

Take Nothing for Granted: Expanding the Conversation about Business, Gender, and Feminism

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Special Issues can surprise and frustrate in equal measure. Editorial expectations are often upended. The submissions imagined are not always those received or in the numbers anticipated. The questions that frame the call for papers seldom carry the same weight at the beginning and end of the editorial process. Yet somehow the academic publishing industry survives and thrives, commodifying scholarly inquiry based on virtually free labor inputs. The best readers should take nothing for granted, including editorial and publishing processes and practices.

In our case, the Call for papers drew attention to three socially imagined concepts, which we understood to be invariably intertwined. Of the three, “feminism” stood out and alone as the most ignored, neglected, and under-analyzed, especially by scholars of business and management. A list of themes threw off a range of concerns: archival collections, processes, and practices; methodological traps and escape hatches; the utility of key feminist analytics; the challenges of language and interpretation; holes in geographical and chronological coverage; the significance of agency and empowerment; the hidden biases, unexamined gendered norms, and stereotypes of business classics.

More submissions came from scholars in older northern European, resource rich, democratic, market-oriented, capitalist countries than from those in the Far East and global south, where

business history research is still in its infancy and debates about gender and sex have been corralled if not quelled. There were no entries from China or Eastern Europe, one each from Africa and the Middle East, whose topics, while innovative, proved more appropriate for other journals. [specificity may be filled in or with-held; I tend to favor transparency/reflexivity). Chronological coverage ranged from the 18th to the 21st centuries.

Even as we moved from the anxious early stage of article selection through the revision process to the final stages of crafting a single, co-authored narrative, two questions continued to nag, neither of which had been anticipated or dealt with explicitly in the papers:

What has business history told us about the accuracy of *beliefs* about gender, women, and feminism?

How has business history informed us about *differences* in how women enter, experience, and conduct business as gendered subjects?

These questions troubled us precisely because they had emerged belatedly, almost as conversational fall-out from the publishing prep process itself. Not only did they force a re-examination of assumptions underlying the Call; they pushed us to reconsider presumptions about the field, our own as well as those held by others.

We invited a mixed group of scholarly insiders, outsiders and engaged fellow-travellers across the business and wider history fields to address one or both proffered questions or to suggest some of their own. Our goals were simple but intentionally subversive. In fields like ethnography, that have depended upon narrative accounts of the researcher for their veracity, there has been a keen awareness of the “facts and fictions of qualitative inquiry” (Denzin, 1996). Scholars of gender, women and feminism have long scrutinized the biases buried in narrative approaches, whether in the humanities or social sciences. They have called for authors to be more reflexive and self-aware of their own positioning within and outside academia. They have injected stinging power into the phrase, “to take for granted.” Forced to render visible the invisible, they have learned to read texts against the grain, to imagine unsung voices, to value multiple identities and realities, to theorize about the untheorizable, to appreciate the art in science, to embrace intersectionality, and most importantly, “to take nothing for granted.”

More recently, they have interrogated the rituals of academic publishing. Brouwer (2019) has considered peer reviewed papers, identifying them as both a constraint and a treasure. Although the Call has largely escaped notice, our experience suggests that it too functions as part academic ritual and as performative act, framing what is included and excluded. Like peer reviewed papers, it stands as a constraint, limiting themes and biasing the selection process, and, as a *treasure*, signaling *Business History* as a field and journal willing to challenge and be challenged.

Our decision to expand the conversation meant that we could take nothing for granted. Our invited participants included two African-American scholars of racial and financial capitalism, one female and the other male; a women's historian who pioneered the first ever synthesis of women in business; a young female scholar of business, management and organizational studies, a female historian of industrialization and family business, and a female scholar of nineteenth century entrepreneurship. We hoped that the addition of these voices might contribute to a growing chorus of scholars interested in business history as a field of knowledge, a friendly or challenging site for innovative research about gender and feminism, and a forum for critique and disruption of academic rituals that take too much for granted.

To jump start the conversation we went off script. Unable to meet in person, we imagined a good plenary session at a conference, with participants of an asynchronous panel sitting on stage, in comfortable chairs, passing around a wholly inadequate microphone. Each panelist addressed questions in writing, initially without seeing the responses of the others. Working backstage, behind zoom screens, we extracted themes from the assembled responses before adding our own prompts. A virtual dialogue was constructed, reproduced in emails, and sent to the participants for editing and revision.

