

“YOU HAVE TO THINK LIKE A MAN AND ACT LIKE A LADY”:¹

Businesswomen in British Columbia, 1920–80

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BUSINESS OWNERSHIP WAS, and often still is, constructed as a masculine endeavour and an exclusively masculine enterprise. This was the case in twentieth-century Canada overall, and it was also true in British Columbia. Self-employment was not a common choice for the small pool of women in the workforce between 1920 and 1980. Women made up just 14.3 percent of the workforce in British Columbia in 1931 and, of those women, 12.8 percent were self-employed. Only 8.7 percent of all self-employed people in the province were women.² By 1971, more women were going out to work in British Columbia, but fewer of them – only 3.1 percent – were self-employed.³ More women were working, but business ownership was a relatively minor part of women’s overall employment, and the majority of entrepreneurs were still men.

Despite their relative scarcity in the labour force, working women in British Columbia chose self-employment more often than did their counterparts in the rest of the country, as Table 1 demonstrates. For this reason, the province provides an interesting window on the actions of female entrepreneurs.⁴

¹ “Think Like a Man, Act Like a Lady,” *The Business and Professional Woman*, May–June 1967, City of Vancouver Archives (CVA), add. mss. 799, 588-A-4.

² *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 7, tables 1, 25–9, and 55. Note: figures on female self-employment were not included in the 1921 Census, but they can be estimated based on figures provided in the 1931 Census and based on occupations that have high female self-employment. The rates are similar, using such estimates, to those provided here for 1931.

³ *Census of Canada*, 1971, vol. 3, pt. 2, cat. 94–723 and cat. 94–726. By 1971, 33.8 percent of the workforce in British Columbia was female, but far fewer of them were self-employed. Women did make up a larger proportion of all self-employed people but still far less than half: 16.8 percent of all business owners in British Columbia were women by the time of the 1971 census.

⁴ Data on employment figures for men and women, their rates of self-employment, and comparisons between British Columbia and the rest of Canada, are found in the *Census of Canada*, 1921–71. For a detailed look at rates of self-employment in British Columbia compared to Canada, see Melanie Buddle, “The Business of Women: Gender, Family, and Entrepreneurship in British Columbia, 1901–1971” (PhD diss., University of Victoria, 2003).

TABLE 1
*Self-employed Adult Women as a Percentage of
 All Gainfully Employed Adult Women:
 British Columbia and Canada, 1901-71*⁵

	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971
British Columbia	27.4	N/A	13.4	12.8	11.1	6.6	6.3	3.1
Canada	19.5	N/A	13.1	11.0	8.1	4.7	5.2	2.8

British Columbia's striking gender imbalance over the first half of the twentieth century affected women's marital and occupational choices.⁶ That married women made up a greater share of the adult female population and the gainfully employed adult female population in British Columbia than they did in the rest of Canada is not surprising in a province that began the twentieth century with few marriageable women and many eligible bachelors. But women in British Columbia also worked, and opened their own businesses, in higher rates than did women in the rest of Canada. The gender imbalance gave women more opportunities to marry and provided more opportunities for entrepreneurship. Sylvia Van Kirk notes the prominence of enterprising women during the Cariboo gold rush of the 1860s and argues that women had a role to play and "an impact on the society out of all proportion to their numbers."⁷ Women did not necessarily step out of traditional gender roles, but British Columbia's mining frontier provided them with "exceptional opportunities to commercialize" those traditional roles by "providing a range of services for a largely male population."⁸ Partly as a result of this gender imbalance, women were more entrepreneurial in British Columbia at the beginning of the twentieth century because

⁵ Data for 1901 are from the Canadian Families Project 5 percent national sample of the 1901 *Census of Canada*; all other data are from the published census. See *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 7, table 21; 1941, vol. 7, table 5; 1951, vol. 4, table 11; 1961, cat. 94-514, ser. 3.1, table 20; and 1971, vol. 3, part 2, cat. 94-723, table 8 and cat. 94-726, table 8. For this table, BC figures have been removed from Canada totals. The census defined adult women as ages ten and over for 1901-31, ages fourteen and over for 1941-51, and ages fifteen and over for 1961-71.

⁶ Rates of marriage are part of the story of self-employment because married women were much more likely to be self-employed than were single women: married and widowed women, many with families to support, dominated the arena of self-employment in twentieth-century British Columbia. See Buddle, "The Business of Women."

⁷ Sylvia Van Kirk, "A Vital Presence: Women in the Cariboo Gold Rush, 1862-1875," in *British Columbia Reconsidered*, ed. Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1992), 21-2.

⁸ Van Kirk, *British Columbia Reconsidered*, 22.

they had more opportunity, in a population dominated by men, to commercialize skills that had been gender-typed as feminine. Cooking, cleaning, housekeeping, and marriage could translate into enterprises such as restaurants, laundries, hotels, and even brothels.

Moreover, BC women's prominence in entrepreneurship continued long after the gender imbalance had righted itself. While scholars have researched some aspects of female business ownership in the province, they have rarely noted that women were more likely to choose entrepreneurship in British Columbia. Peter Baskerville has, like Van Kirk, examined enterprising mid-nineteenth-century women but in an urban context.⁹ Most research on entrepreneurial women in British Columbia has been limited to biographical sketches, celebratory vignettes in local history publications, or brief commentaries in studies about work or about women in the province more generally.¹⁰ John Belshaw reminds us, in his appeal for more demographic histories of British Columbia, that women's experiences as entrepreneurs "was greater than non-demographically-minded histories have suggested ... A proportionately smaller female population exercised a variety of options in tailoring their British Columbian life-course."¹¹ Indeed, the female population exercised its entrepreneurial options in British Columbia more than it did in the rest of the country.

Thus, few scholars are researching BC businesswomen, and research on how gender shaped these women's identities, entrepreneurial choices,

⁹ Peter Baskerville, "She Has Already Hinted at Board': Enterprising Urban Women in British Columbia, 1863-1896," *Histoire sociale-Social History* 26, 52 (1993): 208. Baskerville has also examined women and credit, and women and investment, and he has noted the prominence of female entrepreneurs in British Columbia. See Peter Baskerville, "Women and Investment in Late-Nineteenth-Century Urban Canada: Victoria and Hamilton, 1880-1901," *Canadian Historical Review* 80, 2 (1999): 191-218. See also Peter Baskerville, "Familiar Strangers: Urban Families with Boarders, Canada, 1901," *Social Science History* 25 (2001): 321-46.

