



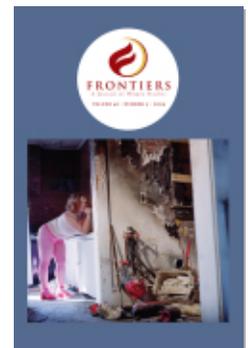
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Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Volume 40, Number 3, 2019, pp. 117-138
(Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



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Sewing Entrepreneurs and the Myth of the Spheres

How the “Work at Home Mom” Complicates the Public-Private Divide

JENNIFER ANN RUSSUM

The “working woman” has been an enigmatic figure in America since the nineteenth century. From the rise of the “separate spheres”¹ to the women’s “right to work” movement,² America has been a place where women’s labor, both in the home and outside it, has been questioned and critiqued. This cultural conversation shapes the possibilities for female identity, as different authorities—the voices of men *and* women from church, state, and academia—speak to how women may present themselves in public, as workers, as professionals, and most contentiously, as mothers. The struggle to classify and compensate women as laborers continues in modern America, with ongoing debates about equal pay, maternity leave, and flexible work hours playing out in the political and media landscapes.³ Critiques of childcare costs⁴ and the surge of women leaving the workplace to stay at home with their children⁵ only make the issue more complicated. This study looks at contemporary entrepreneurs and the ways sewing continues to play an important role in women’s professional lives, especially for middle-class women, who along with working-class women have historically used their sewing skills to earn personal income. The ability to sell sewing knowledge and products on the web adds a new angle to the already complex identity of the professional middle-class seamstress, a long-standing but often ignored figure in US history. In this study I focus specifically on mothers who start sewing businesses from their own homes to show how their use of digital tools to exhibit and sell their goods problematizes cultural pressure for mothers to align themselves along the binary of the “working mom” or “stay-at-home mom.” The binary has never truly existed for myriad women throughout history who have served as the main caretaker for their children while also garnering an income on the side, but digital platforms are helpful in dispelling the myth that women must choose between homemaker or professional by shedding light on how women pursue both these roles at the same time.

An ongoing critique of American capitalism is that not enough women head US companies⁶ or work as entrepreneurs.⁷ Studies show that women still face significant challenges in the workplace, even after decades of progress in the fight for women's rights. One study by Howell, Carter, and Schied found that women saw their workload increase when middle management was removed and did not feel they had more of a voice within their company, despite worker empowerment being a goal of "flattening out" the organization by removing mid-level liaisons.⁸ Additionally, women struggled to juggle their working identities with their non-professional roles of mother, wife, and caretaker. Even in the most "family friendly" companies, female employees received mixed messages from superiors regarding their lives outside of work. For example, "One manager constantly told workers, 'Do not work late' and 'Take care of your personal life.' But in the next breath, there was a very different message. 'Don't forget, these deadlines must be met.'"⁹ Many of the programs intended to promote gender equity in the workplace ironically cause women, and specifically mothers, to be stigmatized by their co-workers. For example, many studies show that women who take advantage of company policies such as flexible work hours or extended maternity leave are penalized, whether formally or informally, for doing so. These women are often disrespected or disregarded by co-workers because they do not work at the office on a traditional schedule,¹⁰ and studies show that women who partake in flexible schedule benefits eventually fall behind their peers in pay.¹¹ It is no wonder women are hesitant to keep their employment or pursue advancement when they face such explicit gender discrimination at work. Often the dissonance of juggling employment with the unpaid labor of the home becomes too much for women to bear and they revert to part-time work or staying at home full-time, especially after taking childcare costs into consideration.

While these rhetorics are important in illuminating the ongoing gender bias that hinders women in the business world, these cultural narratives ignore the large number of women who have become entrepreneurs in the handmade industry in recent years.¹² Female shop owners who make and sell clothing, baby items, and home décor items are often ignored as entrepreneurs because their products are deemed frivolous or feminine, even when their sales numbers rival those of companies in the male-dominated, traditional marketplace. Etsy is just one example of a vast site of commerce where female entrepreneurs are prevalent. Etsy hosts more than 1.9 million online storefronts and 87 percent of the shop owners are women.¹³ The growth of Etsy and individual online sewing companies over the past decade shows that women can be savvy in business in spite of (or even because of) the financial difficulties the US has faced in the early twenty-first century.

Instead of entering into the tension of the public American workplace, many women are evaluating their own skills and knowledge and turning to the internet as a space to make a profit and grow professionally. Mothers are willing to work from home, navigating back and forth between business and childrearing responsibilities, to make an income apart from the traditional workplace filled with its restraints and silent judgments on women who chose to work and raise children at the same time. These women often label themselves and communicate with each other online using hashtags such as #wahm (work at home mom) to signify their unique role in the hazy world where babies and business co-exist in the public/private space of the home. While one might argue that women sewing from home or from privately rented studios perpetuates the tendency to make women's sewing labor anonymous or, worse, invisible,¹⁴ I argue that as female entrepreneurs build their businesses using digital tools and interact with customers online, they make the home a public space and are able to bring more visibility to sewing labor than in past eras. The digital sewing shops and classes prevalent on the web today add to the rich history of women's sewing entrepreneurship. In this study, I seek to answer the following questions:

- What digital tools are female entrepreneurs using to launch and manage sewing businesses?
- How do contemporary sewing businesses add to the historic landscape of American women who have sewn for profit in the past?

