is any other place in the world where there is gathered together in one body so many old maids in good standing."

She continued, describing "old maids" as "much maligned." She said a popular fallacy was that old maids disliked that state. "Now you know the truth of the matter is that we regard spinsterhood as an achievement," she said to more applause and laughter. She noted that some women were born spinsters, but that "most of us achieve it by very strenuous discipline." She added that women had to resist many temptations and some, especially older women, "grow careless" and marry.

Not everyone at the conventions appreciated the pride and humor of the single women. Responding to Stewart's comments, Mrs. Carrie Jacobs-Bond of Hollywood, 36

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37 "Fifth Annual Convention, Portland, Oregon, July 1923, Vol. I of 2, NFBPWC, Inc.," BPW/USA, 228.
California, agreed only caustically that being a spinster was great. "I think you are the smartest things in the world that you have escaped," she told the audience, "but what would have happened to me if I hadn't had this son to live for?"\textsuperscript{38} She, like Stewart, was greeted with applause. Even Jacobs-Bond's remark could not contain Stewart's humor and bravado. Stewart was chairwoman of BPW's national legislative committee and, when giving a report on a proposed constitutional amendment on uniform marriage and divorce laws, she said, "There probably won't be much discussion. Uniform marriage and divorce laws don't concern this organization very much."\textsuperscript{39} Her comment clearly was intended as a joke, but Lena Lake Forrest, the national president, told Stewart she believed there would be interest because the home was the foundation of everything, including the business woman. Stewart apologized for being facetious. Forrest's remarks were more in keeping with the public image of the organization; Stewart's with the internal humor and camaraderie.

Zontians, also, joked about being single. A humorous serialized play written by Buffalo club members in 1922 and discussed in Chapter V, included a comment about a real Zontian, who was single at the time and who never married, and her fictitious marriage. The speaker in the play commented, "Yes, Clara married. I did, myself, once, so I can't judge her too harshly."\textsuperscript{40} Marriage, not singlehood, was the state that needed to

\textsuperscript{38} "Fifth Annual Convention, Portland, Oregon, July 1923, Vol. II of 2, NFBPWC, Inc.," BPW/USA, 181.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{40} Zonting Zebra II (May 1922), ZCB, 9.
be defended. An item in the Zonta Club of Buffalo newsletter noted that one member announced at a picnic that she was "crazy about a man, thereby shocking her friends seriously."\textsuperscript{41} They may have been shocked because the woman in question was interested in a \textit{man} or because she was interested in any type of relationship. The humor, though, is in the same vein as the other examples. Most club members were single and movement toward marriage or a serious relationship was the source of jokes. Internally, in clubs dominated by single women, members defending getting married; externally, they praised marriage.

Novelists found defense of spinsters and humor about them more difficult. Most novels about business women continued to portray marriage as the natural and desired state for women. Those who did not marry or whose marriages failed often were different or lacking in some usual feminine traits. Single women generally were unhappy. Edna Ferber's \textit{The Girls} offers one portrayal of the problems of being single. A column on reading and books in the BPW national magazine recommended had recommended the book as one that "girls of all ages" would like.\textsuperscript{42} It focuses on three generations of women in one family, each named Charlotte, each the niece of the next elder, and each single. Each has a sister who is married and has children. Finally, each is single because of a traumatic or failed love affair. The marriages in the book are not necessarily happy, but the single women generally long to be married or regret whatever has left them single.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Zonting Zebra} III (June 1923), 6.

\textsuperscript{42} Edna Ferber, \textit{The Girls} (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1921); \textit{Independent Woman} IV (June 1922), 19.
The middle spinster belongs to a reading club, most of whose members are single because they had to stay home to take care of a parent or because their boyfriends had parents who needed care. Most long for marriage, but when one member marries and returns to the club, she is less than thrilled with her new life, especially the lack of sexual excitement.\(^{43}\) What is especially striking about the single women in the book is that few of them have careers. Most are at home, somewhat bored, but obliged to take care of relatives or other family matters. The central business woman in the book is Carrie, sister of the eldest spinster, who goes to work after her husband has left her and taken money from her father's business. She is successful, but "lacked a certain feminine quality."\(^{44}\) As bitter about her marriage as her sister is about being single, Carrie does not want her daughters to imitate her life. She says she would "just as soon they never married."\(^{45}\) In *The Girls*, marriage is the goal, but Ferber does not see marriage as a state that will save women from the unhappiness or restlessness they experience as single women.

In other novels, some of the business women were not quite womanly or feminine enough, or did not have the proper traits to allow them to marry, or to succeed in marriage. The most extreme example probably is Dr. Emma Harpe in *The Lady Doc*. As noted above, Harpe dresses in an extremely masculine style, and lacks feminine traits of nurturing and compassion. She competes like a man, albeit one who lacks values, and is


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 65.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 68.
not interested in marriage, except when a wealthy man appears in town and she envisions financial security without the struggle of working. Previous to the arrival of the wealthy bachelor, Van Lennop, Harpe was pleased to be called "a good fellow" by the men with whom she drank and smoked. She had no interest in appealing to them as a woman. But when she discovers that Van Lennop is rich, she sees him "as an exceptional business chance." At first, she seeks a lucrative friendship, then turns her sights to marriage. She says to herself, "how will you look anyhow hanging to a man's arm? As a clingin' vine you'll never be a conspicuous success, but you could give a fair imitation if the game was worth the candle ..." She decides to "cut out these pique vests and manly shirt bosoms and take to ruches and frills and ruffles," convinced that her outward appearance will help to charm the wealthy man. But she also tries to turn him against a young woman who previously had rejected her own advances. She played many devious and cruel tricks to capture the rich man, tricks that he discovers and that show that she is not really feminine or womanly, nor really interested in romance. In the end, he chooses the younger, more attractive, more feminine woman. Despite her efforts to put on a feminine demeanor for a wealthy bachelor, Dr. Harpe remains outside the bounds of normal womanhood. Her interest in marriage could not overcome all of the other non-womanly traits she exhibited and she was rejected both by the man and the town she sought to exploit.

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47 Ibid., 177.
48 Ibid., 178.
Not all single women were as dangerous or as aberrant as the Lady Doc. Yet even single women who seemed happy were not always portrayed kindly. In Ruth Suckow's novel, *Cora*, a physician and her "side partner," a librarian, live together in a relationship of an unspecified nature. Cora likes the physician and admires the house the women share. But she is uncomfortable with the relationship. After her own failed marriage, Cora visits the couple and notes that "the relationship exaggerated the feminine in one and the masculine in the other." At first, Cora sees the relationship as "free from the pain and the heat and the bewilderment of the things that beset men and women." Then she concludes, "They were like man and woman together, after all, and with the natural zest left out." As much as Cora enjoys the all-women gathering at the doctor's house, she finds the two spinsters somewhat unnatural, their relationship neither admirable nor a model for her.

A rather back-handed defense of single women appeared in a BPW magazine editorial. It suggested that many secretaries were happy they were not married to their grouchy bosses and that "sometimes it is far easier to mourn for the husband we have never had than to live with the one we have married." The editorial concluded that should be consolation to a single business woman "when some man tells her that woman's place is in the home." Like Ferber, the editorial writer was not enthralled with the possibilities offered by many marriages.

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50 *Independent Woman* II (July 1921), 8.
Like characters in the books, all single members of business women's clubs were not necessarily content with being single. Sometimes, humor was employed to make the point. In another Buffalo Zonta serialized story, the writer of one installment, using herself as the character in the story, includes a man to whom her character is attracted. The writer, a 48-year-old widow, added a note at the end asking the next writer to "please keep my sweetheart in the story." The next writer, 35 and single, turned the "sweetheart" into a villain. Regardless of the feelings of the speaker or writer about marriage, the topic was grist for jokes in organizations in which the large majority of members were single and likely to remain so.

Marriage clearly was an issue, regardless of whether women wanted to be single, or wished for husbands. In an attempt to attract the next Zonta national convention to Rochester, the city's Zonta Club presented an official of the Rochester Chamber of Commerce. He told 1925 convention delegates, "You know Rochester has many more millionaire bachelors than any other city." Much of the publicity for that convention also mentioned the Rochester bachelors. For some members of business women's clubs, being single was not their chosen permanent state. Others probably were uncomfortable that it was the chosen state for so many women, and hence promoted the presence of bachelors.

51 *Zonting Zebra* I (June 1921), 11.