¹⁰ For a good examination of one kind of self-employment, in just one city, see Jean Barman, "Vancouver's Forgotten Entrepreneurs: Women Who Ran Their Own Schools," *British Columbia Historical News* 31, 4 (1998): 21-9. Small mentions of businesswomen and short biographies of female entrepreneurs can be found in other sources, but these are not thorough treatments of gender and self-employment. See Alexander Freund and Laura Quilici, "Exploring Myths in Women's Narratives: Italian and German Immigrant Women in Vancouver, 1947-1961," *BC Studies* 105-06 (1995): 159-82; Cathy Converse, *Mainstays: Women Who Shaped BC* (Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 1998); Marjory Lang and Linda Hale, "Women of the World and Other Dailies: The Lives and Times of Vancouver Newspaperwomen in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century," *BC Studies* 85 (1990): 3-23; Rosemary Neering, *Wild West Women: Travellers, Adventurers and Rebels* (Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 2000). For a good study of gender imbalance and women's social position, see Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

¹¹ John Douglas Belshaw, "The West We Have Lost: British Columbia's Demographic Past and an Agenda for Population History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 29 (1988): 41-2.

and behaviour is almost non-existent. Furthermore, literature on gender and entrepreneurship in North America suggests that business ownership has largely been viewed as a masculine realm. The history of business seems to be a “chronicle of masculine activity,” of self-made men in grey flannel suits.¹² Men have long controlled, dominated, and defined the business world, and notions of masculinity are part of the definition of a businessman.¹³ In stressing the connections between masculinity, independence, and self-employment, David Burley argues that self-employed women were an “anomaly in a man’s world.”¹⁴ David Monod also addresses the patriarchal nature of certain types of entrepreneurship, pointing out that women were “barred from the brotherhood that underlay the professional ethos” of twentieth-century Canadian shopkeepers.¹⁵ Other scholars have suggested that traits reserved for men in business included competition and aggression; moreover, men’s business behaviour was shaped “according to an heroic, individualistic and nationalistic agenda”¹⁶ that afforded no place for women. In the early twentieth century, it would have been difficult even to consider women as entrepreneurial since entrepreneurship suggested a realm marked by manhood, brotherhood, independence, competition, and aggression – traits not associated with women.

Yet, while entering a masculine realm of work, female entrepreneurs found a way to present themselves as both feminine and businesslike – characteristics that would seem antithetical. If the business world was dominated by men, and by manly characteristics such as aggression and competition, the way for women to assert their place in an entrepreneurial context was to stress that they could be businesslike in an appropriately feminine manner. Strategically, women attempted to

¹² Wendy Gamber, “Gendered Concerns: Thoughts on the History of Business and the History of Women,” *Business and Economic History* 23, 1 (1994): 129.

¹³ David Burley, *A Particular Condition in Life: Self-Employment and Social Mobility in Mid-Victorian Brantford, Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 236. Burley is not the only scholar to make the connection between manliness and self-employment: Mary Yeager states, in her introduction to the three-volume collection *Women in Business*, that the business world has been made and recorded largely by men. See Mary A. Yeager, “Introduction,” in *Women in Business* (Cheltenham, UK, and Northampton, US: Elgar, 1999), 1:ix-x. On the gendering of the business world as masculine, see also Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) and *Incorporating Women: A History of Woman and Business in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998).

¹⁴ Burley, *Particular Condition*, 102.

¹⁵ David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 88.

¹⁶ Stana Nenadic, “The Social Shaping of Business Behaviour in the Nineteenth-Century Women’s Garment Trades,” *Journal of Social History* 31, 3 (1998): 639.

"avoid the stigma that followed their entry into the male professional space" by stressing their femininity.¹⁷ Entrepreneurial women in British Columbia, as well as outside observers, relied on conventional understandings of appropriate gendered behaviour as a way to legitimize their place in the business world. To demonstrate that they were respectable women, businesswomen emphasized their devotion to fashion and to their families. They found a way to enter a "school of manhood" without becoming manly. They spoke of their roles as mothers and wives and presented themselves as "womanly" women, but the media also stressed businesswomen's lady-like behaviour and appearance, emphasizing qualities that their readership could recognize as markers of femininity. Businesswomen displayed a public image of respectable femininity; however, as this article demonstrates, the media also did its part to represent self-employed women as overtly feminine.

As American historian Wendy Gamber states, the business world was "rigidly sex-segregated ... Hampered by limited capital and constrained by social convention, most female entrepreneurs clustered in occupations that mirrored traditional conceptions of women's work."¹⁸ The issue of how women's enterprises were feminized, with women selling women's goods, is an important aspect of how they were viewed. Gender conventions affected both the types of businesses that women chose to pursue and how others viewed and described businesswomen. Those who ran businesses that catered to women or utilized skill sets that had long been defined as women's work could rely on their field of work to demonstrate their femininity. Women who sold clothing, hats, and other products to women, or who ran restaurants or girls's schools, were operating in a public, entrepreneurial world marked as masculine, but their choice of business could be explained as a female preserve. Either the work itself was an extension of women's traditional homemaking skills – cooking, sewing, cleaning – or their clientele was female. Thus, sex segregation made sense economically in that women who sold goods to women would be more successful, but sex-segregated enterprises were also more conventional and, while entrepreneurship was conventionally defined as masculine behaviour, these types of enterprises, and the businesswomen who ran them, could be explained as appropriately feminine.

It was even more important to represent women who operated businesses that traditionally had been run by men as feminine in behaviour

¹⁷ Monod, *Store Wars*, 88.

¹⁸ Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 27.

and appearance. Such women were often described as exceptional in the period under study because both the act of self-employment and the type of self-employment chosen placed them in a particularly masculine public work world. Again, the women themselves, and media representations of these women, stressed their lady-like attributes, arguably because people were more comfortable with women working in men's fields if it was clear that such women were still conventional in other ways.

The definition of conventional, respectable, or lady-like behaviour was class and race-specific. While many entrepreneurial women in the province operated small and financially vulnerable home-based businesses, those who were most likely to maintain a prominent profile in the community were middle-class white women.¹⁹ The businesswomen who were most public in advertising their businesses, who were interviewed in the newspaper articles under study here, and who belonged to business and professional women's clubs, were of a certain class and race: this cannot be ignored because their construction of respectable womanhood was influenced by their status as white, middle-class women. They also left more written records than did lower-class women who ran boarding houses or laundry operations out of their homes or who sold crafts or food products informally.

Gender was therefore extremely important in determining how businesswomen were represented or represented themselves, while class and race were important in defining a particular kind of acceptable businesswoman. British Columbians needed reassurance that women who worked in the male-dominated business world were still feminine, at least in mannerism and appearance if not choice of occupation. This version of femininity was marked by middle-class traits of respectable womanhood. Even more interestingly, depictions of respectable busi-

¹⁹ Certainly, non-white, non-Anglo-Canadian women operated businesses in British Columbia. Robert McDonald notes that immigrant women contributed to the family economy in Vancouver (running boarding houses, for instance). Some Asian women became prominent in small business (providing services as restaurant and shop owners, for instance). Sue Lee Ping Wong, a widow with eleven children, supported her family in Kelowna by making and selling tofu in the 1930s; Mrs. K. Ushijima operated a dry goods store and worked as a dressmaker in Vancouver in 1918. And First Nations women, although they were not well-enumerated by census takers, reported that they were self-employed as hunters and fishers, and they sold goods in an informal market economy within their own communities. This is true of many non-white, and non-middle-class, women in the province, who used a variety of informal entrepreneurial strategies to support themselves and their families. See Robert McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class Status, and Social Boundaries, 1863-1918* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996); Wrigley's British Columbia Directory, 1918; Tun Wong, "Sue Lee Ping Wong," *Okanagan History: The Sixty-Third Report of the Okanagan Historical Society* 63 (1999): 156-9. See also the Canadian Families Project's 5 percent public-use sample of the 1901 Census for examples of First Nations women who declared they were self-employed.

nesswomen changed very little between 1920 and 1980. While the types of work that drew women into the labour force changed, the gender codes to which businesswomen conformed remained constant. Certain markers of conventional middle-class femininity continued to be associated with businesswomen into the 1970s, including emphasis on lady-like appearance and behaviour, overt references to motherhood, and even the sex-segregation of most businesswomen into feminine enterprises. As late as 1979, "work" was still being defined "as a masculine word."²⁰ This was particularly evident in the world of female entrepreneurship, where media representations of businesswomen, and the women themselves, continued to emphasize their femininity, as though this would minimize the masculine nature of their work.