Our imagined plenary challenged how qualitative inquiry evolves into written words. We created a conversation that did not happen as it is now written. Criticism is built in. Is it productive to veer so far off established paths to do things that disrupt established norms of qualitative research? (St. Pierre, 2018) Might the strategy not subject qualitative research to still more attacks from positivists whose faith in scientific methods, proofs, and real facts, continues to hold? Doubters might be relieved to know that we have not yet stepped into the methodological waters of creative

nonfiction, practiced by some. (Caulley 2008). We are not in fictional dialogue with historical figures (Selbie and Clough, 2005). Nor are we engaged in ficto-feminist imagined non-fiction conversations (Williams, 2021).

We are determined to expand the ways of writing that highlight issues of voice, experience, interviewing, and of working in a field of research that requires constant tilling. Lather (2013). “Methods braiding” more accurately describes our imagined plenary conversation. (Watson 2020). It intertwines arts -based methods with more traditional social sciences approaches to writing research. If academic writing of all sorts is seen as a theoretical and practical process, through which assumptions about knowledge are exposed and received scripts are interrogated and changed, then our Special Issue has served a useful purpose. It has certainly spurred us to question the gendered norms that we have internalized and carried into academia. If nothing else, we hope it keeps fueling better and more diverse and inclusive conversations about gender, feminism, and business.

Editorial Team: *We proposed this Special Issue because we felt there was more to say about the relationship between women and business history. If most business history (usually) starts with an archive, what difficulties does the archive present to writing about women in business history?*

Gabrielle Durepos - The more I look for traces of women and gender in the archives, the more I realise how little we know and can know. The business historical profession is built on an assumption that deep immersion and thick description of archival sources leads to veracity and credibility. Whether you understand the archive as a physical building that houses documents, or a politicised epistemic space which shapes a societies’ conditions and logic of knowledge, feminist pioneers like Gerda Learner have illustrated that archives are well preserved, masculinised organisms. The archive has not simply forgotten women, but it routinely forgets what it forgot.

Shennette Garrett-Scott - The archive plays a central role in shaping the kinds of questions business historians ask and the kinds of stories they tell. It is not a neutral space

but a political and ahistoric one, deeply influenced by its context, the money that created it, and the hands that brought it into being. It is a site of knowledge production, one that not only projects but also exercises power. The archive is suffused with power: the power to speak and to silence, to create and to erase. More than a record of powerful people, it reflects first and foremost what particular groups felt important to preserve.

Gabrielle Durepos - Michel Trouillot outlines four moments in which silences enter the historical operation and my sense is that each presents an occasion of gendering.

The first moment concerns fact creation, where the historical record is made. Because women, historically, have been either excluded from paid labour, or included, but relegated to clerical positions, they were deemed unimportant thus their activities were not documented in business records. Not only are women largely absent from official business documents, but records that reflect characteristics traditionally associated with femininity, including emotion, caretaking, nurturing, mentoring or subjective personal storytelling, are also missing.

The second moment concerns fact assembly, thus the creation of the archive. Archival Scientist Terry Cook notes that *we are what we keep and we keep what we are*. This statement, in the context of business archival practices, such as collection and appraisal, is highly problematic for women and femininity. Collection and appraisal have traditionally been highly masculinised in that they have been created by men whose craft has been to maintain records that reflect masculinised organisational activities, such as objective meeting minutes and agendas, tough leaders, mergers and acquisition, etc.

The third moment concerns the retrieval of facts whereby historians select records that will be organised in narrative form. In this operation, historians are influenced by the stories their community and societies at large wish to hear, but also by the dearth of records on women and femininity in the business archive. Stories of entrepreneurial success, winning at any cost, breeching a frontier and unprecedented profitability capture the popular

imagination, however, few documents exist to tell these stories with the woman as the protagonist.

Finally, the fourth moment is the process of attaching significance to the narrative, thus making history. Of course, it is difficult to write histories of women when the historical enterprise relies on a deep immersion in the archive where few traces of women exist.