52 "The Confederation of Zonta Clubs Incorporated Fifth Annual Convention, Toledo, Ohio, May 15th and 16th, 1925, Minutes of Meetings," Zonta Archives, Zonta International, Chicago, 31. (Collection hereafter cited as ZI)
Marriage was of interest to clubs beyond jokes and beyond the question of the proper role for women. In 1924, the National Federation of BPW Clubs discussed the implications of marriage for clubs, which were losing members as women married and left the workforce, or worked only part-time. BPW required that at least three-quarters of the members of every club be active in business or the professions. Some clubs used the remaining quarter to allow women who married and left the workforce to remain in the clubs. Miss Irene Hogan of Youngstown, Ohio, said of her club, "A great many of our younger girls have quit because they say that our club has become a club of housekeepers and old maids." The clubs clearly would not survive if younger business women shunned joining because the clubs did not focus on the vital interests of business life. Miss Sarah Postlethwaite of Chattanooga said that when women married, their ideas changed and they no longer were as interested in club affairs. Zonta, too, faced the loss of members to marriage. Some members proposed in 1926 that the club's governing documents be amended to provide alumnae membership for women who had married, or otherwise left their businesses. The recommendation was not adopted. Beyond the humor and pride in singlehood, the issue of marriage, family and women's domestic roles was complex. Clubs suffered when women married and left the workforce or the club, and married women often had different interests than the predominantly single business women, but

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53 "Sixth Annual Convention, West Baden, Indiana, July 1924, NFBPWC," BPW/USA, 228-236.

marriage was so central to society and to most women's lives that the organizations had to embrace its possibilities. The clubs rarely brought issues of children or childcare into these discussions. The different interests of married women and their reasons for leaving the workforce sometimes were related to their care of children. Yet, within the clubs, "marriage" often encompassed the related issues of children, childcare, and domestic duties.

Official statements and speeches by members of the two groups included numerous pro-marriage, pro-homemaker comments. An excellent example of the way in which mostly single women spoke about marriage is a 1920 speech by Lena Madesin Phillips, founder, first director, and later president of the National Federation of BPW Clubs. Phillips praised the business woman and the new organization that supported and promoted her. Then, Phillips said:

Of course, the ideal place for a woman is married and at the head of a big family, but all of us don't do this, and therefore we must not be seconds to men, but should be able to take our places at their side, having better wages and realize the possibility for self-expression there is in the work for women. Of course though we are in the business world, in our hearts we are mothers and the woman who hasn't a motherly desire in her soul to do good and make the world better is all wrong.55

Phillips sandwiched women's ambition, equality to men, and the need for better wages and equal treatment in between the comments on women's more traditional roles: marriage, which she calls the ideal place for women, and motherhood, which, instead of having and caring for babies, she redefines as a desire to do good and improve the world.

Phillips' speech was a masterful reinterpretation of marriage and motherhood. To a public she must have believed would not accept women focusing on business ambition, she bowed to marriage as the "ideal" place for women. In what is almost an aside, she adds that not all women are going to be married and therefore ambition and equal rights are important. But in case even that is too threatening, Phillips claims that all women are mothers "in our hearts." The business woman, then, believes in marriage and motherhood, even as she remains single, competes with men, and seeks equal treatment.

As Phillips' comments demonstrate, members of business women's clubs rarely perceived any abnormality in women who did not marry. On the contrary, the clubs and their members could portray committed spinsters as perfectly normal, complete with "natural" maternal feelings. In fact, being in business could be good for marriage and being married could be good for business. Elisabeth Sears, who was a field organizer in the early days of the National Federation of BPW Clubs and a well-published journalist, wrote that marriage should not "smother" women within the house, but develop their qualities and allow them to make economic contributions. "The entry of the married woman into business has improved not only business but the family status as well," she wrote. "There is not the slightest danger that the family life will suffer."56

Novelists, however, did not agree with Sears. Many depicted serious dangers to family life that resulted from women's business careers. Women who were too good at business, who were ambitious and competent, married, but they also had marital

problems that could be attributed to their business sense. For example, Jeannette, the main character in Charles Norris' *Bread*, remains single and has a successful career as a clerical worker, helping to support her mother and younger sister. She resists marriage and serious relationships. Finally, prompted by the jealousy of her boss’s wife, she marries a man who has been pursuing her. The marriage is not very successful. He likes to gamble, drink, and hang out with other men. She resents not having money and being unable to buy any of the things she could when she was single. She and her husband plan to have a child, if they can get out of debt. But he does not keep his part of the bargain, and she leaves him, returning to her old job as private secretary to a company president. She is promoted to head of a department, doing work she loves. Yet, rather inexplicably, she becomes restless and unhappy about “the grim treadmill of business life.” She resents having hit the top of both the salary scale and promotion ladder for women. She tells her ambitious niece:

> I threw away my life ... To learn to earn her own living is a dangerous thing for a young girl ... I’ve paid bitterly for my financial independence. I sacrificed everything that was precious to me because I wanted to be self-supporting.\(^{57}\)

This attitude is rather surprising, given the character’s enthusiasm and talent for office work. The turnaround apparently fit the author’s intention to disparage and discourage women from getting too serious about careers. The change of heart becomes more drastic toward the end of the book. The character says that her marriage might have worked if she had tried as hard at it as she had at her secretarial job. Financial independence, she

\(^{57}\) Norris, *Bread*, 451.

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says, distorts a girl's mind. "The more I live, the more I am convinced that women have no place in business."58 She looks for her ex-husband, hoping to try again, only to find him remarried and successful in his business. She returns home, alone, to snuggle with her cat. Her regrets about her marriage place all the blame on herself, on her ambition and her ideals. Any failures of her husband or of a larger system disappear by the book's end.

The BPW magazine review of business women's fiction that appeared in 1930 said Charles Norris' book represented a "characteristically masculine reaction." Of the main character, the reviewer wrote, "She, too, is a type, but not a frequent one."59 Most business women probably shared the author's lack of sympathy with the book's ending. Blaming a woman for having ambition, for relishing financial independence, and for failed marriages may have reinforced some traditional notions of marriage and womanhood, but did not fit the image that these organized business women sought to promote.

A two-part novel, also mentioned in the review, and given higher marks than Bread, also sees women's independence as problematic for marriage. The Matriarch and A Deputy Was King follow the life of Antoinette (Toni) Rakonitz and her extended family of strong, determined women, who live in England and various locations in Europe. In fact, all men in the family are weak or suspect for some reason, and the women outlive the men. Toni grows up believing that women are stronger. When she is 16 and the

58 Ibid., 463-464.

family’s fortunes are lost, she goes to work as a dressmaker’s apprentice, eventually opening her own shop and helping to support her mother, grandmother, and aunt. Despite her determination and ambition, while she is on vacation, Toni revels in the easy life, cursing both work and "the independence of the modern girl."\(^6\) She meets a man, marries him almost immediately, and tries to hide her business competence from him, partly to appear more traditionally feminine, and partly because she wants to be supported and not be responsible for her family. But her deception backfires and when the husband discovers his wife’s business is in danger because she took his advice while pretending to have no ideas of her own, he says:

... it was blasted silliness to think that I’d have minded your knowing better than I ... to have imagined that I’d mind just because it was business, and I was a man and you were a woman, and men are supposed to know better in business.\(^6\)

She responds that most men would have minded. He leaves her. Eventually, they get back together and she gives up her business, but not her interest in business, to move away with him and support him in his new farming ventures. The change is prompted not only by the husband’s change of heart, but also by the emergence of a war-injury-related illness, which forces him to drop out of the social whirlwind the couple had enjoyed before their split. That financially irresponsible lifestyle ultimately did not appeal to the business-minded Toni. She also sought to be a more nurturing mother and wife. Her skill in business did not ruin her marriage, but her belief that a man would not appreciate it


\(^6\) Ibid., 166.
almost did. Yet, as in many examples of business women’s fiction, for Toni’s marriage to succeed at the end, and for her children to be happy, she leaves the business world and embraces the joys of motherhood and wifehood.

Another common fictional theme was that business women often chose the wrong men to marry or get involved with. Although Jeannette blames her own ambition for her marital failure in Bread, she clearly had not chosen a mate wisely to begin with. Another woman who chooses the wrong man turns out to be among the most successful, and happiest, business women in business women’s novels in the early twentieth century. Emma McChesney, heroine of several books by Edna Ferber, marries at eighteen, has a son, decides her husband is a loser, and divorces him when the boy is eight. She declines any support and takes a job as a stenographer in a woman’s undergarment company. She rises to head stenographer, then to inside sales, and finally to traveling saleswoman in the most lucrative district. She earns enough to keep her son in a private school, and while she regrets not having a home and doing domestic things, she loves her job and never regrets leaving her marriage. Eventually, she becomes corporate secretary of the firm.62

McChesney goes into business after her unfortunate marriage, but in most novels, it was women who were in business already who made the bad choice of husbands. These books suggest that women’s instinct to marry or be involved in a relationship is so strong that she will forego her usual good sense to get married. Or, perhaps, the women are tired of being so organized and using such good judgment, traits outside the normal purview of

62 Ferber, Roast Beef Medium.
womanhood, that they suspend such behaviors and marry the man who pursues them.

Cora, the heroine of the Ruth Suckow novel of the same name, works to exhaustion as an important private secretary and supported her family, who had always been poor. On a vacation, she meets and marries a man who pursues her. Within a year, he has lost several jobs, their furniture has been repossessed and when Cora discovers she is pregnant, he disappears. Cora, like the heroine of *Bread*, blames herself and her expectations of her husband's success. He has led her to believe he is more ambitious and more financially secure than he is. But, unlike Jeannette in *Bread*, Cora recovers from the failed marriage, although she never embraces a nurturing motherhood. Her mother and aunt care for her daughter while she pursues her career. She seems happy and successful as the book ends.