The records of the business and professional women's (BPW) clubs highlight not only the attitudes and actions of the mostly middle-class women involved in professional work but also those of entrepreneurial women in the province.²¹ The club records are an important source for understanding how businesswomen wanted to be represented and the kinds of businesses that they associated with respectable middle-class femininity. Members of the Victoria and Vancouver clubs, formed in the early 1920s, were also instrumental in the formation, in 1930, of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (CFBPWC), again demonstrating an exceptionally active entrepreneurial spirit in British Columbia.²²

The BPW clubs provided a place for women to consider issues specific to their work, with women's employment the focus of the clubs's social and political activities. While members also performed service work, employment issues were of central concern. The clubs provided a unique window on issues relating to female self-employment since female entrepreneurs were well-represented within their ranks.²³ The clubs

²⁰ Margaret Hewett Robertson, "Work Is a Masculine Word," *Business and Professional Woman*, October-November 1979, 6-8, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-4.

²¹ BPW clubwomen were not all self-employed. This article focuses on the self-employed members, but it is the case that wage-earning and self-employed club members alike encountered gendered tensions and wrestled with their professional images.

²² "History of the Victoria Business and Professional Women's Club," British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), 89-1387-3, file 5; Vancouver BPW Club Records, CVA, add. mss. 799, 608-A-1, file 4.

²³ In the two years for which complete membership lists exist, a disproportionate number of self-employed women, compared to their proportion of the female labour force, joined the Victoria BPW club. In 1931 and 1948, specific job descriptions exist for all BPW club members, and these allow me to make inferences about employment status that are useful when compared to census information about businesswomen in twentieth-century British Columbia. See Membership List, Victoria Business and Professional Women's Club, 1931, Attendance and Registration Book, BCA, 89-1386-3; and Membership List for 1948, BPW Club Records, BCA,

appealed to self-employed women, who had few other spaces in which to network with other women who worked outside the home.

Club records demonstrate that businesswomen wanted to be both respectable and womanly. They emphasized their middle-class femininity and actively participated in the construction of an appropriately feminine public identity, distinguishing themselves from the masculine attributes of business ownership. The Victoria club's social events included "delightful suppers," tea parties, glee clubs, and reading clubs.²⁴ The membership lists for BPW clubs in British Columbia also indicate that they attracted a very specific type of proprietor, with hairdressers, café owners, milliners, and photographers being prominent.²⁵

The businesswomen who were not members of BPW clubs are perhaps more significant than those who were. In addition, keepers of boarding houses, club memberships excluded laundresses, cleaning women, and other small, home-based, self-employed women who might have operated in an informal economy as "penny capitalists."²⁶ Women who ran home-based businesses and whose work was feminized to the point of being almost invisible as a form of entrepreneurship did not typically join BPW clubs. Membership was not overtly restrictive: in Vancouver, as in other areas of the province, an active member could be any woman who was "gainfully employed in business, a profession or industry."²⁷ However, it appears that occupations like keeping a boardinghouse, doing laundry, or selling farm produce were not viewed as professions; similarly, female penny capitalists were aware that the clubs were not meant for them.²⁸

89-1386-2. For a list of individual 1931 and 1948 club members, with names and occupations, see Buddle, "The Business of Women," 159-60, and app. 3.1.

²⁴ "History of the Victoria Business and Professional Women's Club," BCA, 89-1387-3; Victoria Club Minute Book, 1930-1937, BCA, 89-1386-3.

²⁵ For a list of self-employed women and their occupations for the Vancouver and Victoria BPW clubs between 1921 and 1963, see Buddle, "The Business of Women," 174-6. The list includes occupations such as "authoress," guest house proprietor, and the owners of many types of stores, ranging from women's clothing to shoes, flowers, and jewellery.

²⁶ John Benson defines working-class penny capitalists as working men or women who entered into business on a small scale and survived on small enterprises but rarely made large profits. Very small enterprises cushioned the poor and provided disadvantaged working-class people – such as widowed or abandoned women – with ways to adapt and survive, but these businesses were working-class responses to economic crisis, not the kinds of businesses mentioned in BPW club records. See John Benson, *The Penny Capitalists: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Entrepreneurs* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 6.

²⁷ Vancouver BPW Club Records, Minutes and Correspondence, CVA, add. mss. 799, 608-A-1, file 6.

²⁸ It is possible that they chose not to join the clubs or did not feel welcome, but practical considerations such as membership fees also prevented working-class women from joining. Many small business owners, struggling to make ends meet and supporting dependents, had little time to take part in club life.

The BPW clubs embraced a particular construction of middle-class white womanhood, which found expression in how club members represented themselves. For instance, at a luncheon held by the Vancouver BPW club in 1923, Ethel Rease Burns "of the School of Expression, Alberta College, Edmonton," spoke on "Motherhood and Business." She asked her audience, "What's the matter with the business world that it would contaminate women who go out into it? It is a man-made world," where, too often, "a man leaves his ideals at home." After establishing that the business world was masculine, Burns suggested that women "must go into the business world and take her ideals with her, and her highest ideal is true motherhood."²⁹

Burns's speech outlined a few common themes that many BPW clubwomen espoused over the next fifty years. First, she acknowledged that the business world was masculine and that some people did not see a place for women in it. Second, she stressed that women could succeed in business: a general optimism regarding women's potential was a key part of the rapid formation of BPW clubs in the 1920s. But – and this is the third theme that threads through much of the literature on businesswomen – the woman who did so should take her ideals with her, ideals that were not the same as those of men. Burns specifically identified the "gift of motherhood" as a quality that only women could bring to the business world. While not all women were mothers, Burns highlighted motherhood as a marker of womanhood. BPW club members emphasized the womanliness of female entrepreneurs to set them apart from (and perhaps to remove them from direct comparison to, or competition with) businessmen. Burns stressed that businesswomen's success would come from stressing their uniquely female attributes rather than from behaving exactly like men.

The Vancouver BPW club began to publish *The Vancouver Business Woman* in 1923. It reported the activities of local businesswomen and announced club news, but it also served as a space for businesswomen to network and consider issues they deemed important. For instance, in 1927, the newsletter reprinted an article by Emma Dot Partridge, then secretary of the Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs of America. Partridge stated that women "take business as a challenge to make good in a man-made world and still struggle with a feeling of insecurity."³⁰ Her comments illustrate a belief that the world of

²⁹ Vancouver BPW Club Minute Book, CVA, add. mss. 799, 608-A-1.

³⁰ Emma Dot Partridge, "On Taking One's Work Too Seriously," *Vancouver Business Woman* 4, 8 (1927): 7-8, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-3.

business was masculine. Partridge argued that businesswomen were too serious and too courteous: “busy men are gruff, why not busy women? ... The world is used to expecting the woman to act the hostess and, if she is anything less than gracious, comment is made.” Women, she argued, have “not yet achieved the frankness and openness that the impersonality of business demands.” In short, she suggested women should behave more like men if they wanted to succeed. In many respects, businesswomen acknowledged the gruff masculinity of the business world but strove to maintain their femininity in the work world. However, Partridge’s comments did demonstrate that, whether or not women ought to change, they were different from men – a common theme throughout the BPW club records.