I offer two examples from historical literature of American women who worked from home, sewing to bring in an income for their families, while also managing other parenting and homemaking responsibilities. One example is from the nineteenth century and one from the twentieth century, to show how the “work-from-home” mom existed long before the role earned a hashtag on Instagram. I then offer two examples of twenty-first-century women who have used their sewing skills and experiences as mothers to create products and grow large, thriving companies that sell sewn goods. These companies make millions annually and stimulate job growth as they increase sales, hire employees, and use their resources to empower other aspiring female entrepreneurs. I argue that modern-day female entrepreneurs use digital tools to provide a visual understanding of the difficulties women face as they work from home, sew for a profit, and build companies while simultaneously balancing all this with their personal responsibilities. Social media have helped make female entrepreneurs, and their labor, more visible. One positive outcome from social media use is that “work at home moms” receive more acknowledgment

for their professional endeavors than they have in the past. But more important, as these women post their experiences online, both the good and the bad, they paint a picture of what it means to be a working mother in America, and in doing so, they represent the women who have gone before them—those who never had an Instagram account or Facebook page to document their labor. Work at home mothers are able to portray their lived experiences on the internet, allowing their work in the so-called private sphere to bleed into the public. This is an act of boldness, as it exposes the positive and negative realities of a realm that has often been considered insignificant. Social media allow working mothers to illustrate, in tandem, their business challenges, their professional successes, and their labors in raising children. In the same day a female entrepreneur may post a picture to launch a new product and a photo of her child who has spilled cereal all over the kitchen. Throughout history, mothers have recorded their varied work in childrearing, homemaking, and sewing for profit, but since most of these records were kept in diaries, letters, or material items such as embroidery samplers and quilts, it was easy for the public to dismiss them as trivial archives of inconsequential domestic labor. As female seamstresses leverage the internet to publicize their products and scale their businesses, while simultaneously documenting their experiences as mothers, they lay claim to the lands of Google and Facebook, and they unveil the space of the home in the international and bustling public of the worldwide web.

THE PRICK OF PROFIT: SEWING AS PAID LABOR
THROUGHOUT AMERICAN HISTORY

Historically, sewing has been a point of intersection between the home and the marketplace. While women have always sewed as a household chore, sewing has also been a skill sold for profit among the middle and lower classes. Sometimes wealthy women would hire out their sewing tasks, offering employment to women in the social stratum beneath them. Even as decorative needlework became the dominant form of sewing for many middle-class women and was often considered a leisure activity, women found a way to make their fancywork an economic endeavor by selling their creations at charity fairs and women's exchanges and creating patterns and writing instruction manuals to sell to their peers.¹⁵ Other women were employed in schools to teach young girls the skill of sewing, and some women worked as private fancywork tutors, earning “between ten and twenty dollars a week, an income that exceeded the earning possibilities of most work available to women” at the time.¹⁶ Although the middle class idealized the rigid lines between male life in the pub-

lic sphere and female life in the home, this separation was often threatened by adverse circumstances, such as illness or bankruptcies, which drove women to the marketplace to sell their sewing skills or sewn products to provide financially for their families. The market economy and the domestic economy were never truly separate.

One example of the spheres colliding can be seen in the life and writings of Sarah Sheldon, a farmer's wife living in Vermont in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Although the Sheldons were not poor, they had four sons to raise in an era when crop prices fluctuated often and cash was often scarce. To alleviate family financial concerns, Sarah turned to her skill of weaving to make a profit. She kept a "dye book" that chronicled her knitting and weaving, as she would sell house linens and wool stockings to her neighbors in addition to the fabrics she created for her own household. She even writes of staying up all night to finish spools of linen for commissioned projects. Sarah, like many other women of her time, would often complete her weaving, sewing, and knitting, and then divide the final products, keeping some for her own family and selling the rest within the local community, demonstrating that the production of the home was central to the functioning of the marketplace. Yet sewing was not a completely individualistic endeavor for Sarah. She relied on her neighbors, including other women, to buy her goods, and she also credits her mother for teaching her the sewing skills that helped her feel settled and successful after moving to a new town with her husband. Women supporting and training other women has always been an important aspect of female entrepreneurship.

Even as machines took over much of the sewing production in the late nineteenth century, especially within the city, rural women continued to foster craft industries to provide work opportunities for each other. Middle-class ladies would organize embroidery sales to alleviate the economic hardship of women whose husbands' wages could not fully support their families.¹⁸ Women in the Appalachian region of the United States would often work from home by sewing, quilting, or knitting, continuing to radicalize the notion of the home by turning "feminine" and "domestic" tasks into waged labor.¹⁹ Even during the peak of the industrial revolution, sewing labor never fully left urban homes despite factories multiplying within most large cities. Many women continued to sew, piece together garments, and make lace from their own houses for extra money, even if they had full-time employment outside the home as well.