Another fictional character who makes a bad choice of husbands is Una Golden, heroine of Sinclair Lewis' *The Job*. She is tired of office politics and office routines and when she hears another office worker say she is about to get married and will be able to sleep late in the morning, Golden agrees to marry a man she has been seeing. She is not in love with him, and finds him dull, but sincere and amusing enough to make marriage seem appealing. Like the husbands detailed above, he has been dishonest about his financial circumstances, he loses his job, drinks and gambles. The rent is not paid and he does not seem to be looking for work. Una goes back to work and, when he finally gets a job and assumes she will now quit hers, she leaves him. By the end of the book, she has become quite successful and encounters an old beau. In her new position, she is his boss. Nevertheless, they plan to marry and she plans to keep her job.
Choosing the wrong husband had different effects in different books. But the suggestion in many of the novels was that the man, in order to attract the woman in the first place, had to appear ambitious and successful. Then, after the marriage, he failed to meet the woman's expectations of either income or ambition. In some instances, the woman blames herself because she had been independent and had become used to spending money on things she wanted. Yet only in *Bread* does the woman look back with any serious regret about her behavior in the marriage. In each of the other stories, she moves forward and either finds a new love or new happiness in another venue, often recognizing that marriage provides neither automatic bliss nor automatic security.

Not all fictional marriages turned sour. One of the most famous fictional characters who marries and seems happy is Jo of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, published in 1868. Jo's marriage is a somewhat surprising turn in the book, because for much of the novel the character is independent and appears uninterested in marriage. The book was extremely popular among young girls, especially, in part because of the character of Jo. Girls and young women often found Jo's boyish independence and her pursuit of her career interests inspiring. Until the end, Jo takes on "masculine" roles and interests, rejecting flirting with male callers and other more "feminine" behaviors that interest her sisters.

One critic thinks Jo appealed primarily to white, middle-class women as "a model for non-domestic success," and an example of the search for personal autonomy. 63 That

63 Barbara Sicherman, "Reading 'Little Women,'" 249.
view certainly is confirmed by Marion De Forest of Buffalo, a journalist, playwright and founder of the Zonta Club. As a young woman, she even wrote magazine fiction under a pseudonym, just as Jo did. De Forest wrote the first stage version of *Little Women*, which appeared in New York in 1912.64 De Forest was in London in 1919 with the overseas premier when the founding convention of the Confederation of Zonta Clubs was being held. In 1914, De Forest and actress-director-theater manager Jessie Bonstelle visited the Alcott homestead in Massachusetts and read the many letters the four daughters and their parents had written to one another. Bonstelle, too, had been inspired as a girl by Jo and began acting in response to reading the book. After some persuasion, the Alcott family agreed to let the two admiring women edit a book of family letters and journals. The published *Little Women Letters from the House of Alcott* in 1914.65 Unlike Jo, De Forest continued her writing and publishing career and never married. Instead, she lived for about 26 years with fellow Zontian Mai Davis Smith. Bonstelle did marry and had a son, but continued her theater career.

In the end, Jo and her new husband open a school and home for boys. The independent heroine continues to work even though she marries and has two children. Other fictional characters also continued to work after marriage, with mixed results.

64 “Marian De Forest Likes Play Writing; Many Not Submitted to Producers,” *Buffalo Sunday Times*, April 1, 1928, 42; “Marion DeForest Rites Tomorrow,” *Buffalo News*, February 18, 1935, 1, 8.

65 Jessie Bonstelle, Marion De Forest, *Little Women Letters from the House of Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1914). See pages 4-9 for details about the inspiration *Little Women* provided the two authors.
Emma McChesney, in the third Edna Ferber novel in which she is featured, finally marries her business partner who first proposed at the end of the first Emma McChesney book. He asks her to stop work for a three-month trial period after their marriage. He does so thinking she deserves to be pampered and enjoy pleasures of the leisure life.

McChesney, though, is miserable after a few weeks and when the trial is over, he husband admits he misses her at work. Their marriage remains happy and they continue to work together as well.66

Things do not turn out quite as well for Rosalie Aubyn, a self-made successful business woman, who is involved primarily in insurance in London in the early years of the twentieth century. She unexpectedly falls in love with and marries a lawyer, Harry Occleve. They agree to have a partnership in which both continue to work and both contribute to household expenses. They have three children and Rosalie continues working, now in a responsible position at a bank. Everything seems fine until she is offered a chance to travel to Singapore and other Eastern cities on behalf of the bank. Her husband objects. It is clear that it would be acceptable for a man to accept a post where he traveled away from home for a year, but not for a woman. Women make the home a home. When she considers leaving for a year, everything that apparently has been wrong all along comes to the surface. The children really are not thriving, but are emotionless and uninterested in their parents. The oldest son blames a variety of problems on his

66 Edna Ferber, Emma McChesney & Co. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1915). The other two books are Roast Beef Medium (1913) and Personality Plus: Some Experiences of Emma McChesney and her son, Jock (1914).
mother. He does not believe in religion and tells his mother it is because "she never taught him different." Later, he says his lying, drunkenness and other transgressions are due to never having a home. Two of the three children die traumatic deaths at the end of the book and the third is in prison. It is all because Rosalie worked outside the home. She realizes all has gone wrong because she failed to sacrifice. Like Bread, this book is also written by a man and also takes rather unlikely turns as it blames the business woman for whatever problems have arisen. This story is especially unlikely since many upper-class English children were raised by nannies and governesses in much the same way the Oclocle children were. The difference is that Rosalie sets out to prove that men and women are equal and should bear equal responsibility in the household.67 The reviewer of business women's fiction in the BPW magazine noted that the author has "a rather warped view of the business woman."68

Not all real women left business when they married, either. In fact, about a fifth of BPW and Zonta members were married and still working at careers. Articles in magazines and public speeches debated the desirability of having married women work outside the home. Some club members spoke in defense of married women continuing to work. Others noted that having married women in offices and in business women's clubs defused charges both that business women were aberrant and that they were destroying the family. A newspaper account of BPW's second convention in 1920 helped make those

67 A.S.M. Hutchinson, This Freedom (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1922).

points. The reporter claimed that half of the women who attended were "Mrs." The writer's point was, in part, that Business and Professional Women's Club members were "serious-minded women," rather than girls seeking husbands. He noted that married women workers faced less prejudice than in the past, and that women believed in the "new triangle -- woman, home, and business." The triangle was a theme that other writers addressed as well. One article in the organization's magazine was entitled, "Where the Baby Comes In." It featured a club in New York City that offered a place for women to leave children while they went to work. The club planned to develop a country home where children of working mothers could spend the summer and where mothers could visit on weekends.

The business woman the clubs promoted was good for society, good for the family, and good for womanhood in general. She was, in short, womanly.

Being womanly required a public persona that at least paid respect to traditional women's pursuits. Internally, club members might joke or brag about their spinster status. They might express little interest in marriage or children. In public, though, members praised marriage and motherhood and noted that domestic concerns were the highest calling for women. The members might remain single and might pursue careers with as much ambition and drive as men, but on the surface, at least, they had to value domesticity if they were to be accepted and acceptable to the business world. The


practical aspects of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, at least as related to working women, rarely were addressed. The clubs did not take on childcare nor did they discuss the division of household chores among husbands and wives. In newspaper articles about individual club members who were both married and had children, these questions sometimes arose. Generally, however, marriage, motherhood, and domesticity were concepts that required attention only theoretically.

Novelists usually did more than pay homage, they raised domesticity above business careers in many of their novels. The most successful, the most efficient, the most reasonable of business women ultimately sought either marriage or some equivalent domestic expression. The apologies of members of business and professional women's clubs about marriage and motherhood seem somewhat transparent, but apparently were sufficient to insure that the club members were not scorned as abnormal or unnatural women.

