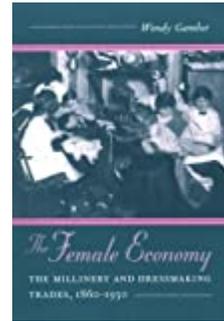


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wendy Gamber. *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xiii + 300 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-252-02298-x; \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06601-6; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02298-2.



Wendy Gamber. *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xiii + 300 pp.

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This is an important work about a portion of the nineteenth century economy that was dominated by skilled, relatively well-paid women workers and entrepreneurs. If this description doesn't fit your image of the work world for women a hundred years ago, may I suggest this book? Professor Gamber in this careful and subtly nuanced study makes a strong case for the importance of the millinery and dressmaking trades in the work world of nineteenth-century women. She also clearly describes the impact of the mass-production of hats and women's clothing on women's employment and business opportunities.

The *Female Economy* is divided into two sections: Part One describes the "female economy" of proprietors, workers and consumers from 1860 to 1910, while Part Two analyzes the transformation in production from 1860 to 1930. In 1860, women of almost all social classes purchased clothing from milliners and dressmakers: goods were made to order usually in a small shop with a female entrepreneur. By 1930, women of almost all social classes purchased factory-made clothing from a department store; both factory and store were usually owned and operated by men. The 1930s garment work-

ers were largely unskilled while the milliners and dressmakers of the 1860s were semi-skilled and highly skilled workers. While historians have explored the impact of this "democratization" of fashion on American culture, little work has been done on the women who made the custom goods that were replaced by the off-the-rack garment.

Although the dressmaking and millinery trades have been richly represented in American and English literature, the non-fiction voices of these workers are hard to find. In Part One, Professor Gamber presents the results of her painstaking gathering of data from business directories, city directories, the manuscript census, the R.G. Dun and Co. records and a myriad of other sources, including the letters and diaries of middle and upper class customers, Progressive Era consumer and workers-aid organizations, and the few extant memoirs of milliners and dressmakers. Most of the data are from Boston and the study never ventures far from the Northeast. The intensive study of Boston and the rich data set that Gamber has collected is one of the finest aspects of this work. She is able to flesh out the portraits of some female entrepreneurs by locating them in more than one source.

The Dun and Co. records are a particularly rich source of personal information (closely resembling gossip) on the business women and their families. One of the most fascinating portions of the book uses the records of Boston's Protective Committee; this committee intervened on behalf of women workers in the larger dress-making establishments. Here in one fell swoop, we have workers, female employers and their customers (members of the committee) all involved. Gamber relates the ironic plight of the woman entrepreneur with a poor Dun and Co. credit rating whose customers conspire to "trustee" their own orders until she pays her workers with money she doesn't have because her customers won't pay their bills in a timely manner.

It is difficult to summarize Gamber's portrait of this female economy. A few tidbits may surprise the reader: millinery and dressmaking were "the fourth most important occupational category for women in 1870; only domestic servants, agricultural laborers, and seamstresses were more numerous." In 1900, dressmaking still ranked third while millinery was fourteenth (p. 7). Most proprietors of retail establishments were single women ("man milliner" was an epithet) and in Boston, a quarter were over thirty years old. Gamber also finds strong evidence of the working class origins of many of the "Madams" and, she argues, dressmaking and millinery was one of the few paths to independence for the working class daughter. Although this seems a very female world, men controlled access to credit and in the case of customers, husbands often decided when and which bills would be honored. Millinery and dressmaking was a risky business and few women became wealthy but many did manage to maintain a "precarious independence."

In Part Two, Gamber explains in more detail the millinery and dressmaking shop; how work was done, how skills were acquired, and how a worker might rise from apprentice to shop owner. She describes the transmission of skills and how a young woman, with hard work and luck, might learn a craft and own her own small shop. In the late nineteenth century, the development of systems of drafting and eventually pre-printed patterns sought to eliminate the importance of training and trade secrets and "challenge the dressmaker's most precious skill: her monopoly over cutting" (p. 138). This development would not only convince many would-be dressmakers that they had no need for training, it also paved the way for standardized sizes. (Fashion would, of course, also play a role as fitted bodices fell out of favor in the early twentieth century.) The proponents of "scientific" dress-cutting techniques were scathing in their den-

igration of the standard practices of dressmakers which usually involved numerous fittings. Now a simple machine (usually the work of a masculine mind) could eliminate the need for tiresome fittings and the work could be done, it was claimed, by any housewife with some skill at sewing. While these machines and drafting methods no doubt did not deliver all they promised, they mark the beginning of the erosion of the necessity of a dressmaker for the well-dressed woman. The development of the department store and the availability of factory-made dresses (altered in the store for the up-scale customer) in the early twentieth century completed the transformation of dressmaking. The product had, of course, been subtly altered: no one today would expect their clothing to fit as well as clothing made by a dressmaker or tailor.

A similar process takes place in the early twentieth century in the millinery trade. Milliners had, unlike dressmakers, generally kept stock on hand and thus had to deal with wholesalers. The largely male world of wholesaling had accommodated women entrepreneurs of "small means," but beginning around 1900, wholesalers began to "rationalize" their business. Business practices which had emphasized a personal relationship between retailer and wholesaler now gave way to more business-like behavior. This emphasis on what we would probably call the bottom line made the wholesalers generally impatient with small shops that were often late to pay or returned unsold goods—most of these small shops were of course run by women. These women were now seen as "unbusiness-like," undesirable customers. This combined with the development of factory-made hat forms (also sold by the wholesalers) spelled the end to the custom-made hat.

I would be remiss if I neglected to mention the final consumer's role in this process: all of this ready-made stuff was cheaper. Instead of having one or two good dresses and one new hat a year, a woman of modest means could afford more if the dresses and hats were either entirely or mostly factory-made. Gamber is careful to note the complex interaction among consumers, retailers, wholesalers and producers in this process of transforming an industry.

In this portion of the work Gamber does a superb job using millinery trade journals and the publications of the proponents of "scientific" dress-cutting techniques to substantiate her story of de-skilling and de-feminizing millinery and dressmaking. Indeed her use of multiple sources makes her story a rich and complex one. This book is must reading for any student of nineteenth and

early twentieth century labor history. The only minor criticism I would make is that Professor Gamber has a tendency to push her sources a little too far. Can we really know that the dressmakers and milliners took pride in their work, that they considered themselves artisans? I want to believe that the impoverished milliner with one employee and a business that lasted only two or three years had hopes and aspirations of grander things and that for a brief time she was able to create and live an independent life that she valued, but I'm not convinced.

This is a minor quibble about a truly outstanding piece of scholarship. We should be grateful to Professor Gamber for uncovering this female economy and suggesting so many other tantalizing avenues for future research.

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