Toward a New History of the Postwar Economy: Prosperity, Preparedness, and Women's Small Business Ownership

Debra Michals
Department of History
New York University

In 1945 as World War II was drawing to a close, New York Governor Thomas Dewey implemented an inventive strategy for economic recovery and postwar reconversion. The program, which focused on small business as the key to the state's future prosperity, sought to spur new enterprises by offering a host of training and counseling services to would-be entrepreneurs. What made Governor Dewey's effort particularly novel, however, was its extension to women. In June 1945, the governor established a Women's Program and Women's Council within the Commerce Department, charged with encouraging and assisting would-be female business owners in launching independent enterprises [State of New York, 1944-1953]. Toward this effort, the Women's Program ran a series of small business clinics across the state throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, where women could bring proposals or product samples to be reviewed for marketability by business experts. The Women's Program also produced pamphlets on how to start a business, counseled women by phone or mail on finding suppliers or developing marketing strategies, and used the media to showcase women who achieved success as business owners with the help of the clinics. Among the hundreds of stories in its files, the Women's Program frequently spotlighted Helen Morgan's prepared spaghetti sauce, Evelyn Costello's baby formula delivery service, and Agnes Hose's smoked turkey products, which in only a few years outgrew her kitchen and required a staff of sixteen women and ten men to meet supermarket and specialty store demand [Todd Papers].

Through the Women's Program Governor Dewey hoped to resolve several pressing postwar problems at once. First, small business ownership could aid in clearing women wartime workers from jobs for returning soldiers by providing women with an alternative outlet for their newfound economic impulses. Second, small or home-based businesses would address the joint economic and familial burdens of married women whose husbands either did not return from battle or returned too injured to work. Third, in seeking to re-establish the 100,000 small businesses that were lost during the war, the state looked to women for assistance. Arguing that "the woman's touch is a definite

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asset in New York business," Jane Todd, director of the Women's Program and the first woman to hold the post of Deputy Commerce Commissioner, said in 1945 that she expected "25,000 women to open small shops in the next decade" ["Job Bars," 1945]. A year later, before a group of Harlem women, Todd added, "If women – who are more daring than men – go into commercial activities, the loss to our economy will be partially recovered" ["Harlem Wives," 1946]. As a direct result of the clinics and the program's related services, over 11,000 women had started new businesses in New York by 1951 [Todd Papers].

The first and by far the most ambitious program, New York's small business clinics hardly stood alone in linking reconversion, at least in part, to women's enterprises. From 1945 through the mid-1950s, national publicity and demand from women led as many as 20 other states to adopt variations of the New York women's small business clinic model. In some states, such as Maine, California, and Ohio, officials sought to replicate the entire program, right down to establishing a women's division within the appropriate government agency. Other states, such as Texas and Massachusetts, adopted only the clinic portion, and relied on Todd and her staff to aid in facilitating and inaugurating their initial endeavors [Todd Papers]. In addition, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs spearheaded efforts to bring the clinic format to women in more than a dozen locations, relying on its own state chapters to sponsor clinics and urge government leaders to establish a women's division within the state [*Independent Woman,* 1945-1954; BPW Papers]. From 1945 to 1950, the number of women business owners nationwide jumped from 600,000 to nearly one million, assisted in large part by these vocal and active public campaigns [*962,000 U.S. Women*, 1948; *Changes in Women's,* 1954; *Status of Women,* 1952].

While many of these programs continued well into the 1950s, and in some states such as New York and Ohio into the 1960s, the period from 1945 to 1953 represents a crucial moment in postwar history in which the state for the first time sanctioned a new role and identity for women as small business owners. Contrary to popular conceptions of the era, public ideology and government programs did not simply encourage women back to hearth and home at war's end. Rather, fears of another world war, desire for prosperity, and a utopian discourse about reconfigured gender relations in the postwar era converged to facilitate women's movement into small business ownership. Women, too, were eager to take their place as equal partners in the nation's future, and responded in large numbers to every reconversion opportunity available to them, whether political or economic [Litoff and Smith, 1995; Banning, 1951; NAM Papers]. At the same time, the small business clinics reveal the ways in which women's enterprises became definitionally intertwined with the home while also being part of a broader effort to promote small business as the foundation of the postwar economy. By the end of the Korean War in 1953, the urgency associated with keeping women economically viable in preparation for war subsided. Consequently, the small business clinics occupied a place of declining importance in state economic and political

endeavors. But the links they forged between women and economic enterprise nonetheless endured, adapting in succeeding decades to the changing social climate and notions of women's roles.