**Feminism**

Only slightly less treacherous to traverse than issues of marriage and motherhood were related topics of feminism and women's relationship to businessmen and men in general. The organizations were rife with differences of opinion on feminism, on women's equality vs. difference from men, on women's appropriate place within the business community, and other issues that went to the core of what it meant to be a business woman and a woman. In general, although individual members and the clubs as
a whole reveled in the community of women they had created, they were cautious about appearing too feminist, too radical, or too independent of men. An observation historian Wendy Gamber makes about milliners and dressmakers is useful in thinking about 1920s self-defined business women. "The varying identities that the craftswomen assumed had both conservative and radical implications," Gamber argues. Their ambitions could spur them on, while the middle-class status they were attaining could lead to conservatism. A similar duality appears in 1920s business women. On the one hand, their identities as "business women" meant a radical departure from women's traditional focus on domesticity because they incorporated "male" traits of ambition and competition. On the other hand, many of the club members wanted to change society only enough to allow women a chance in business; they had no visions of broad social change, and less interest in being seen as dangerous troublemakers. They sought a piece of the American Dream and, in order to gain that piece and their place, they had to be careful how they spoke in public about issues of womanhood and woman's place in society. The identity they created could, therefore, be challenging and accommodating at the same time.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this dilemma for women was the years-long debate within the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs over the name of the group's official magazine. Created in December 1919, the Independent Woman was named in haste when the preferred name, "The Open Road,"

was found to be taken.\textsuperscript{72} The editor and National BPW director planned to change the
name by the second issue. That did not happen and controversy, much of it centered on
the belief that the name was too much of a challenge to men, surrounded the name for
many years. Ruth Rich, an early editor, noted in 1925 that "since the initial issue ... there
has been criticism of the name."\textsuperscript{73} A proposal to change the name was defeated in 1922,
and again debated seriously at the 1925 BPW national convention. During the 1925
discussions, Mrs. Josephine Forney of Oregon said that she was ashamed to leave the
magazine on her desk at the Portland Chamber of Commerce, "where the men might
come in and pick it up and ridicule the name." She did not want men to get the idea that
she was trying to be independent of them. "I like them to know I am working with them. I
don't feel so blamed independent as all that."\textsuperscript{74} Forney never suggested that she had heard
complaints from men about the magazine name, only that she was uncomfortable with the
implications of "independent" and imagined that the name might offend men.

Another critic of the name, Miss Hazel Palmer, argued that advertisers would be
more prone to buy space in a magazine with a different name. She wrote to the national
office that the name made the group sound like women interested only in themselves. A

\textsuperscript{72} The organization also considered "Business Woman" and "Business and
Professional Woman." The first and last had been used by the Woman's Association of
Commerce, the group that had declined to join with the National Federation when the
latter was founded. That connection, as well as continued use of the name by a small
publication in Chicago, made those names undesirable.

\textsuperscript{73} Ruth Rich, \textit{Independent Woman} IX (May 1925), 22.

\textsuperscript{74} "Seventh Annual Convention, Portland, Maine, July 1925, Vol. II of 2, NFBPWC,"
BPW/USA, 12.
long-time supporter of women's rights, she admitted that club members were economically independent, but did not want anyone to think they were independent of families, communities or the country. "Our National Program does not connote independence -- but a cooperative spirit," she wrote. "We are a part of everyday life and enjoy the fruits of the coordinated efforts of millions of people, men and women."

Changing the magazine's name would not be a retreat from "our fight for women's rights and against discrimination," she concluded. In other words, organized business women could work to change conditions for women, could admit women faced discrimination, and could advocate for women's rights, but some members wanted the groups to do those things under a veneer of womanly restraint. Despite the discussion, the name was not changed in 1925. In 1926, delegates to the national convention voted to appoint a committee to select a possible new name. In January 1927, the magazine announced a contest to come up with a new name. Although they selected a contest winner, delegates to the 1927 convention voted 239-62 to keep the name Independent Woman. The rejected names included the contest winner, "B & PW Magazine," as well as "The American Business Woman," "The BPW Magazine," and "Today's Business Woman."

The supporters of the name "Independent Woman" did not speak much during these debates, but one non-member who liked the name was Dr. Elizabeth Thelbeig, a professor of physiology at Vassar College, who gave an address on "International Relations of Women" at the 1925 convention. She began her remarks by saying she had

been an "independent woman" since before most of the audience were born. She left home at age 17 and went to New York to study medicine. "I felt very independent and I have felt independent ever since -- not that I desire to put all humanity on the half shell and call that half shell the female sex. Not at all. But I have rejoiced in your title." The majority of delegates agreed that "independent" would remain, even if they did not join Thelbeig in rejoicing about the name, which finally was changed in 1956 to "National Business Woman." The debates are instructive about how tenuous many women felt their positions were in the business world and how dangerous it might be to present an image of business women as "independent" in any sense other than earning a living.

That sense of caution extended to other issues as well. During one discussion at the BPW's founding convention in 1919, Jean H. Norris, a New York City lawyer, argued that the proposed constitution of the federation should not state as a purpose "To secure combined action" among business and professional women. She preferred "to bring about a cooperative spirit among women." She said discussing combined action would "bring about an avalanche of criticism from the men of this country, and that is something we cannot afford."77

Pearl Rall of Los Angeles disagreed. She said California recently had passed a community property bill through "combined action," pulling together groups representing thousands of women to support the bill. "We found that if we were afraid that the men..."


77 "First Annual Convention and Executive Committee Meeting," BPW/USA, 86.
would get excited over some word, that we would have to be changing and explaining all the time, so the best thing was to go ahead.\textsuperscript{78}

Gail Laughlin, a California lawyer who was elected the first president of the federation, also spoke against changing the language. "I think we need something more than just spirit and we need action beyond that."\textsuperscript{79} Norris's language change was rejected, but within a few years the change found its way into the group's statement of purpose.

The need to be cautious was expressed in a variety of ways. The Portland, Maine, BPW Club, in a regular newspaper column, reported on a former Portland woman who was now president of the San Francisco Club. She was described as one of San Francisco's most successful business women, running her own printing establishment. Further, "she is not one of these arrogant advocates of feminism who wants to place woman far ahead of man in the economic race. Nor does she exalt the business woman and disparage the home woman." The description captured all appropriate cautions for proper "womanhood" -- respect for men and for domesticity. Then it went on to list the advantages she believed the business woman had over women trained solely as homemakers. The cautions expressed, the woman's more radical views about the deficits of "simple mothers" could be detailed.

Not all members chose caution in speaking about aspects of womanhood and expected behaviors of women. These differences of opinion and approach toward

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
advocating for business women had the potential to disrupt the organizations, but often were accommodated. Looking back on the founding of the National Federation of BPW Clubs, lawyer Pinckney L. Estes Glantzberg of New York in 1925 summarized the general philosophical difference among members.

This federation has been torn between two factions of women: those who were feminists and wanted to make out of this organization a sword of defence that would cut down all prejudices against women in work or any place else . . . There is another faction in this Federation, or has been . . . of reformers, women who wanted to reform the world through some special social endeavor. The average woman is not interested in the feminist movement nor social reform -- economic or social -- but is interested in desiring to know and understand each other, mutual understanding.80

Glantzberg captured the differences in attitudes and approaches among club members, although she failed to see the complexity and interrelationships of the "types" she presented. Not all women who joined BPW or Zonta saw themselves as feminists or even reformers, and some women who made "feminist" statements did not attach that label to themselves. Some wanted both reform or feminist action and mutual understanding. Ultimately, most wanted to succeed in business and sought to find ways, with the help of the clubs, to do so, or to gain recognition for successes already achieved.

In most of the previous descriptions of womanhood, of the proper stance for business women to take, of clothing and of attitudes, the clubs and novelists alike assumed that the women had a choice of the appearance they wanted to present to the public and of their actions in general. Instead of starched collars, why not choose the

more feminine lace? Instead of advocating that women remain single, why not praise marriage and motherhood, while acknowledging that not everyone married? In other words, given a choice, the organized business women would choose accommodation to social expectations on the exterior, while pursuing their own ambitions and advocacy for women. But what if business women had no choice? What if they were born different, had innate characteristics that marked them as masculine, or as ambitious, or as non-maternal? Such themes were frequent in fiction, perhaps explored as explanations for why women would venture into "male" domains, seeking "male" rewards and "male" achievements. These women of fiction were not necessarily trying to upset gender norms, but their biology doomed them to do so. Real-life business women rarely explored these themes, at least not in meetings and publications for which records remain. Novelists, however, scattered such references throughout books about business women. Some innate tendencies were more subtle than others.

Perhaps the least subtle depiction of a woman who "had" to be a business woman was that of Evangeline Knapp in Dorothy Canfield's *The Homemaker.* She was not masculine in appearance, but her overall personality and tendencies contributed to her rather dismal performance as a mother and homemaker. Eva Knapp has eczema, her daughter has a persistent cold, one son has a digestive disorder, and the youngest son hides from her under the stairs and is too willful. Eva cooks the perfect meals and keeps the house perfectly clean, but she also constantly criticizes the children and her husband,

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and has no idea that her lack of "normal" nurturing and sensitive behavior is causing most of the family's ills. She thinks she is the perfect wife and mother. Her husband, Lester, works in the accounting office of a department store, where he fails to get promotions, and dislikes his job. Everyone in the family is unhappy. Then Lester loses his job and is seriously injured in an accident. Eventually, Eva Knapp goes to work at the department store, where she thrives. And, the household and children thrive under Lester's more humane care. When Lester gets better, the doctor and both Knapps silently conspire to pretend he is not well. Everyone recognizes that the Knapp family is better off with Lester at home and Eva at work, but unless he remains injured, social pressures would force them to return to a more traditional arrangement.