For a while, the spread of the sewing machine caused tension as people debated the spaces in which sewing should take place. As clothing became a mass-produced commodity, tailors would contract out work for the low-

est price. Often garment production was executed in factories filled with machines and workers, but sometimes women could make the lowest bid on these contract jobs and piece together garments in their own homes. Eventually, though, there was a push to move all sewing to factories with central supervision, especially because some feared tenement diseases would spread through women handling garments in sub-par housing. As factories became the designated space for sewing labor, some women benefited by forming successful unions to protect their rights as workers. However, many women suffered from losing the flexibility to work from home while raising young children, becoming subject to male supervisors who might unjustly deduct their wages or harass them in the workplace.²⁰ The concerns women face in their workplaces today are eerily reminiscent of the problems women met in factories a hundred years ago.

At the turn of the century the opportunities of industrialized America were rumored widely abroad and immigrants continued to flood the country in hopes of a better life. While many immigrant women worked in factories, others worked from home to supplement the family income. Many Asian immigrants were quite successful in the new country, particularly men who worked as merchants.²¹ However, even these men relied on their wives' sewing to bring in supplementary money. Although the husbands were able to provide for their families' basic needs, it was the women who took in paid sewing and embroidery jobs and actually built capital for the family. Immigrant women from all nationalities continued to sew throughout and after both world wars and were successful at making money for their families; however, this income was at a personal cost. One Chinese American woman describes working from home with her small children in her care:

I can still recall the times when I had one foot on the pedal and another one on an improvised rocker, rocking my son to sleep while the other was tied to my back. Many times I would accidentally sew my finger instead of the fabric because one child screamed or because I was falling asleep on the job.²²

There are always hardships when the home becomes a space for wage labor, and women throughout history have had to negotiate their household roles with their employment, sometimes for significant financial gain and sometimes at the cost of their physical and emotional health.

It was not until after the world wars that commercial sewing, especially garment production, was almost completely removed from the home. By this point, sewn goods were easily mass produced in factories, and the values of America were changing with the rise of feminism and more women attending

college and finding jobs outside the home. Of course, women have never entirely ceased home sewing as labor, whether by fulfilling mending and alterations jobs or making custom clothing; but in postwar America work-from-home seamstresses were rare. However, changing social values produced a flourishing craft industry where handmade items were seen as a means to counter a growing commercial culture.²³ As an arts and crafts industry emerged in the US, women had yet another reason to sew from home and their hobbies often blossomed into businesses. Many of the handmade items of the late twentieth century were sold in craft fairs where women would set up booths and sell their goods during two- or three-day market events. The arts and crafts fairs that gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s were not completely original but rather an echo of Victorian fancy fairs and charity bazaars where women sold décor and accessories made by hand. However, craft fairs in the twentieth century became exceptionally large, with the most popular fairs in the US and Canada boasting 60,000–100,000 visitors in a single weekend. Often these events were strategically held in the late fall and late spring to encourage gift buying for Christmas and Mother's Day. It turns out that the textile craft industry was "bolstered, rather than usurped, by advances in technology."²⁴ Although sewing machines led to the gradual decrease of certain types of home sewing, these same machines, ironically, allowed amateur crafters the means and time to produce batches of handmade items to sell in craft markets.

The craft industry was mushrooming at the end of the twentieth century, yet there were certain shortcomings to the craft fair model that prevented seamstresses from building sustainable companies. Even though the traffic at many craft fairs was significant, these events were only held sporadically and at various geographic locations. A woman might travel many hours to sell at one of these events, and the labor and time needed to set up and tend a booth were intense and sometimes expensive, usually requiring one's entire weekend with days of toil before and after the event. Especially for mothers with small children at home, this type of workload and travel time were not ideal, but if one did not participate in fairs frequently, it was hard to sustain an income.

Some women sold their crafts out of private studios, often in addition to selling at craft fairs, but the overhead of maintaining a retail space was untenable for most independent artisans. Sometimes groups of women would wisely join together to rent spaces to make and sell their crafts. They would run these stores as "craft collectives" or "co-ops" that were staffed and stocked by women. However, there were numerous complications with this model:

The problem was that a group of women had to raise the capital to rent or purchase a location, pay the overhead on the property, and staff the

store. Most of the workers in these collectives were volunteers who had to work in the shop and therefore donated their time to help the business succeed, but this often inhibited their pursuit of other money-making enterprises. This was, of course, a difficult means of survival for the majority of women involved, and these businesses were often unsustainable due to the sheer amount of profit needed to pay bills and eke out a profit.²⁵

Although the limitations of maintaining a physical retail space apply to any demographic, it is reasonable to assume that the female artisans of the 1960s–1980s were more limited in their business background, negotiating skills, and ability to raise capital than their male counterparts, even as they optimistically rode upon the second wave of feminism in seeking to become entrepreneurs.