At the end of World War II, America's vision of its future had yet to fully crystallize. Haunted by the economic legacy of the Great Depression and desperate to secure wartime prosperity for the long term, business and political leaders grappled with immense uncertainty in developing postwar reconversion strategies, and they wavered between multiple options and competing visions [Blum, 1976; Degler, 1968; Hartmann, 1982; LaFeber, 1993]. Aside from unresolved international politics and the impending Cold War, the domestic landscape changed greatly by war's end, particularly regarding gender roles, and leaders knew they would have to take this into consideration in their reconversion plans. Women, who had answered patriotic, propagandistic calls to assume wartime jobs, consequently emerged from the war years with a new sense of themselves as citizens and economic entities [Litoff and Smith, 1995; May, 1988; Hartmann, 1982; Hartmann 1994]. Many hoped to take advantage of wartime promises about the future their war work might guarantee them. Others looked to postwar work to help them weather the hardship of single motherhood or the difficulties of providing for children and an injured spouse [Gluck, 1987; Hartmann, 1982].

Ambivalence among policy-makers about the nation's social, political, and economic future left room for women to maneuver in creating and legitimating economic roles and identities. Uncertain about whether another war loomed close on the horizon, leaders were wary of reconversion strategies that primarily and unrealistically sought to restore pre-war gender roles, with men as breadwinners and women as housewives. But a fear of going too far in reinventing those roles, of radically altering the past to mold the future, and of offending those who hoped to see a return to full-time motherhood, also seemed to create an ambivalence among leaders that permeated postwar economic strategies. Most leaders sought a middle ground between promoting jobs for women and eliminating them from the economy. This indecision, in turn, left an opening for women to carve an economic niche for themselves.

Only one notion seemed consistent throughout the programs suggested by business and government interests, and here again there proved to be an opportunity for women. Political and economic pundits seemed to agree that the postwar economy would be built, in considerable measure, upon the production of consumer goods and services. In the years immediately following the war and well into the 1950s, leaders continuously painted a vision of technologically advanced kitchens and households, new conveniences and products that would proliferate in the postwar world to simplify the lives of American families and enhance leisure [May, 1988; Jackson, 1985; Chafe, 1995; Blum, 1976]. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, in their bid to preserve the free enterprise system and remove wartime government regulations from business practices, frequently articulated this vision of the consumer economy in their public appeals, including those made to women [NAM Papers; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Papers].

Converting wartime factories to manufacturing consumer goods was only part of the postwar economic agenda; equally important were efforts to spur new small businesses that would encourage consumption, trigger demand, and create jobs [State of New York, 1944-1953; NAM Papers; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Papers].

The Women's Program not only fit neatly into this ideological state of flux, but it also exemplified a prevailing ambiguity about the nation's future as well as women's place in the postwar economic order. On the one hand, leaders like Governor Dewey expected women to create legitimate, competitive small businesses that would rebuild the postwar economy. At the same time, however, women were enticed to commercialize domestic skills as their entrée to private enterprise. In the rush to achieve the consumer economy that leaders envisioned, reconversion strategists argued that there were commercial prospects even in areas like the home which had once been overlooked. In fact, Governor Dewey and his staff frequently urged women to see the home as an untapped reservoir of potential business ideas [Todd Papers]. Decorating services, catering, apparel manufacturing, and other functions women normally provided to their families free of charge were suggested at war's end as products or services others would be willing to buy [Todd Papers; State of New York 1945-1953]. Within this argument, there was a tacit recognition of the emerging category of working mothers, who would now purchase products, such as home-made sauces or desserts, they would be too time-pressed to prepare themselves. There was also a recognition of pent-up demand during the war years for even the most basic products, such as mayonnaise, which had been in scarce supply, and which women could manufacture for a profit in the postwar economy [Todd Papers]. By linking women's business enterprises to their domestic skills, the Women's Program could keep women both in the economy and in the home at the same time. As such, women's businesses from the start, and in the decades that followed, occupied a liminal space, simultaneously within the broader economy and outside it in a separate feminized realm.