An unnamed author of a 1934 article in *The Vancouver Business Woman* stated chummily that, although “we women are known as the chatty sex ... we find it harder to get acquainted with one another than our brothers of the sterner sex.” The author suggested that women were not like men; moreover, men had set the standards of conduct and women needed to find new ways to accommodate themselves to the old order of things. “We find it difficult to ‘whang’ each other on the shoulder, or playfully knock each other’s hats off, which ... seems an unfailling way of breaking up the ice with men.”³¹

Business and professional women found many ways to ensure that they would not be viewed as manly, even if they worked in particularly masculine areas of business. An obvious point of departure was to emphasize a particularly feminine appearance as a sign that women could be “in business” while remaining womanly. A 1925 advertisement in *The Vancouver Business Woman* for a beauty shop stated: “As a businesswoman, your personal appearance is an important thing.”³² Businesswomen were cognizant of the need to maintain a professional, neat, and even feminine appearance, in part to avoid being considered masculine in the business world. Thus, the advertisements stressed what women already knew.

At the 1932 convention of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women in Vancouver, Irene Green opened a round table discussion entitled “The Psychology of Dress.” The convention report noted that this was “a topic of eternal interest to women, no matter what their age, business or profession.”³³ Green told the audience that it was

³¹ *Vancouver Business Woman* 9, 51 (1934): 2, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-3.

³² *Ibid.*, 3, 7 (1925): 8, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-3.

³³ “Report of the 3rd Convention of Canadian Federation of Business & Professional Women’s Clubs, Held in Vancouver, B.C. July 13th to 16th 1932 at Hotel Vancouver,” Kumtuks/Victoria

not enough for a businesswoman to be efficient, "without any regard to her personal appearance. Because woman is established in the business world today she does not have to dress mannish to command respect, and the woman who becomes tailor-made clothes should avoid being masculine in her effect."³⁴

Interestingly, Green's speech suggests that, in earlier decades, businesswomen had needed to appear masculine in order to prove their worth. However, Green clearly believed that, in the 1930s, women could assert their femininity and still command respect in the business world.³⁵ She articulated the growing belief that middle-class businesswomen could appear conventional and maintain an aura of respectable femininity while working in what had once been an exclusively male business world.

It is also possible that businesswomen did not want to appear "mannish" for fear of being considered lesbians. A masculine appearance, as others have noted with respect to "independent women" in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, could signify that they were "somehow 'other' than women," that they were "Amazonians" who had "unsexed" themselves, that they were the third sex, or that they were sexually interested in women.³⁶ Businesswomen may not have wanted to be too masculine in appearance because it represented what they considered to be sexual deviance, ranging from being completely sexless to being dangerously oversexed, and including an implication of same-sex desire. Green, while not referring to sexuality directly, steered women away from masculine dress, segregating them into three types: the ingénue, the athletic, and the dramatic. She claimed that, while athletic types were easiest to dress, "it was best to avoid the over masculine modes." The dramatic was the "most dangerous type," presumably because a tendency towards flamboyance was not suitable in the business world. This suggests a certain class-based definition of dressing for success, encompassing tasteful conservatism: Green recommended that women conform to "the dictates of good taste and suitability of occasion."³⁷

Club Minute Book, 1930-1937, BCA, 89-1386-3. Green was a member of the Vancouver School Board.

³⁴ "Minutes of a Preliminary Session of the Third Annual Convention, CFBPWC," BCA, 89-1387-3, file 3.

³⁵ Note that, within this context, Green was almost certainly talking about wage-earning professional women as well as self-employed women.

³⁶ See Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, a Better Husband: Single Women in America – The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 176-7, 198-9. See also Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 15, 32.

³⁷ "Report of the 3rd Convention....," Kumtuks/Victoria Club Minute Book, 1930-1937, BCA, 89-1386-3.

The importance of this seemingly inconsequential discussion cannot be overstated: it emphasizes that businesswomen in the 1930s wanted to be considered feminine and that their appearance was almost as important as was the work they did. Green even argued that for a woman to “plan and build a wardrobe which resulted in her being well and suitable [sic] dressed on all occasions required as much brains and executive ability as organizing and running the business itself.”³⁸ While there is no clear evidence that BPW club members agreed with her assessment of the importance of appearing feminine, two references to the discussion exist in the Victoria BPW club notes. Furthermore, the *Victoria Daily Times* used the round table discussion as its feature item in a story about the CFBPWC’s convention, entitling the article “Dressing Well Good Business.”³⁹

The importance that businesswomen attached to appearance continued. In 1937, Vancouver BPW club president Pearl Eaton stated that businesswomen “need no further reminder of the value of being well groomed.”⁴⁰ In 1951, the Victoria club hosted an event called “The Business and Professional Woman as an Individual.” The primary focus was appearance: the scheduled topics were care of the hair, the use of cosmetics and accessories, and clothes to wear to work.⁴¹ In 1961, the Victoria club presented a career preview for young women in which “Make-up and Clothes for a Working Day” formed one of the day’s sessions. “Beauty Counsellor and Model” Mrs. Noel Morgan (whose own first name was not given) discussed hair, skin, personal hygiene, and clothes.⁴²

Businesswomen who sold women’s clothing advertised their goods based upon the shared understanding that attire was a critical aspect of any enterprising woman’s success. Mary Constance Dress Shop advertised “Fabulous Fashions for a Business Woman’s Social Life,” such as after-five cocktail and short formal dresses, while Raymar Fashions appealed to “Business Women of Victoria ... Look Smart in the Office! Choose from our complete selection of business-like dresses in the newest style trends and colors to please the most discriminating woman.”⁴³

Figure 1 shows three advertisements that were typical of the “Business Women’s Week” special spread and of businesswomen’s advertisements

³⁸ *Ibid.*, (emphasis added).

³⁹ *Victoria Daily Times*, 14 July 1932, 8.

⁴⁰ Pearl Eaton, “Secretarial Work” (Speech given at 1937 CFBPWC convention), Pearl Steen Fonds, CVA, add. mss. 272, 517-C-5. N.b.: Steen’s surname was Eaton at the time she gave the speech.

⁴¹ Victoria BPW Club Records, BCA, 89-1386-2.

⁴² 1961 Program, BPW Club Career Preview, BCA, 89-1387-3.

⁴³ *Victoria Daily Times*, 13 October 1962, 23.



**Wardrobe Elegance
for Victoria's
Business Women**

Our selection of good clothes at reasonable prices are worth your time and money. Come in and see them. See how they fit in with your busy life.

- SUITS
- DRESSES
- COATS

Millinery - Accessories

Crown Dress & Hat Shop
617 VIEW STREET PHONE EV 3-7914

Figure 1: Advertisements for Business Women's Week; Victoria 1962. Source: *Victoria Daily Times*, 13 October 1962, 22-3.

**A SALUTE TO THE
BUSINESS WOMEN
OF CANADA**



Down through the years we have been proud to serve career women in every field with the latest in quality and Fashion.

