

Women and the management of family wealth

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Nineteenth-century Geneva wealth management served a clientele that included women, even though their legal capacity remained limited. Under the civil law in force in Geneva, largely modelled on the French Code civil, a married woman was placed under the authority of her husband for the administration of much of her property.¹ Widows and unmarried women, by contrast, enjoyed greater autonomy, and several of them managed substantial fortunes.

Geneva's bankers knew this clientele well. The widows of merchants or rentiers often entrusted their assets to trusted bankers, sometimes relatives, who advised them on their investments and on the transfer of their property to their children. Dowries, marriage contracts and successions were handled with particular care, since they determined how fortunes were distributed among the families.

The Swiss Civil Code, which came into force at the beginning of the twentieth century, unified the country's private law and gradually altered the position of women, even though full legal equality between spouses would not be achieved until the end of the twentieth century.² Contemporary wealth management pays growing attention to female clients, who hold a substantial and rising share of private wealth. The Geneva houses, which have served families for generations, have long experience of this dimension of succession.

1 Notes

1. Jean-Philippe Dunand, "Le géant et les nains. Le Code Napoléon comme modèle des codes civils des cantons suisses romands", forum historiae iuris, 2005 (forhistiur.net): "In the end, the French Code civil remained applicable in Geneva until the entry into force of the Swiss Civil Code in 1912"; Federal Commission for Women's Issues, Femmes

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Pouvoir Histoire, fact sheet 3.5 “Les femmes dans le droit civil” (ekf.admin.ch): in the nineteenth century, a married woman is placed under the guardianship of her husband and may manage neither her property nor her income; under the Swiss Civil Code of 1912, the husband is “head of the conjugal union” and the wife’s contributions remain subject to his power of decision (statutory regime of union of property); new matrimonial law in force on 1 January 1988; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Droit matrimonial”: compulsory civil marriage in Geneva from 1821, federal unification by the Act of 24 December 1874.



2. Swiss Civil Code of 10 December 1907, in force since 1 January 1912 (“Code civil suisse”, fr.wikipedia.org, accessed September 2026). ↩

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