In format and in content, the women's small business clinics likewise straddled the worlds of home and work. The typical women's business clinic combined the structure of a state fair with an educational seminar, thereby bridging the domestic and professional realms. Held in conference halls or auditoriums, the clinics included displays of products or services women might develop into businesses, with a weighty emphasis on home-baked goods, handicrafts and clothing, or baby-sitting agencies. There were tables offering free pamphlets from the Women's Program, as well as book lists and materials available from the Federal Small Business Administration or Commerce Department, including the booklets *Establishing and Operating Your Own Business, Gift and Art Shop, Make it For Profit*, and *Salad Dressings, Mayonnaise, and Related Products*. The New York program relied heavily on its Woman's Council, comprised of 32 leading businesswomen volunteers such as cosmetics mogul Elizabeth Arden, who would meet individually with clinic attendees to outline the nuts and bolts of turning an idea into a business. Iowa, too, used prominent

local businesswomen as speakers and advisors. The clinic highlights, both in terms of attendance and publicity, were the speeches and displays under the banner, "Success Stories." During these sessions, women who succeeded in business beyond the home-based level would exhibit their wares, tell their stories, or meet with individual women. Strategically, these women served a public relations function for the New York Women's Program, which not only kept mini-biographies of successful women on file, but also used them to drum up media interest. Women such as the Mauger sisters, who sold gourmet fruitcakes, or Thelma Manter and Ann Wood's odd job service, were frequently featured in national publications touting the small business clinics, including *The New York Times, Life, Woman's Day,* and *The Reader's Digest.* The Women's Program even made a film about its efforts for national distribution in 1953 [Todd Papers].

Success stories that demonstrated the vast sums of money to be made by women in home businesses no doubt fueled the overwhelming success of the small business clinics, as well as the growth in women's private enterprise overall. Women were eager to follow in the footsteps of clinic legend and oft-cited success story Dorothy Chase, who in less than three years saw her pickled herring business move from her kitchen to its own facility with 50 employees and annual sales in 1948 of more than $250,000 [Johnston, 1950]. In New York, where the Women's Program held as many as seven clinics per year, attendance at each averaged 500-600, but ran as high as 1,500 to 3,000. Even in remote outposts such Iowa farm country, as many as 200 women would turn out at the clinics, some traveling great distances. Over 600 women attended the clinic held in rural Bangor, Maine, while 3,000 showed up in Fort Worth, Texas. Women were so eager for information on starting a money-making venture that in 1948 the Women's Program reported more than 750 requests per day from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii for its booklet, "A Business of Her Own."[962,000 U.S. Women, 1948]. California alone sought 900 copies in 1949 [Todd Papers]. Women from around the country, and even in some cases Europe, also wrote to the Council for advice on handling specific concerns, such as federal health regulations for making and storing cheese products, securing product labels, or researching demand for a party planning service.

Along with ideological concerns, there was a practical reason for stressing the home as a site of small business for women, particularly in the early years of the business clinics. Wartime casualties left many women struggling to combine childcare duties with the added responsibility of providing for their families financially. In articles and speeches Jane Todd frequently noted that "women whose livelihood is changed because of a war casualty" would find an economic solution in small business. One promotional radio skit used the example of Margaret Peters, who, faced with the death of her soldier husband, started selling home-made Hollandaise sauce to support herself and two children. Governor Dewey also pointed out that the range of opportunities available to women in the postwar world did not "minimize the greatest of fundamentals – those of home-making and of raising children" [Todd Papers]. Rather, ventures such as baby-sitting services or home-baked food production

would enable women to broaden their household responsibilities into the commercial world.