As the century turned yet again, the seeds of the internet age fell on soil that was fertile for female entrepreneurship. The American recession of 2008 aided the growth of online craft businesses, because women who could not find work, or desired to supplement their family's income after one partner suffered a job loss, turned to their hobbies and artistry skills as a means to an income. Suddenly it was possible to sell one's handmade items to a broad audience online without the overhead of a physical store space. As women successfully grew handmade businesses online, the appeal of entrepreneurship with its flexibility and independence enticed other women to leave their careers to pursue online businesses as well.

THE SOLLY WRAP AND SHARK TANK

There are countless small-scale cases of entrepreneurship, where women run sewing companies entirely on their own or with a modest team of women (and sometimes men) either locally or virtually. The collective existence of these companies is an important part of American industry and shows the breadth of female entrepreneurship. However, not all of these companies remain small. Since entrepreneurship is vital to job growth in America, I share here two stories of seamstresses who humbly started one-woman operations that have since evolved into large flourishing businesses, and they have mainly used online tools and platforms to achieve this growth.

Elle Rowley's company, Solly Baby, sells luxury soft wrap baby carriers, a product that has become wildly popular in just eight years since the company began. Elle explains her company's origins:

Solly Baby was born in 2011 in the sewing nook of a little house in Salt Lake City right after I had my second child, Solomon (hence the name

Solly Baby). I had always been a babywearing advocate but I was frustrated with other carriers that I'd used so, after buying my first serger on Craigslist, I went to work while my babies slept. I designed and experimented with fabrics, turned my house upside down and into a factory with tape lining the living room floor for cutting guides.²⁶

Elle's company grew rapidly, so she no longer works from her home. Her family has since relocated to San Diego, and Solly Baby works with small local manufacturers so that Elle can oversee production closely. She values the ethical production of her products, and her company uses American factories, fabric mills, dye houses, and printers. Elle also works with her husband and a team of employees on other aspects of the company such as marketing, customer service, and shipping. She has hired a large team of employees, and she gives them credit for helping her company thrive. As she says on the company "about" page, "With the help of many other people, we were able to create a truly beautiful, functional, and safe product that I am proud to share with caregivers."

Not only is Elle a mom of four who understands the needs of other moms, but she also maintains close ties with her customer base through the use of social media. Elle says, "We are able to offer a customized, superior product because of how closely linked we are with this process and our customers." The Solly Baby blog features posts relevant to motherhood and often features Solly customers in series such as "At Home With," which shows how real moms use the Solly Baby Wrap in daily life as they pursue mothering and their career at the same time. Solly Baby also uses its customers in company photo shoots and throughout its Instagram feed. Although mothers are usually featured, Solly Baby makes a point of encouraging dads and other caregivers to use babywear and occasionally shows fathers sporting the wrap.

Although Elle's Instagram and Twitter feeds are used mainly to market her product, she also shares personal photos of her family and likes to highlight when her professional and personal life collide. On Elle's thirtieth birthday she shared a picture of herself peeking over a pile of more than a hundred Solly Baby Wrap boxes. In the caption she shares how her business remains a family affair, even though her company has grown quite large:

Okay, so I kind of imagined on my 30th birthday I'd have my picture taken looking super hot jumping out of a giant birthday cake, but turns out a pile of Solly boxes is just as good! Ha! We had a shipping issue yesterday that made it so our fulfillment center wouldn't be able to ship a few truckloads of stripe backorders that are promised to go out today. All but one employee was out of our office today, so Jared and I came

in to do it. Then we got here and our office was decorated by our employee's wife and my sister-in-law and her little kids all came to help too. And then I started looking at your names on the boxes and felt so grateful that I couldn't be even a little bit bummed. Best birthday ever. #notjoking²⁷

Elle thoughtfully blends her personal and professional life online and has gained over 310,000 followers on the Solly Baby Instagram account as a result.

As live video has become a central component of social media use, Solly Baby has adapted its practices accordingly. The Solly Baby homepage now features a calendar that includes planned live videos for customers. For example, in April 2019 the calendar listed a scheduled Instagram live video with the Solly babywearing educator on a Wednesday and another Instagram live with Elle the following day on the topic of "Raising Resilient Kids." In fact, Elle hosts an Instagram live video session nearly every Thursday on topics such as "Changing Your Story" or "Vulnerable Motherhood." The Solly Baby team continues to modify their social media methods to educate, inspire, and connect with their customer base.

