

Women in the economy of Reformed Geneva

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Women held an important place in the Genevan economy of the sixteenth century, even though their legal capacity was limited. They kept shops, took part in artisanal work, notably in textiles, managed the household's property and, when widowed, sometimes ran workshops or businesses.¹ They also engaged in small-scale lending, advancing modest sums to neighbours or relatives.

The archives show that women were particularly exposed to the repression of usury. The 2025 study notes that they were punished more severely, as were gamblers.² This severity may be explained by several factors, which further research will need to clarify: the visibility of the small-scale credit practised by women in the domestic economy, the prejudices of the time about the role of women in money matters, and the lesser ability of women to defend themselves before the authorities.

The Reformation also altered the condition of women in certain respects. The marriage of pastors, the value placed on family life and the importance attached to the religious education of all gave women a new role in the transmission of faith and instruction. Schools open to girls enabled them to learn to read. These developments remained limited, but they prepared the way for a broader participation of women in economic and intellectual life in the following centuries.

In the contemporary financial centre, the question of women's place arises in different terms: representation in governing bodies, equal pay, access to careers in banking and commodity trading, and services adapted to an increasingly important female clientele. Swiss law has introduced guideline values for gender representation on the boards of directors and executive boards of large listed companies.³ History reminds us that women have always participated in the economy of the financial centre, often under conditions that the law and the mentalities of the time made unfavourable.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Travail féminin” (Anne-Lise Head-König): “Paid or waged female labour [...] is the norm from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, except for women of the upper classes”; wives took part in the economic activity of their husbands, whether peasant, artisan, merchant or labourer, within the framework of the family economy, whereas the urban guilds, organised from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries onwards, tended to exclude women; single women worked as day labourers, in domestic service, in retail trade and in production activities in several sectors; the author stresses that this work was long underestimated by historians because of its invisibility in the records, its reconstruction depending on fiscal, judicial and probate sources. ↩
2. “Jean Calvin et le prêt à intérêt : de la chaire à la boutique”, *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, 2025/1, p. 155 et seq., abstract accessed September 2026. ↩
3. Federal Council, decision of 11 September 2020 setting 1 January 2021 as the date of entry into force of the guideline values for gender representation (MLL-News, mll-news.com): for large listed companies exceeding two of the thresholds (balance sheet total of 20 million, turnover of 40 million, 250 full-time positions), each gender must be represented to the extent of at least 30% on the board of directors and 20% on the executive board; where there is a shortfall, the company explains it in the remuneration report (“comply or explain”); transitional periods of five years for the board and ten years for the executive board. ↩

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