Mallek's
1696 Douglas EV 2-8151

**A
Minnie Beveridge
HAT
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more generally. Victoria BPW club member Minnie Beveridge's advertisements (here and elsewhere) stressed the femininity of her millinery business, which she opened in 1938, and the importance of hats as part of businesswomen's fashionable attire. The Crown Dress and Hat Shop, in operation for more than twenty years, advertised the importance of "elegance," suggesting a middle- to upper-class definition of what constituted fashionable women's wear. BPW club member Alice Mallek operated a women's clothing store on her own after her husband's death. Her advertisement catered to "career women in every field" but also stressed the importance of "Fashion."

BPW club members, who repeatedly reassured businessmen, other men, and other women that they were not going to become manly by entering into business, stressed other characteristics, besides appearance, that demonstrated femininity. In 1952, the president of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Dame Caroline Haslett, told the annual convention of the CFBPWC that women "don't need to copy men. They should keep courtesy alive as much as possible and should aim for an equality that does not eliminate graciousness."⁴⁴ Haslett emphasized that women were different from men: businesswomen sought equality but they posed no threat to gender conventions already in place. This is also what a newspaper article about Haslett, entitled "Business Women Have No Intention to Become 'Carbon Copy' Of Men,"⁴⁵ suggested. While Haslett probably did state that BPW club members could be gracious, feminine, and still businesswomen, the media highlighted these aspects of her talk to reassure readers that businesswomen were not threatening the normal order of the business world. The write-up of Haslett's visit in the CFBPWC's national newsletter stressed the same points. Haslett "proves conclusively that a woman may reach the top in a recognized man's field and still not lose her endearing qualities. One is immediately struck ... with her femininity, her charm of manner."⁴⁶

The emphasis in the 1920s and 1930s on businesswomen's feminine qualities persisted after the Second World War, as Haslett's visit confirms. Businesswomen in the 1950s and 1960s continued to represent themselves as different from men but equally capable. In 1963, Elsie Gregory MacGill, then president of the CFBPWC, spoke in Vancouver to

⁴⁴ Newspaper clipping from 1952 (paper unknown), Vancouver BPW Club Scrapbooks and Miscellany, 1920s-1980s, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-5.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "Convention Chatter," *Business and Professional Woman* 23, 1 (1952): 7, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-4.

British Columbia BPW clubs. MacGill spoke of what she called a "caste system" that held women back in the labour force, and she stated that social attitudes impeded women's progress. There were, she asserted, "two kinds of work – men's work and women's work – and they are not interchangeable."⁴⁷ *Vancouver Sun* reporter Kathy Hassard pointed out that MacGill had, however, "outfoxed the Canadian caste system" by working as an aeronautical engineer.

Elsie MacGill was not self-employed, although she was doing what she and Hassard felt had long been considered "men's work."⁴⁸ But even in a piece written by one working woman about another working woman who headed a national organization and who was a success in her chosen profession, the need to stress MacGill's womanly attributes was evident: "Why did this slight, very feminine little woman embark on such a career?" Hassard asked. It is doubtful that Hassard would have described a male aeronautical engineer as large or masculine, should the situation have been reversed.

As business and professional women made inroads into less orthodox professions, their achievements were celebrated and their femininity emphasized. Beginning in the early 1950s, BPW clubs across Canada annually celebrated "Business Women's Week" to "focus attention on the achievements of women in business, trades and the professions and on the part [that] many of these women are playing in the economic, cultural and public life of Canada."⁴⁹ Articles about the event in the Victoria and Vancouver press focused on women's achievements, but the highlight of the news coverage was fashion shots of local businesswomen.

While the 1960 theme "Widening Horizons for the Business Woman" was chosen to emphasize women's abilities and to stress the "ever-broadening fields in which women are making a place for themselves," the *Victoria Daily Colonist* published a series of large photographs of Victoria BPW club members.⁵⁰ One photograph featured Margaret Harvey, a Victoria club member "in the field of real estate," in a leopard-print hat with matching purse, fur-trimmed jacket and white gloves (Figure 2). Similarly, photographs featuring Vancouver BPW

⁴⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 22 May 1963.

⁴⁸ In fact, it had been men's work: MacGill was the world's first female aeronautical engineer. See Chuck Davis, ed., *The Greater Vancouver Book: An Urban Encyclopaedia* (Surrey, BC: Linkman Press, 1997), 827-8. Biographical information on MacGill's famous mother, Helen Gregory MacGill, who also achieved a number of "firsts" for women, is included here as well.

⁴⁹ *Victoria Daily Times*, 14 October 1961, 21.

⁵⁰ *Daily Colonist*, 16 October 1960, 19.



Figure 2: Vancouver BPW club member Bertha Bell (top) and Victoria BPW club member Margaret Harvey (bottom). Sources: Image of Bertha Bell is from an undated, untitled newspaper clipping, Vancouver BPW Club Records, Scrapbooks and Miscellany, 1920s-80s. CVA, Add. Mss. 799, 588-A-5. Image of Margaret Harvey is from the *Daily Colonist*, 16 October 1960, 19.



Figure 3: Vancouver BPW Club member Barbara Macfarlane. Source: Image is from an undated, untitled newspaper clipping, Vancouver BPW Club Records, Scrapbooks and Miscellany, 1920s-80s, cVA, Add. Mss. 799, 588-A-5.



club members highlighted the “type of versatile dresses and costumes that would span any day during next week’s [Business Women’s Week] activities, or for that matter, any busy week in the life of busy women everywhere.”⁵¹

Virginia Beirnes, convener of Business Women’s Week in Vancouver, had requested that the newspaper present fashionable styles for women “with a mature figure.” Thus, while the importance of “Business Women’s Week” was stated in the article’s text, the photographs pictured Vancouver club member Bertha Bell wearing “a charming and versatile jacketed dress in hazelnut brown antelope crepe” (Figure 2) and “busy club woman Miss Barbara Macfarlane,” featuring “one of the new flattering cuffed shallow necklines” (Figure 3).

In 1961, BC premier W.A.C. Bennett congratulated businesswomen and provided his “enthusiastic support to the nation-wide recognition of Business Women’s Week.” Businesswomen were women, mothers, and wives first, he inferred, and businesswomen second: “It is characteristic of our business and professional women that they regard their careers not separately and selfishly but as adjuncts in support of the family and the community, the foundation stone of our Western civilization.”⁵² While women had entered the world of business, Bennett, like many other observers – including businesswomen – chose to emphasize women’s familial commitments. The message was forceful: women could be businesswomen and they could even be successful, but they had to appear lady-like, gracious and feminine, as the photographs depicted.

In 1979, Toronto freelance writer Margaret Hewett Robertson wrote an article for *The Business and Professional Woman* entitled “Work Is a Masculine Word.” She quoted a co-worker who told her that she was “an attractive feminine woman. Women like you don’t belong in the working world.”⁵³ Robertson argued that, traditionally, “to be feminine is to be passive. Masculine is active and both society and the dictionary define ‘job,’ ‘work,’ and ‘career’ – most particularly the latter – in terms of the active.” As she pointed out, society’s concept of what it meant to be feminine was not compatible with what it meant to have a career.

This helps to explain why businesswomen struggled throughout the first half of the twentieth century to downplay the ways in which they

⁵¹ Vancouver BPW Club Records, Scrapbooks and Miscellany, 1920s-1980s, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-5. N.b: this newspaper clipping is not dated and the newspaper is unknown but it is with a collection of clippings from the 1960s.