Another example of a sewing entrepreneur whose company has grown exponentially in just a few years is Susan Petersen and her business, Freshly Picked, which sells genuine leather baby moccasins. Susan's success has led her to be an icon of sorts for other female entrepreneurs, and her story is one where sewing, business savvy, and grit collide. Similar to Elle and her baby wrap, Susan's business started when she became frustrated trying to find a baby shoe that would stay on her son's feet. Feeling creative one day, she picked up a bag of scrap leather at a yard sale and began experimenting with shoe designs. The Freshly Picked "Our Story" page explains: "Working at her kitchen table, on a shoestring budget, Susan persisted through several attempts until she had created a pair of moccasins that not only looked adorable on Gus' chubby little feet, but stayed on his feet as well."²⁸ Once she perfected the product, Susan was interested in starting a business, but she and her husband were poor at the time and she had no capital to buy the high-quality leather needed to make the shoes. Susan convinced her brother, who owns a window installation company, to let her keep the old windows he removed on the job. Susan "spent a whole summer banging the glass out of the windows because they were encased in aluminum frames. At the end of the summer, she took the aluminum window frames to the scrap yard and recycled them to get money. She made \$200 dollars and with that literal sweat equity, she started her business."²⁹ Her business was not an instant success, though. She priced her first moccasins too low at a \$20 price point and struggled to make

a profit in the early years, as she did not fully understand the high cost of the leather or the value of her time.³⁰ Now her shoes sell for \$49–60 a pair, and she has expanded her line to include leather sneakers, sandals, diaper bags, and totes for moms. Freshly Picked has also started a subscription service for regular customers to receive steep discounts and first-access to new products; the program boasted over 23,000 members on its one-year anniversary in March 2019.

Freshly Picked sales have grown from \$120,000 to over \$6 million thanks to great media exposure, celebrity endorsements, and Susan's strategic use of social media. Susan appeared on the ABC show *Shark Tank* in January 2014 and struck a business deal with investor Daymond John. After the show the contract was renegotiated and eventually fell apart, which Susan says worked out in her favor because she got all the exposure "and at the same time I didn't have to give up any piece of my company."³¹ Before her *Shark Tank* appearance, Susan had the opportunity to provide shoes for a *Parenting Magazine* cover shoot. When the cover model, Kourtney Kardashian, saw the moccasins on the set, she went home and bought a pair for her son. This began a long list of celebrity moms who personally endorse and support the Freshly Picked brand.

But the most influential factor in Susan's success was her early adoption of online tools and her strategic use of social media. When Susan saw her friends selling in the new Etsy marketplace back in 2006, she became intrigued. She quickly taught herself to sew and opened up a shop selling baby blankets. Although the shop was never a huge success, the skills she learned in selling online were invaluable when she switched to selling moccasins a few years later. Susan kept a blog in addition to her Etsy shop and she discovered that if she wrote tutorials about how to make the products she was selling, traffic in her shop increased. Now she uses Instagram to drive her 851,000 followers to the Freshly Picked website. Her feed is mostly marketing photos of cute kids wearing her moccasins (often the children of actual customers), but she also adds personal pictures from time to time, such as a recent photo of her folded laundry. In the caption, she admitted she cannot keep up on her family's laundry and praised a new local service she has started using to wash her children's clothes. Susan knows the power of social media in growing a business and now offers classes to other aspiring entrepreneurs. In a recent Instagram post, she advertised an in-person Instagram marketing class she would be offering. In the caption, she writes: "I started my business right here on Instagram, in many ways you can say I am the company that Instagram built. In fact, one of the most asked questions I get is, how? So my team and I came up with the answer to how, how to market your small business on Ins-

tagram.”³² Susan knows that social media were vital to growing her company, and she wants other entrepreneurs to harness Instagram’s power for building their businesses.

Susan does not shy away from her titles of “entrepreneur” and “CEO.” Instead, she spends her time mentoring other female entrepreneurs. In 2015 she began hosting a weekly discussion on the Freshly Picked blog that she called the “Entrepreneurial Empowerment Conversation.” Eventually the conversation moved from her blog to Twitter and Instagram, and she used the hashtag #eemovement so that other entrepreneurs could follow the dialogue online. For about two years she wrote a post every Tuesday to share an inspiring quote and some thoughts on entrepreneurship. For example, in one post she shared a quote from the book *The E-Myth* by Michael E. Gerber, which she was reading with her staff at the time. She wrote, “If your business depends on you, you don’t have a business—you have a job. The E-myth is a must read for any entrepreneur, and I’ll be talking about my favorite parts of the book for the rest of the month.” In another post, she wrote:

Sometimes when I am feeling overwhelmed, when I have a lot of big decisions to make or if I have something really hard to do, I will fall into a habit of working in my business instead of on it. I will allow myself to get caught up in tasks that at the end of the day, don’t get me any closer to my end goal(s) and I think this trap is typical for a lot of entrepreneurs. You cannot be the technician and the entrepreneur in your business. They have competing goals and priorities. Be the entrepreneur!

Other female entrepreneurs engaged with the hashtag online and shared their responses to Susan’s weekly prompts on their own feeds. For example, jewelry designer Megan Reynolds followed along with the #eemovement conversation each week. Here is a caption she shared on Instagram in response to Susan’s weekly post:

Reposting from @freshlypicked: It’s time for the #eemovement prompt for today. Susan asks what your biggest business mistake has been? For me, it’s been not planning out things enough. I’m great at dreaming and making goals, but I struggle with planning out the quarter, year, etc. This can get me and my bank account in trouble, but I’m really working on it this year! What’s been your biggest mistake and how have you learned from it?³³

Even though the #eemovement conversation has ended, Susan continues to use social media to encourage dialogue between female entrepreneurs, often

telling women to “get after it” and “start today” rather than waiting for the elusive perfect moment to start a business.