Shennette Garrett-Scott - While women and records of their business lives do exist in the archive, particularly those of powerful and wealthy women, enterprising women too often exist as whispers and shadows. The business historian who chooses to bring the stories and experiences of women to the fore often faces considerable barriers. Their efforts require bringing all the tools of the craft of history to bear to excavate archival fragments to tell rich stories, stories that often challenge inherently masculinist frames of entrepreneurship as innovation and progress. Women's participation requires them to be strategic and deliberate as they work around structural and institutional barriers.

Editorial Team: *It sounds as if we need to think about multiple silences. There are those created by archive policies and the historical records themselves, which often hide as much as they reveal. Others result from the historians' exercise of their craft. They select and evaluate the significance of narratives that can obscure and distort as well as clarify. As we do that, are there particular narratives we need to de-centre in business history to allow narratives of women to be given more significance?*

Hannah Barker - My work on the women and men in 'trade' who worked in small businesses in the north of England during in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made me rethink assumptions about women's economic roles... our view of the commercial world during early industrialisation tends to be dominated by narratives of particularly big and successful businesses, and those involved in new and large-scale modes of production. In places such as Manchester, Liverpool, Preston, Bolton, Salford, Blackburn, Warrington, and Wigan, it was not great factories and mills that altered the

urban and economic landscape – at least not before the 1820s – but rather the proliferation of small businesses, often family owned and run.

Angel Kwolek-Folland – I found that thinking about women in a business context illuminated women’s experiences, but also looped back on how we understand *business*. Two images illustrate what I mean. The first one I came across when walking through a neighborhood in San Antonio, Texas in about 1993 where I saw a woman selling hand-made tamales from the front window of her home. The second I found when doing research on women in Lawrence, Kansas in the 1870s. There was another woman who sold baked goods she made in her kitchen from the front window of her home. Neither business history nor women’s history could account for these women who used their household skills to earn money in the marketplace. Yet there they were, cooking up a challenge to our conceptions.

Hannah Barker - Women remained an integral and visible part of urban economies throughout early industrialisation – often heading businesses, or playing key roles within them, despite the traditional assumption that gendered ideas about women’s roles and the advent of modern capitalism marginalised women in the workplace and pushed ‘middling’ women increasingly into the home.

Moreover, while women were most likely to be involved in certain sectors of the economy traditionally associated with women's work - namely clothing, food and drink, and shopkeeping and dealing - they could be found running most types of business throughout the period.

Editorial Team: *How does recognition of the sectors that women are active participants in – and the phenomena of selling from home e.g., ‘penny capitalism’ (Benson, 1992) – change the narratives of business history?*

Angel Kwolek-Folland – Exploring the forces that lead women to sell food from their homes illuminates several things: the economic necessities facing many women; the

relationship between class, ethnicity, and economic activity; the gendered nature of some types of business; the connection between gender and access to credit; the hidden aspects of our gendered economic understanding of things like the GNP (which has no room in it for home-based business unless it's Steve Jobs' garage).

Editorial Team: *As a first step we need to continue to pay as much if not more attention- to smaller and medium-sized businesses as we do to large corporations. The move away from the 'exceptionalist' narrative of women in business history is also likely to reveal more about gender dynamics in family businesses.*

Hannah Barker – In *Family and Business* I argued that the dynamics of families were crucial to understanding how small business operated and that this affected the lives of both men and women, often in ways that we might not expect. Trading families (who were generally defined by household rather than 'nuclear' in nature) were particularly complex social entities, as the locations where belief systems were inculcated, identity was formed and emotions were focused, as well as being economic units that both produced and consumed, the site of both physical and social reproduction. Despite their apparently tightly knit nature, they did not necessarily act as single units with shared interests, with struggles over the control of resources often apparent, though with evidence that age and generation were more important in familial and business hierarchies than gender. This is particularly apparent in examinations of the control of property and access to other resources and benefits. Thus, mothers often exercised far more power than their adult sons, which did not necessarily chime with prevailing ideas about gender at the time. The manner in which patterns of cross-generational inheritance often appeared to ignore considerations of gender, at the same time that hierarchies within generations were so highly gendered, suggests the importance of both age and sex in the control of, and experience of working in, family firms.