⁵² *Victoria Daily Times*, 14 October 1961, 21.

⁵³ Margaret Hewett Robertson, “Work Is a Masculine Word,” *Business and Professional Woman* (October-November 1979), 6-8, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-4.

might, to their detriment, be considered masculine or manly, and why, instead, they accentuated their feminine attributes. If, as Robertson said in 1979, femininity conjured up images of passivity, tenderness, and delicacy while masculinity suggested activity, strength, and aggression, and if the work world was perceived to be more about the latter, then it is little wonder that women felt they did not belong there. But for those women who did enter the work world, regardless of its perceived masculinity, one of their best tactics for survival may have been to exaggerate their feminine qualities.

While an emphasis on femininity was most typical in descriptions of businesswomen, manliness was a titillating and irrefutable aspect of one businesswoman's life. Eleanor Johnson, profiled by P.W. Luce in the *Vancouver Sun* after her death in 1951, drove her own cab in Victoria before the First World War and later became a real estate and financial agent. She owned and operated a cement company and got the contract to build the first sewers in Burnaby. Johnson also worked after the First World War as the marine and financial editor of the *Vancouver Sun*.⁵⁴ Her "manliness" was notable and unusual. Luce proclaimed that Johnson was "born a woman but for more than seventy years she longed for the impossible: She yearned to be a man!" Known as "Billy," she "invaded this strictly masculine field" of newspaper reporting, along with "masculine" fields of entrepreneurship such as driving a taxi and operating a cement company.⁵⁵

Unlike most entrepreneurial women, Johnson did not attempt to be womanly: her appearance and her choice of businesses were distinctly masculine. While her manly appearance was the main topic of the profile, Luce attempted to stress the ways in which "Billy" was respectable: "A big, wholesome-looking woman, with a complexion that was the envy of her more feminine confreres, she was always immaculately groomed."⁵⁶

Even when women operated businesses most closely associated with men, reporters typically emphasized their femininity. In 1962, the *Victoria Daily Times* printed a story about a Montreal businesswoman:

⁵⁴ P.W. Luce, *Vancouver Sun*, 3 November 1951, Magazine Section, 6. See also Lang and Hale, "Women of the *World* and Other Dailies," 17-8.

⁵⁵ Typically, taxi driving was a form of self-employment in this period, as was real estate. This is no longer the case for either occupation.

⁵⁶ Luce, *Vancouver Sun*, 6. Later in the article he again noted that Johnson was a "massive woman," who "always wore mannish clothes." The final years of Johnson's life were a mystery. She left Vancouver in 1941 and did not resurface until September 1951, when her body was found in a hotel in Arizona. Luce tragically opined that Johnson "died as she had lived, a woman who trod a solitary path."

it was entitled “Boss’ Holds Man’s Job – And ‘He’ Is a Woman.”⁵⁷ Laurette Grayel was the owner-director of a Montreal delivery company. Her work was identified as a man’s work, but Grayel was portrayed (and likely portrayed herself) as womanly. The reporter physically described Grayel as an “attractive, 46-year-old blonde,” pointedly demonstrating to readers that she was feminine in appearance if not in occupation. The accompanying photograph showed Grayel in heels and a dress, handing a package to one of her deliverymen.

Grayel stated that her work was “no business for a woman” and that there were “times when you must forget you are a woman.” She implied that the kind of work she did was not meant to be done by women and, therefore, she took on manly characteristics to get the job done. Yet, the article managed to stress her femininity and her success at the same time as it proclaimed that her business was a “man’s job.” According to the author, the only way that Grayel could successfully do a man’s work was by occasionally “forgetting” that she was a woman, while also maintaining an attractive appearance and making sure that her outward femininity was not in question. Grayel recognized this, but so did the reporter who focused on her appearance and behaviour.

A 1967 article entitled “Think Like a Man, Act Like a Lady,” described “Mrs. Hyman Kessler” (her first name was never given) of Hamilton, Ontario, as “one of the most attractive scrap metal dealers in the business.”⁵⁸ The author reinforced the importance of appearance, portraying Kessler as “Blonde, vital, and looking about 15 years younger than her age of 52,” a widow who “always wears skirts when she goes out on the job, and never smokes, although she is a heavy smoker at home.” In this business, Kessler stated, “you have to think like a man and act like a lady.” Acting like a “lady” implied a certain middle-class respectability, reinforced by the message that a lady did not smoke in public. Kessler operated a type of business usually run by men, in this case one formerly operated by her father and her husband, and the message was patently obvious. Kessler thought “like a man” in order to run the business, but by wearing skirts and acting like a lady she retained an image of middle-class femininity.

In Burnaby, British Columbia, after her first husband’s death in 1950, Wendy McDonald assumed ownership of BC Bearing Engineers, an industrial products and bearings company. That McDonald had worked

⁵⁷ *Victoria Daily Times*, 13 October 1962, 23.

⁵⁸ “Think Like a Man, Act Like a Lady,” *Business and Professional Woman*, May-June 1967, cva, add. mss. 799, 588-A-4.

as a model in her twenties was emphasized in two profiles about her, published in 1999.⁵⁹ *Chatelaine* magazine described her as a "woman of her time and ahead of it" but also noted that she "peels off a chunky clip-on earring at the start of phone calls."⁶⁰ The emphasis on McDonald's fashion accessories and past modelling career seem like conspicuous sign-posts set out to proclaim her femininity despite her type of business. McDonald was heralded as a woman who "juggled a career and raised 10 children in an era when women were barely cleaning boardrooms, much less presiding over them."⁶¹ While profiles written as her career was ending celebrated her successes, they presented her as exceptional for operating in a male domain. At the same time, her femininity was carefully, if indirectly, reinforced.

Emphasizing womanliness prevented outright condemnation of entrepreneurial women. If businesswomen proved that they could be as successful as men, while still behaving in a feminine manner and while still becoming wives and mothers, then their existence did not threaten the gender conventions that equated business-like behaviour with masculine behaviour. The message they conveyed was that women operating businesses that had long been associated with men did not want to be men: women wanted to do men's work but remain womanly.⁶² Businesswomen in "male" fields recognized the interaction that occurred between their gendered identities and their business identities.

The type of business that a self-employed woman chose to operate made a difference in how she might be portrayed or in how she might portray herself. While some women ran businesses that were typically viewed as men's work, such as Johnson's cement company, Kessler's scrap metal business, or McDonald's bearings company, others ran businesses in fields deemed to be more appropriate for their sex. Yet, women who operated businesses in trades that were clearly associated with domesticity were in some ways unbusiness-like to the point of

⁵⁹ See David Mitchell and Shari Graydon, eds., *British Columbia's Business Leaders of the Century* (Vancouver: BIV Special Publications, Quebecor Printing, 1999), 96-7. See also "100 Top Women Entrepreneurs," *Chatelaine*, November 1999, 77.

⁶⁰ "100 Top Women Entrepreneurs," 77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* The profile in *British Columbia's Business Leaders* also notes that, when McDonald's first husband went to war and left her with power of attorney, "she didn't even know what the term meant." And in the 1960s, she "confessed" that it took years for her to really know what she was doing. While these confessions may be true, the emphasis on her lack of knowledge, her marriages and many children, and her early modelling career all serve to reinforce her femininity: profiles of businessmen rarely focus on domestic issues or on a businessman's relative ignorance of his line of work. See Mitchell and Graydon, *British Columbia's Business Leaders*, 96-7.