Susan also provides other resources for aspiring entrepreneurs. In the spring of 2015 she opened a “women only workspace” at the Freshly Picked Headquarters in Utah. She advertised the collaborative working space for females in an Instagram post:

Here at FPHQ, we will be opening 16 spots at our brand spanking new Women Only Open Workspace. What does this mean? First of all, we're not hiring, this is for you and your business so . . . Do you need to take your business to the next level? Do you need a spot to work outside your home on your business but can't commit to an office space? Do you thrive in a collaborative work environment? Then this is for you!

As someone who started her business from home with young children in tow, Susan knows the pains of trying to grow a company from within one's own household. Although there are many benefits to the flexibility of working from home, many female entrepreneurs need a space away from the home as their business expands. By offering spots in a collaborative workspace for a low cost, Susan is allowing other women to grow their companies in a feasible and affordable way.

Although Solly Baby and Freshly Picked sell distinctly different products, the companies share very similar roots. Both CEOs launched their businesses when they saw a need in the baby market that was not being met. Elle knew the benefits of babywearing but struggled to find a carrier that was comfortable and safe for her and her baby.³⁴ Susan wanted her baby to wear shoes, no doubt a necessity during Utah's cold winters, but could not find a pair of soft shoes that stayed on her infant's feet. Female entrepreneurship should not be limited to the baby product industry, but there are countless products for moms and babies that lack safety, comfort, or aesthetic appeal and need to be redesigned.³⁵ The Solly Baby Wrap and Freshly Picked moccasins are two examples of functional products that were improved by the knowledge and creativity of the moms who use them. The range of products and services that could benefit from the knowledge and invention of women, and specifically mothers, is nearly endless.

WORKING MOMS ONLINE

Early in American history domestic and professional work blended together easily. In agrarian cultures the same animals and crops that fed the family were also sold for profit. Wives and children at home were contributors to

the family's financial well-being with their participation in cooking, mending, milking, and harvesting. But since the industrial revolution, when money-making endeavors were transplanted to factories with efficient machinery and to corporations with desks and break rooms and hierarchies of oversight, the home has been mostly ignored as a place of production or profit. If anything, children are expensive and mothers who choose to stay home with them are forsaking personal financial gain. Mothers often blush as they admit in public spheres to being a "stay-at-home mom." Perhaps they are embarrassed by the privilege of such a role, but more often they state it as a confession—as if the role of mother requires no labor or fails to contribute to society in an economically meaningful way. But women engaged in entrepreneurship at home begin to complicate careful divisions between the hidden labor of the home and the visible labor of the marketplace.

Female entrepreneurs in the handmade industry subvert cultural constructions of female identity. First, if monetary profit is one way (though not the only way) to measure the value of material items that have been sewn, woven, beaded, or crafted, many of the handmade companies launched in the digital age prove their worth, literally, by garnering significant gross sales. Further, many female entrepreneurs choose to (or even strive to) work at home, regardless of whether or not they are raising children. Being able to work from home, without the time and space constraints of the traditional workplace, has become a symbol of freedom for both men and women in the twenty-first century. The number of people working remotely in the US increased by 115 percent between 2005 and 2017,³⁶ and entrepreneurs of both sexes can be seen online touting messages about the freedom of working "in your pajamas" or making a profit from the "comfort of your couch." Female entrepreneurs often coach other women who are trying to build enough momentum and profit with a side business to transition out of a traditional job. After quitting her day job to pursue her handmade business full-time, work at home seamstress Maggie Whitley ran an ongoing series called "How I Quit My Day Job," featuring guest stories about women who quit their jobs to launch or grow online businesses.³⁷ If working from home has become a symbol of status, women may be ahead of men in making this transition out of the public workplace and back into the home.

Women who are mothers working from home add further complexity to the ways female labor is portrayed online. Often a female entrepreneur's validity increases once she has a baby. Photos of her professional products *and* photos of her child garner more likes, more comments, more praise, and more questions from her audience—all helpful ingredients to increase public exposure in a world of algorithms and fierce business competition

online. The blending of personal and professional life inspires followers and customers. Not only does the ability to sustain a business and raise a child earn the praise of other mothers who understand the demands of those roles, but it also inspires women who have not yet had children as they envision a future season of life which they hope will include motherhood and a career. Portrayals of working motherhood can illuminate the varied labors of the home to men as well, as daily images on Instagram and Facebook capturing children playing, meal preparation, messes, products, and sales campaigns silently answer the subliminal question, “What do moms do all day?” Male partners may arrive home from the workplace already knowing the answer to “How was your day?” because the mother posted pictures and captions online to depict the multifaceted labor that took place at home while he was gone. In many successful female-founded handmade businesses, it is not uncommon for the husband eventually to quit his full-time job to join his wife’s business endeavors and enter into the work at home lifestyle where boundaries between professional and personal tasks are blurred.