The Knapps both are unsuited to their expected gender roles. Neither of the adults in Canfield's book has a choice about their proclivities. They were born and developed into adults who did not fit the mold. Eva Knapp was organized, detail-oriented, and ambitious. She was not loving, nurturing, or understanding the way women were supposed to be. Lester Knapp was loving, nurturing, understanding, artistic and poetic. He had none of the expected male qualities that would allow him to succeed or even survive in a business environment. Canfield's novel suggested that not everyone who disregarded gender prescriptions did so voluntarily, even as it parodied the expected roles men and women were forced to play and the disastrous results of adherence to those roles.

Other business women also were marked from birth with a "difference" that permitted their business success and challenged their abilities to carry out traditional
women's roles. Maxine, a character in G.B. Stern's *The Matriarch*, had "a gift for business." That gift, clearly "masculine," was not specified, but Maxine found that business "thrilled her beyond any more womanly occupation."82 Carrie, the business woman and mother in Edna Ferber's *The Girls*, is "plain, spare, sallow" and has a mind that matches her father's. She and her father discuss real estate "like two men." Carrie's mind is "the mathematical and legal-thinking type of brain rarely found in a woman."83 Carrie does marry and have children, but goes into business after her husband disappears. She seems more suited to business than motherhood and domesticity. "There's no denying that Carrie lacked a certain feminine quality," Ferber wrote. "Her fingers were heavy, clumsy, almost rough, like a man's." In addition, she is not a particularly warm or nurturing mother. The failed marriage was apparently unrelated to those qualities, but Carrie's business success clearly is due to her inherent masculine traits. While Cora, the protagonist of the novel by the same name, is not masculine in appearance, she, too, lacks maternal instincts. She never is able to nurture and cuddle her child, only in part because she is too upset that the child's father has left her. Even when she recovers from the embarrassment and disappointment about her marriage, she is not warm to her daughter. Instead, "Her maternal instinct turned into intense ambition to provide well for Josephine -- do what any man could do."84 If Cora had normal female nurturing genes, she probably

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84 Suckow, *Cora*, 325.
would have stayed home with her child, instead of returning to work and taking on the "fatherly" role with Josephine. Her mother and aunt become the "mothers."

Another extreme example of a woman with the wrong gender traits is Jan Prince in Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor*. Prince, who comes from a troubled background, has many markers of "masculinity." She looks like her father and has no interest in or skill at traditional domestic tasks. The town doctor decides to help her "work with her nature and not against it." He observes that she "is not the sort of girl who will be likely to marry." And although she has a serious suitor, Nan chooses a medical career and remains single. She is advised against such a choice by a single aunt and another single woman, both unhappy with their status. But Nan is destined to choose the "male" path, one that cannot accommodate female roles, because of her inherent masculine traits.85

These inherent "wrong" gender traits led women other than business women into unwomanly actions. A feminist spinster in *O Genteel Lady!* speaks out about slavery and women's rights. She and other women who belong to the Society for the Promulgation of Belief in Women are "unattractive." The problem is not only their choice in clothing, something over which they have control, but protruding adam's apples and other physical signs of their lack of femininity.86 Another spinster, in Ellen Glasgow's *They Stooped to


Folly, is well dressed and well received in proper society. But the husband of her best friend and his mother both think there is "something masculine in her prominent features and her pronounced opinions upon public affairs." No doubt her masculine features were the cause of those unwomanly opinions.

Fictional women who succeeded in business were born with the "wrong" gender traits, longed for marriage, endured an unhappy marriage, or otherwise failed at various gender expectations. Women born with masculine traits might have been fated by them, or unhappy because of them, but those mistakes of nature allowed characters to pursue non-womanly careers. Even so, few authors portrayed happy, healthy, well-adjusted, successful business women. Instead, the fictional heroines often were conflicted about domesticity and careers, or made the wrong choices in life because of their career orientation. Their unhappiness often related to issues of marriage and motherhood.

The real business women who joined organizations after World War I saw a different, happier future for themselves and sought ways to enable their own success and that of other women. Doing so often required caution and acknowledgement of society's expectations for women, but the image the organized business woman presented rarely was the tragic one of fiction. Instead, the real business women could, and did, succeed. The success was not without difficulty, however.

Historian Nancy Cott explores problems women faced in the post-war era in determining their relationship to men and to other women. She suggests that

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87 Ellen Glasgow, They Stooped to Folly: A Comedy of Morals (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1929), 44.
individualism overtook ambitious women and society as a whole, prompting many
women to act as if their opportunities were the same as men's and to ignore larger forces
of discrimination.\(^8\) Cott's analysis rings true, at least on the surface, for BPW and Zonta
members, who often had to put on a public appearance of ignoring such discrimination
and acceding to gender prescriptions. Yet, the reality for these organized business women
was more nuanced. Beneath the surface, both organizations and many individual
members ignored neither discrimination nor gender limitations. They advocated in many
ways to eliminate discrimination and they redefined the core contents of "womanhood,"
even as they accepted its outer shell. Since the primary identification within the clubs was
as business women, serious, ambitious career women, the more political beliefs
sometimes took a back seat. The idea of supporting women as a group and promoting
women's opportunities was built into the clubs. When they talked about "women,"
however, club members rarely included women of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.
They more frequently recognized class differences and sometimes viewed their efforts as
helping women who might have been relegated to "lower" classes enter "middle" class
occupations. Therefore, even members who did not speak of themselves as feminists or
did not hold such ideas often spoke in support of "women." Members sought individual
success and sometimes blamed other women for acting in ways that would hurt all
women's opportunities, but the emphasis of clubs and many members was on acting
cooperatively for the benefit of an even larger group of women. The official positions of

\(^8\) Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 280-281.
the clubs were reflected in their bylaws and constitutions: both supported "women" as a group and sought to improve conditions for women, especially women in business. They recognized gender discrimination and fought it through their legislative activities, public speeches, and interactions within their communities. But, as with all issues the women addressed, their comments and actions often were couched in terms of acceptable womanhood, which included an assumption the women they sought to assist were, like themselves, white, frequently native-born, and often middle class.

Mary Cass, general manager of a box company who was described above, provides a good example of the complexity of business women's statements and actions about their place in the business community. In 1921, Cass sought membership in the all-male Buffalo Athletic Club. The club said her membership was "much desired," but since it was a men's club, Cass would have to sign her checks, "by courtesy of Mr. So and So." Cass rejected that idea and told the club either she was a member or not, but she would not be a member by courtesy of a man. She was admitted. She also was the only woman member of the Buffalo Chamber of Commerce. These incidents were described in a relatively private forum, the Buffalo Zonta Club newsletter. In a public forum, a newspaper item about Cass published the same year, she is quoted as saying, "I'm not one of those horrid, very mannish types that are so often supposed to typify the woman in business. It isn't at all necessary for a woman to stop being a woman just because she's in

89 Zonting Zebra II (October 1921), 8.
business." In another newspaper article several years later, Cass says, "the way for a woman to get along is to act the way a woman should act, and not as she thinks a man should act." The two faces of Cass are interesting. In the first instance, she demands rights equal to a man, acting forcefully to gain positions she seeks. In the public statements, Cass seems to accept differences between men and women and encourages women to behave more demurely like proper women. But her own experiences indicate that she had altered some of the traditional notions of womanhood. She continued to dress in a feminine manner as noted earlier, but she adopted many "masculine" behaviors and renamed them "womanly." She was assertive, ambitious, active, and competitive. All were traditional male qualities, redefined by Cass and other business women as womanly traits. In addition, she did not discuss in the public forum the actions that did more to challenge gender norms. The more radical component of the business woman often was softened or even hidden for public consumption.

In many other instances, club members spoke of changing conditions for women or supporting women as a group, but often couched those statements in acceptable terms. Buffalo Zontian Dorothy Mandel worked in the family umbrella business. A newspaper article described her as "a home girl, who believes that efficiency in household things need not at all keep a girl from a good business career at the same time." This was the most common type of description of business women's club members: they were


interested in and good at domestic pursuits, but they just happened to have careers as well. The article on Mandel added a more forceful expression of women's rights when it quoted her as saying she had no intention of giving up her business career when she married. "Men don't. Why should we girls?" Her statement that men did not give up work when they married did not appear as strident as it might have if not coupled with her interest in home and domestic tasks. In her support of work and marriage, Mandel did not suggest how a married woman with children and household duties might fulfill those responsibilities and work outside the home.