Angel Kwolek-Folland - For me, the book that first brought these gaps into focus was Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes* (1987) which was grounded in family history, but which also demonstrated the ways in which the growth of the English

middle class was premised on families as business units in which women played a variety of important roles. I remember reading *Family Fortunes* and feeling like my head was exploding, in the best possible way.

Jennifer Aston - Evidence shows that most businesses in eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain were small and situated in one location, though their trading networks were frequently national and international. Crucially however, data from the Board of Trade Official Receivers Reports shows that this was the case regardless of whether the business was owned by a man or by a woman. Similarly, research using trade directories and newspaper advertisements shows women and men using the same format and deferential language of trade to entice their customers. This language, and the skills associated with business, were not something that the owner was born with, rather they were learned through a system of formal or informal apprenticeship. Small family-owned firms acted as the core around which multiple generations organised their lives, with husbands and wives sharing knowledge before passing it to their children. Wives, mothers, and daughters held important roles, not just as invisible investors, but as knowledge brokers and managers, and it was not uncommon for them to take precedence over a male relative: for example, a widowed mother would frequently retain control over the family firm long after any sons had come of age.

Hannah Barker - Looking at [historical sources such as] advertising suggests that female heads of business were happy to promote their image and reputation in public, and in a manner that differed little from that used by men. They submitted themselves to the public gaze readily and willingly, hoping to further their reputations and their fortunes, not by emphasizing those domestic qualities that we are used to thinking formed the basis of female identity in this period, but by presenting themselves as respectable women of business. There is plenty of evidence in court and business records that women could be robust in their business dealings too, though it is also apparent that they were at a legal and social disadvantage when it came to struggling with husbands over control of property.

Editorial Team: *Are we starting to see a change in the way those narratives are being framed in business history?*

Jennifer Aston - Recent work in business history has fundamentally undermined many of the prevailing 'known truths' about the economy, gender roles and what it meant to be male or female. This is particularly true of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, where it was widely assumed [as Hannah and Angel point out] that women's role in business had been subsumed under a tidal wave of domesticity.

These studies have not just asked questions of the field of business history, they have also asked some fundamental questions of feminism (and feminists) too.

Editorial Team: *Do we therefore also need to problematise feminism and its relationship to business history?*

Peter James Hudson - Business history may or may not have been actively hostile to the incorporation of some of the more radical and theoretically innovative analyses that have emerged within feminist scholarship, but its embrace of those analyses has certainly been lukewarm or tepid – especially when it comes to feminist critiques of the patriarchal and capitalist foundations of modern-day enterprise, and of business history as its scholarly or academic adjunct.¹

Jennifer Aston - As scholars of female business ownership, working to revise the historiographical narrative of multiple fields of history, we have asked some difficult questions of our foremothers, challenging their work to discover why female business owners are largely absent from the great body of scholarship that emerged as part of second wave feminism.

Peter James Hudson - At the same time, what is striking to me, as someone who writes on the political-economic history of the Caribbean, is the fact that much of the pioneering research on the history of business in the Caribbean has been done by women scholars:

sometimes by women historians of business, more usually by women scholars from a variety of disciplines and historical subfields.

Jennifer Aston - As revisionist scholars, we are now being asked some equally difficult questions ourselves, most pressingly about the experiences of women of colour in business. For many of us (myself included) the presence or absence of race (and to a lesser extent ethnicity), isn't something that we have addressed explicitly. There has been an unspoken assumption, certainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth century British context with which I am most familiar, that the population was predominately white Anglo-Saxon, Irish or European. This is largely because of our available source material; neither census returns, insurance records, trade directories or probate records routinely record race. Yet this is a field that has shown time and time again how official archives can be read against the grain, how new archives can be created through working backwards from other sources and how, (as Beatrice Craig argued) if we don't go looking for something, we will never find it. There is more work ahead but doing it will ensure that business history continues to challenge and influence wider understanding, not just of beliefs about women and gender, but of wider society.