⁶² See Candace Kanes, "American Business Women, 1890-1930: Creating an Identity" (PhD diss., University of New Hampshire, 1997), 68. She makes a similar point in an American context.

being invisible in the business world. Factors such as the feminized niche within which women operated, the small size of their businesses, and the reality that businesses such as boarding houses operated out of the home meant that these women were rarely recognized as entrepreneurs in their own right.

Women who ran hotels in British Columbia were more likely than were the keepers of boarding houses to be acknowledged as businesswomen. The Okanagan's Armstrong Hotel, for instance, was notable for its "strong women proprietors." Florence Drage began an eleven-year tenure as owner in 1930. In 1950, James and Jean Phillips owned the hotel and Jean managed it. She was "criticized in some quarters for running the establishment, especially as it contained a bar, and women were still expected to keep a low profile." Apparently, Phillips did take part in what the author termed "more womanly things." She went to church and sang in the choir, and one acquaintance recalled that there was "no mistaking she was a lady, but she was a strong woman, too. People didn't really hold managing that business against her."⁶³ The reference to Phillips as a lady seems to connote middle-class respectability. Hotel keepers were running larger and more commercially profitable businesses than were boarding house keepers, none of whom appeared on the Victoria or Vancouver BPW membership lists, despite their prevalence in both cities. Hotel keeping had a place in the more public business arena, and hotels were usually separate from the home, making them a different kind of enterprise than boarding houses. That boarding house keepers were more likely than hotel keepers to be working-class women may also explain why they were not members of BPW clubs. The 1948 Victoria BPW club membership list included two hotel proprietors, Erma Vautrin and Norma MacDonald; the latter, who owned the Oak Bay Beach Hotel, was still an active businessperson and a member of the Victoria Chamber of Commerce in 1957.⁶⁴

Some entrepreneurial women worked outside the home but in feminized trades, and, like the more domestic home-based businesswomen, they were rarely acknowledged as self-employed entrepreneurs. In 1935, *Fortune* magazine published a series of articles on "Women in Business," one of which distinguished between "women engaged in the business exploitation of femininity" and the "vital industries" dominated by

⁶³ Devon L. Muhlert, "Armstrong Hotel Fits a Dowager's Role," *Okanagan History: The Sixty-First Report of the Okanagan Historical Society* 61 (1997): 84-9.

⁶⁴ Annual Report and Business Directory (1957), Victoria Chamber of Commerce, City of Victoria Archives, 33 G 1, file 2.

men.⁶⁵ The point, as Kathy Peiss elaborates, was that men's ventures were considered to be "vital" – a word that connotes indispensable and fundamental – while women's ventures, being neither vital nor indispensable, were unbusiness-like.⁶⁶ The *Fortune* piece further stated that women's success with businesses that exploited femininity proved only that "women are by nature feminine." Being feminine was the antithesis of being business-like, even for women operating businesses that were recognizably entrepreneurial.

Some women in British Columbia entered the beauty industry and made a niche for themselves. Beauty salon owners, corsetieres, and milliners were well represented in the Vancouver and Victoria BPW club membership lists. The women stressed their middle-class femininity in comments about their businesses and in advertisements. Minnie Beveridge opened her millinery shop in Victoria in 1938. In 1954, in the *Daily Colonist*, Beveridge described her millinery work as a "hobby" that developed into her living. Reporter Dee Lavoie wrote that Beveridge took into account a woman's personality and clothing when she created a hat for her: there was "a hat for every person."⁶⁷ The article focused on the designs, fabric, and shapes of Beveridge's hats rather than on her business acumen. Lavoie portrayed her as a fashion expert, a recognized "authority on hats and how to wear them," but not as a business expert, despite her years of successful entrepreneurship.

Beveridge advertised directly to the community of businesswomen to which she belonged and noted her membership in the BPW club. She also appealed to her customers's sense of fashion: "The shape that flatters is yours this fall," her advertisements announced in 1960, with "Lovely, Lofty" hats from Minnie Beveridge Millinery.⁶⁸

Observers' comments about businesswomen focused on particular attributes when they described women and their enterprises. After she was widowed in the 1940s, Alice Mallek continued to operate the women's wear shop that she and her husband had opened in 1913. A profile of Mallek in the *Daily Colonist* in the mid-1950s stated, "Mrs. Mallek loves furs, like most women, and on her racks can be found some of the loveliest creations."⁶⁹ Many articles highlighting businesswomen in British Columbia stressed either the femininity of the proprietors or

⁶⁵ "Women in Business: III," *Fortune* 12 (1935): 81, cited in Kathy Peiss, "'Vital Industry' and Women's Ventures: Conceptualizing Gender in Twentieth Century Business History," *Business History Review* 72, 2 (1998): 219.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Dee Lavoie, *Daily Colonist*, 14 February 1954, 18.

⁶⁸ *Daily Colonist*, 16 October 1960, 6.

⁶⁹ G.E. Mortimer, *Daily Colonist*, 13 January 1957, 3.

the femininity of their goods: this profile stressed both. G.E. Mortimer described Mallek as a kindly woman of “lively ideas and mischievous good humor.” Her carpeted salon was described as a “smart downtown dress shop,” while she was described as respectable, womanly, and as dignified and elegant as her store. Mortimer physically described this “proprietress” as a “silver-haired widow.”⁷⁰ Descriptions that focused on women’s dignity or their femininity were a common feature of profiles such as this one. Certainly, class was one of the markers of Mallek’s success, and her dignified appearance identified her as a respectable, middle-class businesswoman.

A retiring president of the Vancouver BPW club told the *Vancouver Daily Province* in the 1950s, “though I’m known in business circles as Mrs. Theresa Galloway (she once owned a beauty parlor), I’m very happily married, and to a man who believes a wife should also be an individual.”⁷¹ Catering to a female clientele, Galloway’s business had appealed to traditional understandings of gender divisions within Canadian society. Reporter Winifred Lee stressed that Galloway was respectable and womanly but also ambitious, hard-working, and community-minded, a “friendly hospitable person” who would tackle anything from sewing lace on lingerie to cooking a meal to leading a women’s committee. Galloway had also “constantly agitated for better conditions and hours of work” for working women. She embodied the ideal businesswoman: respectable, friendly, womanly, and business-like, but in a feminine trade.

While Lee wrote of Galloway’s work on behalf of other women and of her extensive committee work, the article’s subtitles included phrases such as “A Gay Person,” “Happily Married,” and “No Cigarettes for Her!” “I’m very sentimental,” Galloway apparently claimed: “I just can’t bear to part with my daughter’s baby things.” Lee noted that “sloppy clothing for young people” aroused Galloway’s disdain and that she drew the line at smoking and drinking for women: “If women only knew how ugly they look with a cigarette dangling from their lips, I’m sure they’d stop.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *Vancouver Daily Province*. The article, clipped for the BPW club scrapbook, is undated but appears with clippings from the mid-1950s. Vancouver BPW Club Scrapbook, 1950-58, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-5.

⁷² Smoking seems here to be a marker of middle-class respectability, just as it was for Kessler, who kept her addiction at home but refused to smoke at work. For Galloway, cigarettes seem to represent an undignified image from which respectable (read: middle-class) entrepreneurs ought to distance themselves. And, although Galloway describes cigarettes as “ugly,” she may also have considered them a symbol of lower-class women, something not to be associated with respectable middle-class businesswomen.