Although the initial emphasis may have been on the home, the Women's Program, the BPW, and the women business owners themselves, often did not expect these businesses to stay within the home for very long. In the pamphlet "A Business of Her Own," and its follow-up, "102 Ideas For a Business of Her Own," the Women's Program may have urged homemakers to consider small gift, food, or clothing boutiques; catering and food preparation; party and baby-sitting services. But they also advised them on how to conduct business in a professional and competitive manner. The pamphlets stressed the importance of product quality and appearance, as well as the need to do initial research before starting up. Similarly, the pamphlets developed by the BPW for national distribution at clinics, such as "Bread and Butter Sidelines," saw the home as having untapped commercial value in the broader business marketplace. Across America, clinic leaders, like those in Iowa, stressed that no idea was too small to become the cornerstone of a large company [*Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 1953].

More importantly, the Women's Program and its counterparts in other states made a clear distinction at the clinics between two classes of business ownership: the pin money class, which referred to either women at the startup stage or those who merely sought an additional source of part-time income, and the professional class, which described women whose businesses advanced beyond the home. While the clinic organizers saw it as their mission to counsel women in both categories of business ventures, their literature and speeches placed an emphasis on the ability of any idea to secure a lasting place within a given market or business category. As such, clinic advisors not only evaluated whether there was a long-term need for a product or service a woman might seek to establish, but they would also counsel her on how to proceed regarding expansion. For the women's clinic organizers, it was less important – in fact, it was virtually irrelevant – whether a business idea originated from homemaking skills. What mattered instead was its commercial potential, professional quality, and the ability of the woman herself to produce the product to meet demand. As a result, the women's clinics covered a broad range of categories where women might have existing skills or resources, including roadside farmer's markets and canned produce for rural women and eclectic boutiques or typing services for the more cosmopolitan types. They reached out across color lines and not only held clinics for black women in Harlem, but used these women to illustrate how clinic advisors could help a woman expand her business. In a 1948 radio promotion of an upcoming clinic, the New York Women's Program told the story of Grace Bell, a Harlem housewife who turned her penchant for southern cooking into a thriving specialty business with the advice she received at a small business clinic. Equally important to Bell's story, however, was the fact that she turned to the Woman's Council for advice when demand for her services soared [Todd Papers].

Grace Bell's story was typical of an emphasis on the home and the world beyond it that fused women's business ownership to their familial roles

as well as to broader visions of postwar prosperity. In fact, the link between women's small business ownership and the home legitimated these ventures ideologically as a vital part of postwar reconversion. Business, political and academic conferences and symposiums held across the country in the last two years of World War II sought to address the question of women's future roles with an awareness that wartime workforce participation had changed women's expectations of their place in society. Texas defense contractor and director of the Federal Smaller War Plants Corporation, Maury Maverick repeatedly argued that "women had learned too much to go back," and would find great opportunities in small business if the country "rolls into full production after the war." In a 1944 *New York Times* article, Maverick averred that the home is the basis of small business, and as such small business would provide a natural economic role for women in the postwar world. While linking women's familial obligations to business enterprise, Maverick nonetheless did not limit the categories they might pursue to the domestic realm. In fact, he argued that women had and would make excellent small defense contractors, and saw great potential for family businesses that relied on contributions from all household members. In a nod to altered social roles, he further said that home life had been so dramatically changed by the war that "no stigma will be attached to a man if his wife happens to be the moneymaker" ["Bids Women," 1944; Blum, 1976].