In somewhat different language, other Buffalo Zontians expressed similar feminist ideas about marriage and work, again couched in respectable appreciation for at least part of women's supposed "natural" domestic inclination. Helen Z.M. Rodgers, a married lawyer with a daughter, said, "The mother who keeps her interest in outside affairs keeps her children interested in her." She added that there was no reason women should not have careers and children. "Of course it's possible," she said. Rodgers explained that she always arranged her work schedule so that she could drop in and visit her daughter at appropriate times during the day. Rodgers and her husband employed a housekeeper/nanny. Mrs. T.W. Gardiner, an architect and home builder, said, "I absolutely believe that any woman can have both a husband and children and a career so

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long as she loves what she is doing." The newspaper article described her as "just as much at home directing a steam shovel ... as she is when she deals a hand of bridge ... or is busy in her own kitchen baking a pie." Olive Frank, an engineer and member of the Buffalo club, was quoted as saying, "After I was married I thought I could be content to care for hollyhocks in the back yard, paint the furniture, and play bridge," but she found out she was "homesick" for her drafting boards, transverse and removable baffles. She defended continuing to work while married and, to make work seem more like an appropriate domestic task, pointed out the similarities of the two. "[E]ngineering is more closely allied to sewing and baking, and other allegedly feminine pursuits than anyone seems to realize," Frank said. These women appeared to understand how traditional expectations led to women's lack of opportunities. In confronting those limits, they often praised traditional women's roles or expressed some acceptable relationship to them. Even though they rarely addressed the logistics of caring for children and households while working outside the home, they upheld the possibility that all were possible. The effect of their statements was to challenge traditional roles and to make clear that women's success depended on those challenges.

Not all expressions of feminism, or of acknowledgement of discrimination against women were couched in the language of domesticity and womanhood. In a number of

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95 "Buffalo Woman Stands Alone in Unusual Engineering Achievements," Buffalo Courier-Express, September 1, 1928, Scrapbook, ZCB, 8.
speeches and statements, officials and other club members spoke of the strong advocacy
role they saw for women, without admonishing their listeners to be "womanly," or
without making accommodations to men's feelings. Mary Stewart, outspoken about being
single, also was straightforward in her assessment of women's relationship to men. At a
meeting, she recalled an incident that took place during the suffrage campaign. One
reporter, insisting that nothing Stewart has to say was "news," tried to make news by
asking her if she liked men with beards. She said no. He then made a comment about
kissing a bearded man, to which Stewart replied, "Bless me. I long ago passed the age
where every man is a possible kiss. He is a probable vote."96 Stewart's comment was
humorous, but suggests both her reluctance to bow to men's wishes and needs and the
importance of political action for women. Leaders of both women's organizations made a
variety of other forthright comments about women's place in society. In 1918, Lena
Madesin Phillips, who would become the first director of the National Federation of
BPW Clubs and later the group's national president, wrote that the "tide of public
opinion" had long worked against women, "refusing their demands, curtailing their
opportunities, undervaluing their work."97 In 1929, Phillips was still convinced that
prejudice and discrimination limited women, despite the ten-year effort of clubs like
BPW. She said in a speech, "There is a dead line, in business, in professions, in politics,

96 "Legislative Committee proceedings, Eighth Annual Convention, Des Moines,
Iowa," July 13, 1926, "Des Moines 1926" folder, Convention Drawer, BPW/USA, 10-11.

97 Lena Madesin Phillips, undated report, Lena M. Phillips collection, Arthur and
Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College,
Cambridge, Massachusetts.
beyond which many men, ever more consciously, determine we shall not pass." She said the "mark of the slave chain" remained in women's paths. Likewise, the national Zonta president in 1929 asked members, "Do We Believe in Women?" In a New Year's column in the national magazine, Katharine B. Sears suggested Zontians needed to work on behalf of women as a group to promote not only women, but Zonta and its ideals. "Do we believe in womankind? Do we believe in the new role that she is endeavoring to play in the world of today? Do we believe in the new relations that she is attempting to establish?" Sears wrote. She, like Phillips, wanted to inspire members to work together to improve conditions for all women, and especially for business women.

This "business woman" envisioned by the clubs and their officials was ambitious and serious about her career. She cared not just about her own advancement, but about her fellow club members and about women in general. She would fight to increase opportunities for women, to improve education and training, to gain recognition for women's achievements. Her activities would be focused on women. And, she would prove that women were not petty, jealous, or vindictive toward other women. The belief that women were unkind to other women was rampant in early twentieth century America, and a constant source of concern to business women's organizations. Regardless of the merit of the charges, one important reconfiguration of womanhood the clubs supported was the end of jealousy and pettiness. Women would now work and act for other women.

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A newspaper article about Buffalo's Louise Gerry on her election as national Zonta president in 1926 noted:

... [S]he has a great belief in womankind and her power, a belief that woman is only just beginning to come into her own and secure the benefits that are rightly hers in the economic scheme . . . and one of the first lessons women must learn is to stand by each other, to be tolerant and kind ...

Women sometimes blamed one another and their "feminine" natures for their lack of success. They sometimes failed to work to change larger systems of discrimination, as historian Cott suggests. On the whole, though, they were interested in making changes that would allow women increased opportunities. They wanted women to work together, because together they could affect those changes, which might be changes in attitude of local businessmen as much as legislative alterations. In order to succeed as business women, in order to gain recognition for women's achievements, in order to improve conditions for women, and in order to gain increased opportunities, members of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs first had to gain acceptance and an audience. Doing so required resolving the "almost inevitable" conflict between expectations that, as women, their primary interest and focus would be on domesticity, and as business women, that they focused instead on the more "masculine" interest in careers. In real life and in novels, business women found ways to appear womanly, to appreciate womanly pursuits, and to maintain an aura of respectability. Those accommodations allowed the women to undermine the

very traits, behaviors, and expectations they seemed to support. Rarely did these
organized business women seek to extinguish "womanhood," but they did disrupt it by
incorporating many previously "male" traits and goals into their conceptions of what it
meant to be a woman. By being womanly and feminine in various ways, the women who
joined business women's organizations could call themselves both women and business
women.
CONCLUSION

"... PART OF THE STREAM HEADED FOR THE TOP"

In 1969, Florence Liscomb was one of nine charter members of the Portland, Maine, Business and Professional Women's Club who remained in the group. When Liscomb joined the club in 1920, she was a 45-year-old divorced bookkeeper who lived with her sister and brother-in-law and their family. During the BPW club's first decade, she had participated in the serious and the more social activities, serving twice on the Executive Board, once in charge of the Research Committee, heading the extremely popular bowling program, chairing the Sports Committee, and participating in both the drama and glee club groups. In the 1910s through 1930s, Liscomb was a bookkeeper at a department store, an office supply store and a women's clothing store, working at the latter from 1924 until the store apparently closed in about 1939. Before retiring in 1958, Liscomb worked for fifteen years as a seamstress at a Portland department store. Early in the 1920s, she moved into her own apartment, and lived for many years in a building inhabited by several other BPW members. At the end of 1969, when she had been a member of the Portland Business and Professional Women's Clubs for 49 years, Liscomb died at the age of 94.

Only a handful of charter members remained in the Zonta Club of Buffalo in 1969, fifty years after it was founded. Among them was Angela Barone, who had
immigrated to Buffalo from Italy when she was a year old, and became a charter member of Zonta at age 26. Like Liscomb, she studied clerical work at a business college, but her life then took a different path. She got her start in a lawyer's office. When the lawyer opened a macaroni company in 1916, she assisted him and became an officer in the firm. In 1925, she opened her own insurance and real estate firm, purportedly the first woman in Buffalo to operate such an office under her own name. She served two terms on Zonta's Board of Directors, helped found the Buffalo Business and Professional Women's Club, and was active in the League of Women Voters and a number of other community projects, including the Erie County Board of Social Welfare. Barone remained in Zonta until her retirement in 1972. She died in 1978 at age 86.

The two women are examples not only of business women's varied experiences, but of their persistence. It is not surprising, of course, that few original club members remained in 1969, fifty years after the founding of the two organizations; the average age of members of the Portland and Buffalo clubs in 1920 was about forty. At the twentieth anniversary of the Buffalo club, an official studied the membership patterns of the first two decades. She discovered that nearly a quarter of the women who had ever been members remained so in 1939. Of those who left the club, 13 percent had died, 10 percent had left Buffalo, 14 percent lost the jobs that allowed them to be members, and 7 percent left due to marriage. The remainder either gave no reason, could not attend luncheons, were ill, or did not attend or did not pay dues and were dropped. In the Zonta Club of Buffalo, about a quarter of the charter members remained active after a decade, and about 12 percent after two decades. At least 40 percent of the founding members of the
Portland, Maine, Business and Professional Women's Club were still active a decade later. No records remain to indicate why members left that club.

