

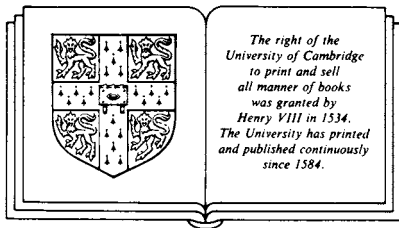
# Women clerks in Wilhelmine Germany

*Issues of class and gender*

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## *Introduction*

A visitor to Hamburg or any other large German commercial center at the turn of the century would have noticed a sight unfamiliar twenty years earlier. For each morning hundreds of neatly dressed young women appeared in the city center and entered offices, department stores, shops. They were “commercial assistants” – office and sales clerks – hired when the service sector of the economy expanded in the late nineteenth century. The “working girls” seem a visible sign of the new independence and assertiveness of women. But further investigation reveals that the women worked long hours in uncomfortable surroundings, that they were paid less than their male colleagues, that they had few opportunities for adequate job training or vocational education, and fewer opportunities for upward employment mobility. Although they demanded “equal pay for equal work,” the general public was convinced that they worked only for pin money and that their employment was not meant to be a career but only a way-station to marriage.

Perhaps this sounds familiar. The phrases, the conditions, the attitudes may still remind one of the present-day circumstances of female sales and office staff. To be sure, there are some differences. Work conditions have improved since 1900; hours are shorter. The German women at the turn of the century were mostly single, while today throughout the West, larger numbers of married women work. Then, women were a minority of clerks; today, they predominate. These are conditions we associate with slow progress. But in one respect there seems to be a reverse development. In contrast to the lack of interest in organization found today, professional associations of female clerks were strong and respected in Germany before World War I. Their leaders sought to improve women’s work and pay

conditions, to expand their educational opportunities, and to institute legislative reforms. At the same time, they worked to give women a "career consciousness," to foster in them an independent spirit and to politicize them; for, in addition to their function as professional groups, they had explicit feminist goals. Yet they failed. The reforms they sought did not eventuate: women did not gain employment equality, nor did they greatly increase their dedication to a career.

To explain why women in clerking were unable to establish professional equality with men despite their relative organizational strength requires an inquiry incorporating issues of both class and gender. We must examine women within the employment milieu of clerking, that is, within lower-level white-collar sales and office work. This demands an analysis of women's position as workers who faced working conditions and a labor-market situation different from men's and to whom many male clerks were hostile. Further, we must investigate the situation of women as a group of employees who differed from their male colleagues because of their particular role in the home. Both gender and class affected women's consciousness and activities. But at the same time, the interests of gender could run contrary to those of class, so that one major source of tension faced by leaders in clerks' associations with female members was the continual conflict between feminist goals and those of clerks in general.

This book contributes to discussions of the emergence of white-collar work and to the scholarly debate concerning the motivations for organization and the political attitudes of German clerks and other white-collar workers. In addition, it explores issues concerning women's work and labor-market situations, women's class positions, and their political mobilization. It has sometimes been argued that women are uninterested in their employment and that their class location should therefore be defined by their home situation. This can imply that women are incapable of organizing to represent their employment interests (which of course follows logically if women have been defined as a group having none). Yet Germany's women clerks were relatively well organized, and middle-class female clerks' associations expected that their efforts would raise women to equality with their male colleagues. The analysis of this study suggests that the problem lies not in female employment behavior but in the dual responsibilities of women in the public and private spheres. It is not that women's paid employment is not relevant to their class location and class consciousness, but that one must take account of gender as well.

The study begins by examining the situation of clerks before World War I, discussing the emergence of routinized low-level white-collar work, or clerking, as a particular occupation, and describing the work

environment and social profile of clerks. Women's participation in clerking occurred within the context of their great commitment to the domestic sphere, both to their families of birth and to expectations of future marriage. Chapter 2 therefore explains the home and family circumstances of women clerks.

For the historian looking back at clerks in 1900, the changing nature of the clerk's work situation is striking, as is the creation of a dual labor market. For as clerking developed, a segmented labor market developed as well, creating a primary labor market that offered responsibility, career mobility, material benefits, and status, while the secondary labor sector offered routine or menial work with no promotion opportunities, low pay, and limited status. Women were largely confined to the latter. These interacting processes of the proletarianization and feminization of clerking make class categorization difficult. Nevertheless, this study argues that by World War I, clerking had become largely a working-class occupation distinct from the evolving service class of bureaucrats, managers, and professionals who comprised the middle classes along with entrepreneurs and members of the "old middle estate" of peasants, shopkeepers, and master craftsmen.