Behind these suggestions and embedded in the Women's Program's literature, there was a tacit understanding that gender bias would continue to make credit and other institutional sources of financing unavailable to women, and consequently women would need to consider ventures that could be started on a shoestring, at home, or with family money. The Women's Program and its counterparts elsewhere were often praised for how little they cost state governments – the average small business clinic could be held for under $100, and New York's entire program, including salaries, had an annual budget of just $75,000. There was virtually no discussion of bank loans or external sources of seed money at the women's clinics, and only once does the Women's Council note assisting someone with financing questions. Instead, clinic advisors around the country often pointed out the advantages of commercializing domestic skills because of the minimal costs involved. Even the proliferation of business books for women in the late 1940s and early 1950s focused more on domestic skills as potential resources for business ventures – again emphasizing their low initial costs – and steered away from discussions of startup capital or financing an expansion that were typical of advice books for a male audience. *Reader's Digest's* 1946 guidebook for men and women praised women's ventures for how little they cost to launch, in one case just $5. Some women's books even built the money problem into the title, such as *Start Your Own Business on Less than $1000* or *Making Money in Your Kitchen: Over 1600 Products Women Can Make.* In this way, too, women moved into small business without upsetting the status quo of the financial services segment of the business world, and made no challenges to discrimination in lending. Whatever success they achieved as business owners was typically built on ingenuity rather than access to capital.

Nonetheless, a general literature about women and small business not only co-existed with reconversion planning but also buttressed the efforts of the women's clinics. *Reader's Digest,* for example, held a contest at war's end, offering $25,000 in prizes for the best independent enterprises. Roughly 22 percent of the 50 first prize winners and 28 percent of the second prize winners were women, whose home-based businesses received lengthy attention in the advice manual *A Business of Your Own* that the publisher produced a year later from the entries. Similarly, throughout the war, *The Boston Globe* ran a regular column of money-making ideas for entrepreneurially-inclined women called, "The Wartime Wife." Written by Polly Webster, who subsequently produced books on women's business ownership, the column continued throughout the 1950s under the title, "Careers at Home."

Other debates about the future of postwar society no doubt contributed to the legitimation of women's small business ownership. First, like Maverick, many conferences addressing the future of postwar America not only took as a given that the war had changed the social landscape but also proffered a utopian discourse in terms of gender roles and relationships. Many scholars, writers and business leaders argued that two crises – the Great Depression and the world war that followed it – had so dramatically altered social relations that there was no turning back. Instead, they saw at war's end a moment of revolutionary possibilities for the future, and they urged the nation to discard its "cultural hangovers" and embrace social change in postwar planning. Dewey, too, noted that, "No longer are there to be artificial barriers against useful employment and opportunity on account of sex any more than there are to be bars on account of race, color, creed, or national origin" [Todd Papers]. Utopian visions of reconfigured gender roles not only included paid employment for all women but also greater household duties for men. In 1944, labor leader and business owner Elizabeth Hawes told attendees at the Newsweek Symposium on "American Women in the Postwar World," that she conceived of a future where "everyone works a 30-hour week [and] both males and females will have time for home chores and pleasant recreational activities." Business ownership fit this vision because it not only created opportunities for women to reconfigure their roles and those of their spouses within the family but also enabled women to carve a place for themselves outside the home. In a typical example, business partnerships formed between husbands and wives could as often have the husband play the dutiful helpmeet as the wife, especially if the idea for the enterprise was hers. A photograph in a 1952 issue of the *Woman's Home Companion* showed Nat Morse measuring ingredients, while his wife and four children stirred the batter for the family fruitcake business.

Similarly, as World War II ended and the Cold War intensified, fear of another world war produced a discourse of preparedness that included maximum use of womanpower. Drawing on the lessons of World War II, this ideology stressed that America must never be caught off guard again. Antiquated ideas about gender roles meant lost time in training and recruiting women for previously male jobs in defense and industry. Instead, the discourse

of preparedness averred that if women were kept economically viable in the post war years, they could easily be called upon again to assist with manpower shortages at home if men were called to serve in a war overseas. "Our planning for the effective use of womanpower can start at a much more advanced stage today than it did in 1942, for we can build upon the progress and learn from the mistakes made during World War II," affirmed Dorothy C. Stratton, former director of the Cost Guard World War II Spars project, in 1950 [Stratton, 1950].