Editorial Team: *Picking up on Angel's point about looking at gender and the economy, each of you in different ways suggest that these expansive, interrelated historical concepts are not easily corralled by a single field and that we need to step back and rethink how to research and create narratives that bring economies into conversation with cultures.*

Shennette Garrett-Scott - Business historians can deepen their research questions first by recognizing and then articulating how gender inscribes business concepts and practices. Gender deeply imbues subjective meanings and measures of value, risk, and success. It shapes what counts as capital, the processes of governance, even the very notion of entrepreneurship. To be sure, as gendered subjects, women can also exercise power that silences and erases. While gender is a salient category of analysis, when joined with others, particularly race, a fuller picture of business's history can emerge.

Jennifer Aston - Despite the substantial evidence from across centuries and continents that show women succeeding as business owners, there is still a preoccupation with the absence of women in 'Big Business'. This is something of a chicken and egg situation. Are women generally not present as the founders of multi-national enterprises because of an inherent flaw in their business acumen, or as a result of entrenched structural and informal bias? As with most things in life, there is no simple answer, but perhaps we are also asking the wrong question. The more important question to ask is surely not why most women *were not* high-risk entrepreneurs, but why the misconception that most men *were* is so pervasive and continues to dominate the narrative.

Editorial Team: *What is business history getting wrong about gender? And what can be done to address the problem?*

Shennette Garrett-Scott - Some of the most provocative scholarship in business history has been driven by what business history gets wrong about women as business owners, investors, and customers. It too often ignores the centrality of gender to understanding the field. The issue goes far beyond locating women's bodies on corporate boards or in business spaces, though this is certainly a good starting point. Women's presence—and absence—in business spaces as well as their paths to and roles in business opens up fruitful avenues of inquiry. Gender certainly influences differences in how women enter, experience, and conduct business as gendered subjects. The ways that women, as gendered subjects, utilize networks and institutions to reach and organize investors, workers, and customers require careful reading against the bias grain of the archive.

The real challenge is to recognize gender at work when women's bodies are not present, to peer hard at the sources and recognize how histories of business success, innovation, culture, and change mask the gendered processes that make them legible even as gender (or sexuality or race) is not named.

Peter James Hudson - Studies have oftentimes replicated the unspoken gendered assumptions concerning the history of business organization, effectively writing the

history, as Wilkins wrote in 1966, using the masculinist phraseology of the time, of “businessman” both locally and abroad.² ... I would like to suggest that the work of recasting this historical research through a feminist lens, while rethinking the basic categories of what counts as business, still remains to be done. And I would suggest that the field of business history could draw on a range of feminist scholarship from beyond the field’s usual parameters to begin this work: Black feminist histories of slavery and the plantation with their important analyses of the role of women in both biological and social reproduction;³ analyses of the “feminization” of work and the labor force under neoliberalism;⁴ accounts of the gendered histories of non-bank financial intermediaries;⁵ research on the importance of domestic labor and sex work;⁶ studies of the masculinist tropes that have been foundational to the expansion of US capitalism abroad; and so on.⁷ My examples are from the Caribbean, but we should also look to LaShaun Harris’ innovative *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy* as a model⁸.

Jennifer Aston – [The exceptionalism narrative]. A fundamental truth of business ownership is that the owner occupies a position of power over their workforce, and newspaper reports of milliners in the nineteenth century will quickly dispel any notions that women might have been more ethical employers. In describing women in business as exceptional, these ‘blips’ of women acting as part of the patriarchal, capitalist system could be explained away without undermining the long durée representation of women as oppressed victims. But in doing so, something [is] lost – the ability to see women as an integral *part* of society equally engaged in its operation in spite of the barriers placed before them.

Gabrielle Durepos - The way to address [change] is to problematise and theorise processes of silencing. Is this a hopeless situation or one which points to the need for liminal and creative thought? I choose the latter. Here are three ideas to redress gendered business archival silences:

1. Continue to challenge the historical profession view of what counts as a historical contribution. There is a need to broaden historical research beyond thick immersion in the archives to include other data sources like personal diaries, oral histories and etc.
2. Encourage transparency in the historical operation and methodological reflexivity to promote a greater reflection on gendered methodological choices and gendered assumptions that underpin writing business histories.

Participate in reviewing manuscripts to challenge gendered business history and engage in our own writing in a way that problematises archival silences and the gendered nature of business history. It's no longer enough to share what we know about women in business history. We have to begin to write in all our unanswerable questions and problematise the silences.