Nationally, the clubs continued to grow throughout the 1920s. The new organizations women formed after World War I remained strong a decade later, despite the deepening economic depression in the country. By 1930, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs had more than 1,000 clubs and 53,000 members. The Confederation of Zonta Clubs had about 90 clubs and at least 2,500 members. Both organizations were becoming international, as well. The persistence of the clubs and their members was about more than numbers or longevity, however. They had many achievements about which to boast, from legislative victories to individual members' business successes. They knew that the road still ran uphill to their original goals of gaining recognition for women's achievements and potential and of improving conditions and increasing opportunities for business women. In 1929, Lena Madesin Phillips, who had been largely responsible for the beginnings as well as the continued growth of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, was circumspect in commenting on the organization's first decade. She said that "experienced feminists" believed the woman's movement had "struck an impasse." She noted:

There is a dead line, in business, in professions, in politics, beyond which many men, ever more consciously, determine we shall not pass. . . . for the rank and file of us there is neither equal opportunity nor equal pay. To the detail, the drudgery, the unremunerative we are fairly welcome. But the mark of the slave chain is still in our path, and one might add in our souls.1


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Despite the seeming tone of defeat, Phillips went on to express the optimism that had marked the organizations from their beginnings, and that had been expressed by other business women since the late nineteenth century. Women could do it, Phillips and other believed. They could, through perseverance, ambition, and, most importantly, combined action, gain the place they sought in the business world. How would they know if they were headed to that place? One writer addressed that very question. "What is advancement?" she asked. "Is it more money? More responsibility? More prestige? More security?" Each of those might be important, but she suggested the answer was somewhat more nebulous. "It implies that the job is good if you feel you are on your way... You need to feel that you are a part of the stream that is headed for the top." Heading toward the top was not so much about money or responsibility, but a feeling women had about their jobs and their prospects. Even in 1930, self-defined business women believed it was possible, individually and collectively, to overcome the barriers Phillips outlined and to head for the top. Self-defined business women had believed for more than four decades that they could climb important job ladders, that they could and had reached many significant milestones in the business world, and that the future would bring even better possibilities. In the World War I era, their enthusiasm increased and business women formed a number of new national organizations to assist their efforts. One of these, the National Federation of BPW Clubs, memorialized the confidence in the future of business

Center, BPW/USA, Washington, D.C., 4.

2 Grace L. Coyle, "Is Your Job a Good One?" Independent Woman IX (January 1930), 8-9, 44.
women in 1925 when it adopted its emblem. The central figure was Nygard of Samothrace, a symbol of victory that represented the "emergence of women into a world of unparalleled opportunity" and "carried the feeling of an irresistible forward movement." The president of a local chapter of another post-war group echoed the feeling. "We have just begun to come into our own," Fannie M. Perkins of the Zonta Club of Toledo said in 1925. "We are citizens of this country. We are entitled to do what God gave us power to do." That power, business women had believed since the late nineteenth century, was to be ambitious and competitive as they dedicated their lives to careers in business, and to success. Business women knew they were headed for the top.

Statistics from various sources indicate that women between 1890 and 1930 did enter the workforce in increasing numbers, but that they did not make headway relative to men in executive positions, nor did they acquire the economic power necessary to big business success. Yet, women like Florence Liscomb, Angela Barone, and many thousands of others in a variety of types of jobs viewed the era differently. They might be labeled exceptions to the overall occupational and employment trend for women, but that label does not do justice to either their numbers or their experiences.

This examination of self-defined business women between about 1890 and 1930 demonstrates that usual sources of statistical data on business women often are misleading. Closer and more particular scrutiny reveals the many ways in which self-defined business women did succeed during this period, the ways in which they managed

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to penetrate the walls of business, and, significantly, reveals their own ideas about what constituted success and achievement. Many thousands of women over four decades called themselves business women and saw themselves as comparable to business men. Trying to match their experiences to those of the most successful businessmen obscures both the realities of discrimination women faced and their accomplishments. The fact that they did not achieve equity with the types of businessmen who often have been studied by historians is among the least relevant points about their experiences. American society during this time was highly gendered. Manhood and womanhood comprised virtually opposite and mutually exclusive behaviors and traits. Men's occupations and women's occupations, for the most part, remained different and unequal, a fact that women, regardless of determination, were unlikely to alter. And, many businessmen were not the scions of industry or finance who have come to be equated with the term "business." The differences from men aside, these women persisted in forging identities as business women, identities that would embrace many "male" qualities and allow women to enter the "male" realm of business and envision themselves as comparable to men. That identity gave meaning to their own lives, provided friendship, support, the knowledge that they had worked hard and done well, and that they had endeavored to help others, too.

In 1892, business woman and magazine publisher Mary Seymour wrote, "It is the business woman who is the woman of the age."4 Through a variety of publications and

4 Business Woman's Journal IV (August 1892), 300.
organizations, business women themselves and those who directed writing at or about them sought to make Seymour's statement true. They found ways to negotiate both requirements of womanhood and the opportunities and limits of various occupations to create an identity for themselves as business women. They helped to re-form and redefine womanhood and business. They took on radical identities based on a devotion to careers, not domestic concerns. They demonstrated that women were and could be the very things many of their contemporaries believed women were not: serious, ambitious, competitive, aggressive, economically independent, and career-oriented.

They were not naive about the barriers women faced and the limits of individualism. They joined together, as women and as business women to provide themselves with the support, encouragement, political clout, and positive publicity they needed to succeed. In an era when many observers believed women had ceased to join together for political and civic aims, these women united with a sense of sex solidarity that was crucial to their identities, although limited to women of certain race and class distinctions. Often, they relished the friendships and companionship with fellow club members. Many of these women could, and some did, join job-specific groups. But their business women's organizations were different. BPW, Zonta, and similar groups were aimed at women more than at jobs. Members shared gender and attitudes about their careers and themselves, rather than specific occupational ties. While this study argues that the women did succeed and, in fact, reconfigured the meaning of success in ways appropriate to women's experiences, it also is not naive about business women and their positions in society between 1890 and 1930. It acknowledges the struggle women faced
from discrimination and insurmountable limits in many areas as they attempted to gain access to "better" jobs. But this is less a story of those large-scale and long-term trends, less a story of victory or defeat, than it is of the women themselves. Their own voices, their own experiences, their own sense of their place in society, and their own efforts in myriad directions, as well as how they were reflected and portrayed in literature affords significant insights into women's lives and American society during the period. It is crucial to recognize that the self-defined business woman believed that she was successful, that she directed her energies to a career, and that she staked her future, in part, on a close association with like-minded women, women who would be friends as well as business peers. A cynic might view the accumulation of their experiences and conclude that their optimism and self-assessments were unfounded. A more idealistic observer might delight in their achievements and their spirit. Whatever the conclusions, examining the business woman from a ground-level perspective where her visions and those of her contemporaries can be seen and heard helps to revise our notions of women's occupational experiences, of the importance of sex solidarity, and of the meanings of success, achievement, and careers.

The self-defined business woman did not disappear in 1930. The organizations continued as did the individuals. But 1930 marked an important turning point for several reasons. First, the National Federation of BPW Clubs and the Confederation of Zonta Clubs, as well as other post-war organizations, reached their tenth anniversaries. The issues with which they dealt and the personalities behind the groups began to shift as the clubs left their formative years. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, the growing
economic depression altered both business and women's possibilities and barriers. All of the organizations formed after the war have survived to the close of the twentieth century. BPW/USA, the updated name of the National Federation of BPW Clubs, has been using as its slogan, "Women Mean Business." The organization with about 70,000 members and some 2,000 local clubs now defines its mission simply as "To achieve equity for all women in the workplace through advocacy, education, and information." With headquarters in Washington, D.C., BPW/USA is a major lobbying group on behalf of legislation relating to working women. It focuses on equity, helping women balance work and family, and changing workplaces to become more family friendly. Zonta International now calls itself "A worldwide service organization of executives in business and the professions working together to advance the status women." In 1996, it had about 33,000 members and more than 1,100 clubs in more than 66 countries.