The ability to jump from “private” to “public” and even merge the two spheres with online presence, a home office, and substantial income threatens the long-standing divisions between the work of motherhood and work with economic significance. The blending of these mothers’ personal and professional experiences is what makes them so inspiring. When Susan Petersen celebrated the eight-year anniversary of Freshly Picked, she posted a photo with the caption: “Eight years ago I was hustling to make moccs at my kitchen table and tonight, I celebrated the year with a team I love and surrounded by women I admire. I tell you all of this in hopes that tmrw [sic] you wake up and chase after your dreams. If this girl with a high school education and a broken sewing machine can build a company, you can do anything you want to, get after it sis!” The photo was liked over two thousand times, and many followers responded with comments on how inspired they were by Susan’s rags-to-riches, work-from-home success story.

Interestingly, it is not just the work of motherhood and the work of sewing that are blended through online representations but also the work of crafting an online identity. Stacey Pigg’s study “Coordinating Constant Invention: Social Media’s Role in Distributed Work” examines how a male writer views his work in blogging about fatherhood. The subject of the study, Dave, did not make his main income from blogging, but still considered it an important part of his “work,” since “social media reading and writing created access to a range of social inventive resources that he needed to understand participatory norms of the community for which he wrote.” For work-at-home mothers, time spent interacting online stems from a “desire for both interpersonal

connection and future professional projects.”³⁸ The internet is the space where business sales, connections, and collaborations occur but is also a space for relationship building. While online interactions increase sales numbers, they may also produce friendships or a sense of camaraderie among women who would otherwise feel isolated by working from their own homes. Social media use cannot be classified neatly—it is both personal and professional—and women who carefully blend their experiences of motherhood with their professional pursuits often find an eager audience for their digital content. In December 2018 Elle Rowley posted a picture holding a letter board with the word “joy” on it. Part of her caption read: “I think joy is available to us morning and night, happy baby or crying baby, money or no money, 300 pounds or 100 pounds. I think it’s actually standing right next to us, available to us at any time.” She then invited readers to join her for an Instagram Live to discuss how she “scheduled in lots of joy this holiday season.” If there is power to be found in bridging the spheres, jumping back and forth between parenting and professional work, merging family life with business, or crafting a holistic online identity that displays one’s personal and professional experiences, it might be argued that working mothers are the most advanced in these digital skills.

CONCLUSION

Seamstresses are launching online companies to sell their sewn goods, market their products, and interact with customers using digital tools. Women throughout history have sewn for a profit, and in this final section I want to consider how online sewing businesses extend and add to the history of women’s sewing entrepreneurship.

Female entrepreneurs continue to collaborate with and employ other women. Since America’s earliest days, women have joined together to complete their sewing labor. Like Sarah Sheldon, the farmer’s wife who worked with neighboring women to complete large weaving and sewing jobs, women seamstresses continue to collaborate with each other today.³⁹ Since Solly Baby’s inception, founder Elle has collaborated with eight different female painters and artists to design limited edition wraps featuring the fabric designs of other women. Furthermore, the women who run these companies have chosen to employ other women, many on a part-time or flexible basis, as their companies require more laborers. On International Women’s Day in 2019 the Freshly Picked Instagram feed featured a photo filled with the faces of many female employees with a caption that read, “Here’s a few of us representing the 51 women who work at #freshlypicked—proud to work with so many strong, smart, inspiring, and capable women.” These flourishing companies provide

accommodating working conditions for women seeking to bring in extra income with their sewing skills.

Women are able to reach a broader customer base through digital channels. Whereas women traditionally have sold most of their sewn items locally, today's online business owners can easily sell to customers across the country and often worldwide. Even for the crafters of the late twentieth century who could travel more extensively than women in previous eras to sell their goods at craft fairs, such trips were timely and costly, and the base of customers even at widely attended fairs was still somewhat limited. Now women can reach an international audience of consumers when marketing products online through the Etsy marketplace or even through their own social media accounts. Of course, online growth does not happen without effort, but as Susan Petersen of Freshly Picked attests, with a great deal of perseverance and strategy it *is* possible to build a company through social media platforms. Petersen actively shares her expertise on reaching a broad audience with other hopeful entrepreneurs in the form of online and in-person classes and how-to blog posts.

Women can start companies with lower overhead and less financial risk. Today's technologies allow women to launch businesses at very low costs compared to women who used to have to rent, buy, or share a physical storefront to sell their goods. The nominal fees for Etsy or a self-hosted website allow women to ease into business without a significant financial investment, other than the cost of physical materials to make products. Often women never have to pay for advertising, but instead share their products on social media or ask friends to highlight or link to their company on various online platforms. The downside to this is that many companies fail to launch successfully, because the owners lack the time, attention, or knowledge needed to help their business thrive. This was the case for Susan's original baby blanket company. Sometimes this failure is helpful though, because entrepreneurs will learn technological and business skills that help them open another company in the future, or they create a new product based on a void they discover in the rather saturated handmade marketplace.