Editorial Team: *Are there reasons to be optimistic about these challenges?*

Jennifer Aston – Perhaps ... one of business history's greatest contributions, not just to the question of female enterprise but to the question of gender in modern society – [is] while we can trace differences in the way that men and women entered, experienced, and conducted business, we can also trace similarities. We can view how multiple generations of a family worked together, expanding, contracting, and diversifying the firm as their needs changed, and observe the single and widowed women who established firms on the main thoroughfares of towns and cities, trading with and alongside their male neighbours and those further afield. Through examining these human interactions, we can observe a language of business emerge. This language enabled the noise of gender differences, something that is often painted as an overwhelming cacophony, to recede into a quiet hum, allowing men and women to go about their business together, despite the legal and institutional bias that undoubtedly existed.

The insights generated by our panel energised our editorial team conversations and threw into relief what had been overlooked in our original call for papers. Although we highlighted the issue

of the archive and its restrictive effect on what gets studied many of the other issues raised were less obviously *visible* problems. The archive – to echo a by-now familiar refrain – is both a treasure to the field and the foundation of ‘veracity and credibility’ (Durepos) but also a significant constraint regarding women’s presence in the historical source record. Although we can influence future archive policies, there can be no magicking up of historical records to fill the silences. We can instead decentralise the unhelpful narratives that are preventing us from seeing gender in operation in the existing records, and in our analyses.

Our panel discussion highlighted three main preoccupations that unbalance the understanding of business as a practice of both women and men in society. The first preoccupation is with big business history, i.e., the attraction of large enterprises and substantial industrial companies. The second preoccupation is of business as a practice undertaken outside of the home, which helps to maintain the norm that post-industrialisation there was an economic separation of home and enterprise. The knock-on effect of this assumption is evident in the overlooking of personal goods and services in business history. The increasing basket of consumer goods reckoned to constitute respectability (Horrell, Humphries and Weisdorf, 2021) were, from the 13th century, increasingly made up of services that women’s labour and enterprise were responsible for producing – cooked food, clothing, laundry, and board (Humphries 2021) - but this is rarely an area of study. And, as we have been reminded in the panel conversation, when we ignore both home-based enterprise and the provision of personal services including food, drink, clothing, and lodging, we cannot *see* women in the economy. The tamale maker at the window (Kwollek-Folland) needs to be present in business history alongside the shipbuilders and cotton-mill owners.

The panel discussion is also a prompt to consider how gender plays out in terms of the dynamics of networked relationships. Not only does gender unfold differently in cross-generational family businesses, but our understanding of gendered social norms is challenged by looking at how men and women act within wider trading networks (Barker and Aston). The intersection of age and gender is a reminder that our analysis of the category of women needs more careful thinking – and how intersectionality across race, marital status, family position, age, inter-generational resource allocation alters our understanding of how business operates.

All the key points raised by the panellists serve as a pointed reminder that gender is not a synonym for women. A gendered analysis of business history goes much further than the ‘add women and stir’ (Scranton, 1998) approach. Gender is inscribed on **all** the bodies that live within the constraints of both capitalism and patriarchy. By shifting the default gender analysis to include men and focusing on how we write about white men who ARE in the historical record in great numbers we can – as Edvinsson in her article, and our panellists (Garrett-Scott and Hudson) above – point out, see gender in operation very clearly. Once our vision has adjusted to the enactment of white masculinity within business all the historical record becomes available to a gendered analysis, including the way in which the language of business is inscribed with gender (Garrett-Scott).

Finally, we can see that a *non*-gendered practice of business history protects both capitalism and patriarchy from historical examination and explains the relative lack of traction of feminist critiques in the field. We had placed feminism at the centre of our concerns in the naming of the Special Issue and of our list of questions, but it did not draw a response in terms of work submitted for consideration. Our panel discussion identified a habitual tepid response to feminist critiques within business history (Hudson) and issued a challenge to the field to interrogate the unthinking reproduction of the ‘businessman’ within its scholarship, and to look outside of the field to feminist scholarship more generally, to black feminist histories specifically to see what is possible.

There is much work to be done re gender and business history. We’re looking forward, as readers, to this journal and others in the field publishing more research in this area, and to the next special issue that celebrates advances following this one.

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