Much has changed for the business woman since the 1920s. She is now more likely to be an executive, to have training from a program in business administration, and to move in circles more equal to those of businessmen. Yet many of the issues faced by the earlier business women still resonate. What does clothing say about the business woman? Should she dress in "masculine" suits and some version of a tie, or should she present a "softer," more feminine appearance? What is her relationship to marriage and motherhood? Many more married women and women with children are involved in business at the end of the twentieth century than were at the beginning. Yet the question of balancing work and family, of women's relationship to wifehood and motherhood remain central to much discussion of women in business. Significantly, the increased
numbers of business women and increased opportunities have challenged the organizations women created to bring about those improvements. Business women are no longer the unusual, non-traditional women they were before 1930, no longer cut off from various sources of support and recreational and social outlets. In addition, late twentieth century women enjoy many other options of organizations that might help promote their business careers or help them effect changes they seek. Clubs that used to be exclusively for men now have women members, as well. Women can more easily belong to Chambers of Commerce and similar groups. The organizations for business and professional women no longer serve as havens for women and no longer are central to the social and emotional lives of women. The clubs locally and nationally struggle to retain members. Nationally, and internationally, they have moved toward more lobbying, political action, and more specific types of educational programs to help women gain skills to set up and run businesses and to advance in business. Despite the many gains of business women, the resonance of many examples from novels, publications, and organizations between 1890 and 1930 cannot help but startle many contemporary Americans.
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APPENDIX I

Occupations, by categories, used to analyze census data

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capitalist
chippodbist
dentist
dermatologist
doctor, osteopath
lawyer
judge

**White collar, other**
abstractor
advertising, p.r.
bacteriologist
cataloger
CPA
chemist
designer
director, agency
draftsman
draftsman
editor/journalist
etherizer
extension service
field director
field worker
gov't. official
head cataloger
historian
historical guide
home economist
industrial efficiency
lecturer
librarian
minister
organizer
ornithologist
parliamentarian
personnel director
photographer
professional engineer
psychologist
psychologist
psychological
psychological
psychological
reporter/journalist
research
research assistant
scientific aide

social worker
statistician
surveyor
YWCA, n.s.

**Nursing, etc.**
dietician, nutritionist
naturopath
nurse
technician
technologist
x-ray technician

**Medical semi-professional**
chiropractor
dental nurse
massage
occupational therapist

**Medical supervisory**
superintendent, hospital
supervisor, nursing

**Service (lower skilled)**
baker
barber
boarding house keeper
chauffeur
companion
conductor
cook
custodian
dishwasher
driver
elevator operator
hairdresser, manicurist
hostess
janitor
laundress
matron
messenger
nurse, untrained
porter
restaurant steward
scalp specialist  
washerwoman  
watchman  
waitress  

**Non-factor/Manual Trades**  
blacksmith  
boat captain  
bricklayer  
candy maker  
carpenter  
construction  
corsetiere  
dressmaker  
electrician  
farmer  
fisherman  
gardener  
jeweler  
landscape gardener  
livestock specialist  
mariner  
meatcutter  
milkman  
miller  
painter  
plumber  
practical nurse  
puzzle maker  
roofer  
shoemaker  
tailor  
tinsmith  
upholsterer  
watchmaker  

**Proprietors**  
apartment house owner  
business owner  
caterer  
contractor, builder  
dealer/trader  
embalmer  

factory operator  
florist  
furrier  
grocer  
highway builder  
office proprietor  
manufacturer  
merchant  
pharmacist, druggist  
shop proprietor  
undertaker  

**Domestic Service**  
domestic  
home cooking  
housekeeper  
maid  
servant  

**Factory/Production/RR**  
assembler  
barnman  
boilermaker  
bookbinder  
box maker  
brakeman  
brewer  
candy dipper  
carting  
checker  
colorer  
compositor  
dressmaker  
dyer  
engraver  
finisher  
fireman  
fitter  
flagman  
folder  
foreman  
garment maker  
glove fitter  
grinder
helper
inspector
ironer
labeler
laborer
lineman
linotype operator
lithographer
locomotive engineer
longshoreman
machine operator
machinist
mechanic
millwork
millwright
molder
motorman
packer
pattern maker
polisher
printer
repairs
spinner
stationary engineer
steam/pipe fitter
stereotyper
stitcher
shipbuilder
shipper
teamster
tester
trainman
weaver
woodcutter

soldier

Arts
actress
artist
craft worker
diseuse/lecturer
interior decorator
musical manager
musician
producer, theatrical
theater
writer

Trade -- lower
demonstrator
peddler
retail clerk
retail sales

Trade -- higher
auctioneer
broker
buyer
commercial traveler
dress economist
financial adviser
importer
insurance agent
investments
manager, department
non-retail sales
real estate

Trade -- supervisor
store manager
store dept. manager

Manager
assistant manager
assistant treasurer
business manager
cafeteria manager
company manager

city worker, general
law enforcement
letter carrier
lighthouse keeper
probation officer
registrar

Public service

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department manager
district supervisor
factory manager
hotel manager
supervisor

Corporate officers
corporate treasurer
president, business
director-treasurer
vice president, business

Miscellaneous
assistant
investigator
mountain climber
professional athlete
student
volunteer
APPENDIX II

Sampling system for census information

Systematic random samples were used to create the profiles of working women in Buffalo, New York, and Portland, Maine, in 1920. Using summaries of the 1920 census of population, I estimated the number of working women ages 21 and older in each city. Portland's Business and Professional Women's Club required women to be 21 or older to join and the Zonta Club of Buffalo, while it had no written policy, effectively did the same. I wanted samples of at least 400 women from each city, so then determined how many pages I should skip between each name by figuring a percentage of the working women I wanted for my sample as compared to the total population of the cities. In Buffalo, I took the first name that appeared on the page, skipping twenty-three pages between names. In Portland, I chose the first name on every other page.
APPENDIX III

Sources for club member occupations

Following are the sources for occupations of members of Zonta and Business and Professional Women's clubs used for comparative purposes in Chapter IV, and for the clubs in Buffalo, New York, and Portland, Maine, on which much of the statistics is based.

Zonta club membership lists printed in the Zontian and in directories found at Zonta International in Chicago were chosen because the lists specified occupations of members rather than classifications, or specified enough occupations to make the lists useful in determining specific jobs. These names and occupations make up the "other Zonta" category used in statistical analyses.

Cleveland: from "Zonta International Classified Directory," 1931, 1933, 1934, 1936

Detroit: Zontian Convention Number (May 1924), 24-25.

Flint: Zontian Convention Number (May 1924), 27.

Grand Rapids: Zontian Convention Number (May 1924), 26.

Los Angeles: Zontian VIII (August 1929), 36.

New York: Zontian Convention Number (May 1924), 18-19; IV (May 1925), 9.

St. Louis: from "Zonta International Classified Directory," 1932, 1933, 1934, 1936

Schenectady: *Zontian* VIII (May 1929), 65.

Toledo: *Zontian* IV (May 1925), 10.


Lists of women attending the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs second and third national conventions in 1920 in St. Paul, Minnesota; and 1921 in Cleveland, Ohio, included occupations of the delegates. These lists came from convention files at BPW/USA in Washington, D.C. Also in those files was a list of New Orleans, Louisiana, BPW members from 1928, the year that club hosted the national convention. These names and occupations, along with those of members of some members of the Bangor, Maine, BPW club between 1923 and 1930, make up the "other BPW" category. The Bangor names and occupations were gleaned from records loaned to me by Geraldine Murphy of the Bangor club. No complete membership lists were among those records, but treasurer and secretary notes of new members and names and occupations of some existing members provided these data.

The Zonta Club of Buffalo collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo Archives contains a card file of members beginning in 1919 and continuing at least until the 1960s. In addition, the collection contains a membership list compiled for the club's fiftieth anniversary in 1969, which details member names, dates of admittance into the club, occupations and addresses. This list was used in conjunction with a similar list compiled in 1939, which also specifies when and why members left the club. These were used together to determine names of members in 1919 and 1920.
as well as addresses and occupations necessary to locate women in the 1920 manuscript census.

Four membership lists among the Portland Business and Professional Women's Club collection at the Maine Historical Society in Portland were used to determine 1920 members of that club and to assist in locating members in the manuscript 1920 census. These are a list entitled "Charter Members of B. & P. W. Club" that was compiled at some unspecified time after 1920, a membership list from 1929-30, apparently compiled at the time, a list from 1961-1962 and one from 1969-1970 that specifies the date the women joined the club.
APPENDIX IV

Status categories

These categories, used in analyses in Chapter IV, are based on various reading about the early twentieth century and how people viewed jobs, as well as on amount of education required for jobs, and, very roughly, remunerative potential of jobs. Refer to Appendix I for specific jobs included in categories, if not specified here.

**Highest status:**

All jobs in "Professionals, upper" category: architect, banker, capitalist, chiropodist, dentist, dermatologist, doctor, osteopath, lawyer, judge; all jobs in "Corporate officers" category; plus manufacturer, manager and supervisor in industry.

**Upper status:**

All jobs in "White collar, other" category, university teachers, all jobs in "Supervisory — education" category, all "Medical supervisory," business owners, proprietors, all "Trade — supervisor" and "Trade — higher," assistant managers, district supervisors.

**Low and mid status:**

All remaining jobs listed in Appendix I, excluding "Arts," which is not part of the status listings due to imprecise nature of the term and the jobs listed within it.