Women continue to use the home as a workspace. Perhaps now more than ever before, the home is visibly recognized as a place of work due to the visual descriptions shared on social media. Instagram, for example, bursts with images of women working from home, and those who run sewing companies often maintain lively social media feeds of bright fabrics strewn about the living room or a new garment being sewn at the dining room table. Hashtags such as #femaleentrepreneur and #wahm, or sewing-specific labels such as #lovetosew, #sewingblogger, or #whereisew, help to organize these photos and al-

low women with similar backgrounds and interests to find one another online. Working- and middle-class women have always worked from home, not just by completing household chores that were often physically taxing and time-consuming but also by completing waged labor. One of the most available forms of work for women seeking extra income was to take in sewing tasks, such as mending for other families. Historically, however, these forms of labor taking place at home often remained hidden, sometimes because middle-class families did not want to share the financial necessity of such work, but primarily to maintain the ideal that the home was a private realm and that women were, above all, nurturers taking care of baking and babies, not entrepreneurs launching businesses. Pictures from the early twentieth century of an immigrant woman sewing with a baby strapped to her back are few. Now, the digital showcasing of women working at home on their sewing labor vividly depicts that the divide between home and market never truly existed.

Gender norms are sometimes reinforced online. While many women are making significant impact and income through their online businesses, sometimes “gendered norms are reproduced and solidified” in digital spaces.⁴⁰ Female entrepreneurs, especially those who are moms, have expressed frustration at being belittled or dismissed because of digital titles such as “mompreneur,” “lady boss,” or “mommyblogger.” Sometimes women enthusiastically adopt these titles, since they exhibit the many facets of their female identity, only to find that the general public deems a “mompreneur” as a lesser kind of entrepreneur. In a recent interview, Susan of Freshly Picked answered the question, “As a successful business owner and a mommy, how do you find a healthy and productive balance?” Susan answered the question and then added, “I also think it’s funny that working women get asked this question, while working men don’t.”⁴¹ Instead of people appreciating the varied achievements of business-savvy mothers, there seems to be a collective questioning about the validity of these working moms. If these women cannot precisely explain how they manage their work and their motherhood responsibilities, it might prove they are invalid in one domain or the other. Online labels and hashtags give women ways to classify the complex roles they fill, but they can also be subverted into judgments that cast doubt on a woman’s ability to be a good mom and bona fide business woman.

Working logistics are still troublesome for women. Although women’s sewing labor may be more visible than ever before, the photos of women working posted on Facebook and Instagram reveal that the logistics of being a female entrepreneur are still problematic at times. Even women who run successful sewing companies full-time still face gender-based challenges present in the business world. For all the pretty pictures posted of women sewing at home, hiring more employees, or opening up shared workspaces in their commu-

nities, the handmade industry is not immune to the problems women face in other trades. Many women work “overtime” for months or years, trying to launch their businesses, often juggling two careers at once. For entrepreneurs who are also mothers, finding affordable childcare or balancing business and one’s personal roles are still difficult. Susan, of Freshly Picked, opened a shared working space for women at her headquarters because she knows handmade entrepreneurs are not immune to the struggles that plague working women. From childcare costs to battling socially imposed ideals about how one should enact the roles of wife, mother, or business owner, even women who have their “dream job” still face a biased world where women confront many obstacles when running their own company.

Despite lingering difficulties for working women, there is so much potential for female entrepreneurship in today’s digital world. Solly Baby and Freshly Picked are two companies that show what is possible for women’s entrepreneurship, especially in industries that combine handmade products with online markets. With sales in the millions, growing staff numbers, and the intentional sourcing of American products and factories to make their goods, Elle and Susan exemplify the spirit of female entrepreneurship also seen in the smaller handmade shops on Etsy and in the sewing blogosphere. The owners of Freshly Picked and Solly Baby care deeply about other female entrepreneurs, ethical production, and providing flexible, positive working experiences for their employees. For example, Susan gives company-wide vacations to all employees when they meet business milestones.⁴² Furthermore, even as their companies grow, these female CEOs remain closely tied to the production of their products and to their customers through the use of social media. The handmade community holds to the unwavering value of putting human touch on each product, and Elle and Susan have not forgotten this, even years after their businesses outgrew their own homes. From Elle hand packing orders on her birthday to Susan continuing to write frequently on the Freshly Picked company blog, these women know they must remain closely tied to the fabric and the leather, to the posts and the pictures, and to the wide online audience who purchase their products and support their growing companies. Elle and Susan inspire modern-day entrepreneurs and also represent the American women who have gone before them, by showing that the home and the marketplace have never been divided. The roles of wife, mother, and entrepreneur overlap and intersect like the lines of a sewing pattern taped onto the living room floor.

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