

Women in Engineering and Management in American History, 1850-1975

*Martha M. Trescott**
University of Illinois

SUMMARY OF WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

Both the panelists and the audience noted the international character of the session, since Linda Keller Brown's presentation dealt with her research on women in European and Asian countries, Ina Dinerman's with Mexican culture, and Martha Trescott's with the United States. Various cross-cultural comparisons were made, and many more will be possible as a result of such research. Brown's work on female managers in corporations in Asia can be compared with results from Trescott's study on women managers in engineering-based firms in the US. Ina Dinerman's research on female entrepreneurs in Mexico lends itself to comparison with Brown's on women entrepreneurs in Thailand, the Philippines, and other Asian areas.

The audience also commented on the relevance of the session to understanding international business and the third world. Brown commented on the employment of Japanese women in Avon in Japan -- that they are typically required to have MBAs from US schools and 10 years' experience but nevertheless receive very low salaries and are not recruited for management-track positions. Also American companies do not typically send women to Japan to work. Such practices reveal structural aspects of the functioning of the corporation. Martha Trescott reported that women engineers in American corporations also have not generally been recruited for management-track positions. Of her over 400 respondents (Society of Women Engineers senior members and award winners, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign female engineering graduates, and employees of various corporations), 47 percent indicated that they had never officially been entitled management but 39 percent (many of the same people) had held jobs which were managerial in nature. Like the Japanese women managers, they had generally received lower pay in lower-ranking jobs than male colleagues, but their actual managerial and other work loads had been heavy. Brown also noted the Bank of America and its practice of not sending women to Asia and the Middle East (which was challenged in court) and also the Italian Olivetti firm and its female president.

In the audience Daniel Hodas emphasized that one of the strongest themes which tied the presentations together was a focus on the social and cultural background of, and influence, on entrepreneurial activities. He noted that this is often lacking in approaches to the study of entrepreneurship by both business schools and business historians. All three research projects have covered entrepreneurial endeavors by women in various kinds of enterprises, from vending and the production and selling of basic foodstuffs (especially Dinerman) to the direction and proprietorship of various small and large businesses (both non-technical and science-based). All three projects stress social forces which have historically tended to hinder or promote the efforts of women in business in the various countries, from less-developed to highly developed nations. Brown noted that of the countries which she has studied, for example, West Germany has been the most hostile to women as senior executives, while England has the greatest equal opportunity laws. Trescott's study has uncovered real resistance to women's moving into top management; and Dinerman has discussed, among other barriers, social attitudes in Mexico which make female vendors and other women in business suspect.

Comments from the floor also indicated implications which such studies hold for redefinition of business history itself to include the important informal sector which Dinerman has studied, much of which is excluded by censuses in different countries. The prevalence of "haggling" as a means of price determination in Mexico, India, and other less-developed areas was noted by Dinerman as a phenomenon which business historians have overlooked because of an orientation to standard supply-and-demand analysis. Brown noted that different ideas about not only what constitutes economically productive entrepreneurship but also management can stem from such studies. Trescott's study has explored ways in which women may manage differently from men and whether (and how) such "female" styles of management may affect the corporation.

Finally, another benefit of such studies for business history and business schools, as noted by Brown, is that grants aimed at introducing international components into business schools may be available from agencies such as the Department of Education. Also, Dinerman commented that studies such as these may provide a very good basis for a comparative-cultures course in business schools. At the very least, business schools might consider inviting lectures by social scientists on campus who are interested in economic behavior, such as economic anthropologists. In short, these presentations were interdisciplinary, all three employing the techniques of history (both oral and written -- and oral history has a strong appeal for women's history because of the generalized lack of written records), of sociology (as in Trescott's questionnaires), and of anthropology (Dinerman). Through such interdisciplinary approaches, business history may be revitalized.

The ramifications of this workshop, it was felt, could be far-reaching for business history and other fields of history such as women's history, the history of technology (especially as it pertains to engineering history in the US and to technology transfer from well-developed to less-developed countries), economic history, Asian, Latin American, European, and American history and for fields other than history in the social sciences and in business. The workshop was international and cross-cultural in scope and interdisciplinary in the methods described. It also raised questions about the need for new models and theories of economic development, noted shifts in paradigms in the study of women managers, and called for an expansion in the countries and range of businesses typically studied by business historians.

NOTE

*For a complete list of sources for this paper, contact Professor Trescott at 112 Engineering Hall, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1308 West Green, Urbana, IL 61801.

**Summary of Discussion on
the Potentials and Pitfalls of Oral
History for Business Historians**