Women also used "a discourse of community, domesticity, neighborliness and service" to gain a place in the world of residential real estate.⁷³ Traditional gendered ideas about women's roles and the association of women with family and "home" provided a way for women to enter the industry. An article in *The Business and Professional Woman* in 1963 entitled "Women CAN Sell Real Estate" profiled the Vancouver all-woman real estate firm of Triangle Realty. "Can womanly qualities of charm, grace, enthusiasm and attention to detail form the basis of a successful business?" asked Virginia Beirnes.⁷⁴ Clearly, Beirnes believed that they could, and that physical appearance and "womanly qualities" contributed to the women's success: "Mrs. Woodsworth is a charming silver blonde; Mrs. Linnell and Mrs. Ashdown, vivacious red-heads, and all are mature women with families."⁷⁵ This physical description accentuated the fact that successful businesswomen could also be wives and mothers. Beirnes also seems to have chosen her adjectives carefully, alerting her readership to the women's charm and maturity but also playfully noting the stereotype of the lively red-head. Beirnes concluded that "know-how, combined with charm, grace and enthusiasm, spell success in the real estate business for women."⁷⁶ The author and her readership undoubtedly made the links between these markers of ladylike behaviour and a middle-class feminine ideal.

The types of businesses that women operated represented a meeting point between societal pressures upon women and their need to make economic decisions. Businesswomen in British Columbia made gendered choices overlaid with capitalist choices. The interaction between gender and business is a critical part of the story because women chose particular enterprises based on their expectations of business success – in essence, capitalist considerations – but also based on societal expectations of appropriate avenues for entrepreneurial women. It behooved women to pay attention to the latter and open businesses in enterprises long associated with women in order to succeed economically.

That the kinds of work other members of society thought suitable for women affected women's economic choices was illustrated in a 1950 article in the *Veteran's Advocate*. The article reported on a meeting of the Toronto BPW club at which male guests took part in a panel discussion.

⁷³ Peiss, "Vital Industry," 239.

⁷⁴ Virginia Beirnes, "Women CAN Sell Real Estate," *Business and Professional Woman* 28, 5 (1963), CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-4.

⁷⁵ Interestingly, the women's first names were not given in the article. The conservative formality of introducing "ladies" by their marital status persisted into the 1960s.

⁷⁶ Beirnes, "Women CAN Sell Real Estate," 5.

Panelists advised businesswomen to become “more emotionally stable” and to follow professions in which women were successful.⁷⁷ Women’s entrepreneurial choices were guided by gender expectations and by societal assumptions about their supposed emotional instability, which the panel clearly believed would hinder them in business.

In 1923, Vancouver BPW club president Mabel Ingram pointed out that “there are women in all branches of business and the professions today, we are shut out of nothing, and the men are recognizing more and more that we are in the business world to stay and to shoulder our share of the big things of the world.”⁷⁸ Club members repeatedly asserted this conviction, and a story published in 1925 about a “plucky” female holly farmer is one such example: M.E. Dunn noted, in *Vancouver Business Woman*, that it was “refreshing to see a woman strike out on a new line of work ... ‘Madam Farmer’ ought to be congratulated.” The profile emphasized that the aspiring farmer was entering a less predictable line of work for a woman and celebrated her “pioneer spirit” and “strength of mind.”⁷⁹ However, the BPW clubs, dedicated to promoting the interests of business and professional women and stimulating “social intercourse,”⁸⁰ were not always optimistic. In 1932, the president of the CFBPWC stated that women had “only one foot on the threshold of business as the equal of man.”⁸¹

The BPW clubwomen in British Columbia continued, from the 1920s to the 1980s, to argue that they deserved to be in business as professional wage earners and entrepreneurs. By 1980, however, the clubs were registering declining membership and women’s employment patterns had changed. More women were entering the workforce overall, but female self-employment in the province was declining.⁸² Furthermore, despite the presence of second-wave feminism in Canadian society in the 1970s and its impact on women’s ideas about work, the BPW clubs seemed reluctant to embrace change. The ethos of lady-like women, operating businesses in manly domains while retaining their femininity, was waning by 1980, but the clubs remained relatively conservative, despite the fact that the BC and Canadian clubs had, as convention co-ordinator

⁷⁷ *Veteran’s Advocate*, 1 February 1950, Vancouver BPW Club Scrapbook (1950–58), CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-5.

⁷⁸ Club luncheon, February 1923, Vancouver BPW Club Minute Book, 1922–26, CVA, 608-A-1, file 2.

⁷⁹ *Vancouver Business Woman* 3, 7 (1925), CVA, Add. Mss. 799, 588-A-3.

⁸⁰ Article 3 of the club constitution states all of these aims and objectives. See *Vancouver Business Woman* 2, 2 (1 July 1924), CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-3.

⁸¹ “Presidential Address,” August 1932, Pearl Steen Fonds, CVA, add. mss. 272, 517-C-5.

⁸² In 1921, 13.4 percent of all gainfully employed women in British Columbia were self-employed, compared to just 3.1 percent by 1971. See *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 7; *Census of Canada*, 1971, vol. 3, pt. 2, cat. 94-723 and cat. 94-726.

Shirley Briggs stated in 1974, "been fighting since 1930 for the economic status of women."⁸³ Briggs also stated that BPW club members "don't believe in burning our bras ... We take action in a business-like manner." This attempt to disassociate the club from any ties to the stereotype of the bra-burning feminist summed up their declining relevance. Thus, by 1980 the BPW clubs were fading in prominence as images of women in business began to broaden beyond the rigid stereotypes of business "ladies" that the clubs had maintained and promoted.

Between 1920 and 1980, businesswomen stressed their femininity by emphasizing their roles as mothers or wives, by heeding their personal appearance, by acting "lady-like," and by consciously stressing the ways in which they were softer, more feminine than, and thus different from, their male counterparts in business. Women stressed these attributes themselves but so did the commentators who reported on club events and who interviewed BPW clubwomen. What we see in British Columbia is not an outright condemnation of women who operated businesses; rather, what we see is a concerted effort on the part of the women themselves, through outside observation and media representations, to assert the essential womanliness of women in business. They were described and bounded by their feminine qualities, something that is clear in the advertisements for female-owned business and in newspaper articles or archival club records that mention female proprietors. This tendency was even more pronounced in profiles of women who operated businesses in masculine fields.

The womanliness of female entrepreneurs was stressed to such a degree that it seemed calculated to negate the very fact of their self-employment. If they could be portrayed as good wives and mothers, as attractive or youthful, small or feminine, then their encroachment into the male-dominated business world was less threatening. After all, if women were still different from men and still acted like ladies, they were not such a threat to an established order in which men, not women, were independent, self-reliant, and the owners of firms and businesses. As long as women resisted acting like men in the world of business (refraining from "whanging" each other on the shoulder, wearing masculine clothes, or smoking on the job) and continued to take care of their appearance and present themselves in a feminine manner, the fact that they happened to be business owners could be tolerated and even faintly celebrated.

⁸³ "Women's Clubs Hold Convention," *Vancouver Weekly*, 18 July 1974, BPW Scrapbook, CVA, add. mss. 799, 588-A-5.