That is not to say that clerks' own sense of location within an employment hierarchy and a social system should be ignored. As Chapter 3 indicates, clerks in the nineteenth century were preoccupied with figuring out social location, for they emerged as a new group that older categories failed to describe. More importantly, in their efforts to prevent deskilling, many leaders of clerks' organizations distinguished between blue-collar and white-collar work, according higher status and social position to the latter. Their agonized attempts to define themselves, and their divergent allegiances to older social groupings both indicate the complexity of the development of group consciousness in a period of transition.

As female clerks began to organize, they relied in part on male models and male perceptions. However, as the middle chapters of the study show, women in clerking owed much more to the bourgeois and socialist feminist movements arising in the Wilhelmine era than they did to male clerks. Women leaders in the middle-class women's movement offered female clerks leadership and allies. Socialists also offered a model, and indeed both movements provided theories of female employment and sets of feminist goals.

"Feminism" is a term requiring further elaboration. This book defines as feminist those persons who worked actively for full female equality with men in their society. Feminism must not be conflated with other social or political movements; a feminist need not insist that all adults in a society be granted suffrage, for instance, or that capitalism be overthrown. Feminists in Wilhelmine society need not

have been democrats, much less social democrats; they did need a commitment to end discrimination against women as women, and they had to do more than just object to discrimination in a particular area.

After tracing the attention paid by German feminists to the issue of female employment and recounting the bourgeois and socialist feminist theories of women's work, the book describes the early years of female clerks' associations when leaders worked in alliance with the bourgeois women's movement. Both bourgeois and socialist feminist theory stressed female equality in the public sphere – in civil and political society – while ignoring any possible transformation of the private sphere, of women's domestic and family lives. Socialist theory predicted that the private sphere would disappear as domestic tasks were mechanized and rationalized. Bourgeois feminist theory, on the other hand, accepted the notion that women had innate nurturing abilities that required the constant attention of mothers to the home. While socialists expected individual domestic life to disappear, therefore, bourgeois feminists felt that it would inevitably continue unchanged, while women structured their employment lives around this fact.

The book then examines the tensions created in clerks' organizations by the reluctance of bourgeois feminists to challenge the notion of women's "natural profession" as homemaker and by the inability of socialist feminists to perceive of the private sphere as a site of inequality. As a result, neither bourgeois nor socialist feminists recognized the interrelationship of women's home and work roles, behaviors, and attitudes. The socialist Central Alliance ignored the question, while the bourgeois all-female clerks' associations presented members with a contradictory message: women were to be assertive and career-minded, but nurturant and domesticated at the same time.

In addition to conflicts arising from women's dual roles in the public and private spheres, others resulted from the organizations' attempts to combine a politics of gender with one of class. It was here in particular that the model of the male organizations was brought to bear – and found wanting. The bourgeois all-female clerks' associations attempted to press for female equality at the same time that they excluded some women on the basis of class, for their chief strategy was based on occupational control, particularly over entry. Clerking was to remain a profession of the "middle estate" (*Mittelstand*), and only those women found within its boundaries deserved equality. The socialist Central Alliance, on the other hand, a union with female and male clerk members, insisted that class was of greater importance than sex, and failed sufficiently to address the needs of its female members or to provide female equality within the organization.



The concluding chapters detail two case studies that examine in depth the conflicts of class and gender. The campaigns for educational reform and for white-collar insurance testify to the narrow limits within which feminist professional organizations worked. The all-female clerks' associations joined with male clerks' groups and with business interests to press for reforms that actually benefited the men at the cost of their female allies. When one female association, the Confederation, attempted to press for a feminist reform, it became isolated and its ideas were ignored. The socialist Central Alliance remained marginal.

The existence of strong associations of women clerks testifies to the fact that women are not incapable of organizing to press for economic or political goals. But the difficulties that they encountered reinforce the conclusion of many historians that only by joining an analysis of gender to one of class can we adequately explain their experience.