Women, too, believed they were different at war's end and were insistent on remaining vital participants in political, economic, and social decisions. But even here, definitions of equality were intertwined with prevailing notions of femininity. As evident in countless speeches, articles, and symposiums, women emerged from World War II with a sense that their war work made them equal partners in the nation's future. They participated in government policy planning, sought postwar leadership roles and representation in federal agencies and committees, and urged that goals of full employment include jobs for women. At the same time, however, women argued for political and economic equality based upon the traits and attributes that made them different from men. Femininity had an equally important function in rebuilding local communities and the national economy, the argument went. Jane Todd, for example, noted on several occasions that women had "particular aptitudes" that would prove valuable to overall economic growth. In a commercialized version of turn-of-the-century urban housekeeping, she pointed specifically to women's affinity for service jobs and enterprises that "make everyday living attractive and comfortable for all of us" [Whitener, 24]. In countless cases, women in planning committees insisted that what made women suitable for leadership or employment were those very qualities that set them apart from men. Even Eleanor Roosevelt noted that "women can help to make a lasting peace [because] women will try to find ways to cooperate where men will think only of dominating." This notion of equal citizenship through different attributes and contributions was also present in the ways in which the small business clinic programs positioned themselves both to women and the public at large. Hence women could understand their business ventures as both feminized and separate, yet equal in professionalism and status within the economy.

Women were also included in discussions about the centrality of free enterprise and small business in the postwar era, here again based on their female roles. Aside from Governor Dewey's particular outreach program, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and, more visibly, the National Association of Manufacturers, appealed to women's organizations as partners in assuring the future of the free enterprise system. NAM was especially vigilant in this regard, meeting with "women leaders and industrial managers" across the country in the mid to late 1940s as part of its "Home and Industry Program." In its efforts to assure an end to government production and regulation of business, NAM linked these economic concerns directly to women's roles. "Housewives are engaged in the largest industry in this country [housekeeping]," said one speaker at a 1945 meeting in Reading, Pennsylvania. Lecturers used the analogy

of home management not only to educate women on the world of business but also to urge their support in assuring the future of free enterprise. NAM appealed to women as investors, workers, and mothers, who would provide a legacy of opportunity to the next generation. As such, NAM sought to educate women on the positive outcomes of a profit system, and in pamphlets addressing women, used the example of a woman who owned a baking business to demonstrate how profitability not only enabled her business to expand but also had economic benefits for the community [NAM Papers].

Understood within the broader context of postwar reconversion, the history of the women's small business clinics and the enterprises they inspired demonstrates the centrality of small business to the postwar reconversion agenda, as well as the long unexplored legacy between women and small business ownership. Women were called to help rebuild the nation through small business enterprise just as they were called to the work force during the labor shortages of World War II, and their contributions to the growth of small business were a vital component of postwar prosperity. Nonetheless, women's ventures and the importance of small business generally remain absent from traditional histories of the era, which focus on the rise of the military-industrial complex, the emergence of corporate conglomeration and the organization man, and labor patterns or problems. Those studies that do include women highlight their role as workers, noting a decline in their labor force participation from 1946 to 1948, and the consistent rise in those statistics thereafter. This study, however, shows that if women did indeed leave the labor force at war's end, they did not necessarily leave the economy. Instead, many women began to engage in the less visible, often undocumented, realm of business ownership, and in fact, their efforts here may account for their brief decline in labor force participation. By the 1950s, when a redomestication ideology that celebrated the primacy of women's household roles became more fully entrenched, women nonetheless continued to regard private enterprise as a means to provide for their families economically while often also pursuing personal goals. In fact, it was the earlier links in the postwar era between small business and the home that enabled women in succeeding decades to regard it as a means to combine financial needs, personal ambitions, and familial obligations. Catalog magnate Lillian Vernon, whose company in 1996 reported annual sales of $238 million, started her business in 1951 at her kitchen table while pregnant with her first child [Vernon, 1996]. For Vernon, and others like her in the midst of a burgeoning consumer economy, business ownership had been a way to secure upward mobility for their families where a husband's job alone might not. Over time, however, these ventures quietly became much more. Women's business ownership, then, was not only a vital component of the rising consumer marketplace, but it helped ignite it both through the services and products they produced and the increased purchasing power they generated for women and their families. As the story of Lillian Vernon and others like her so clearly illustrates, once women found their way to business ownership, their ventures, like their drive to succeed, could not be contained within the home.

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