During the 19th century, the United States experienced substantial industrial growth and technological advancement. This period altered women's roles in the economy, as their employment and wages rose along with industrialization. While prior research has documented women’s advances in the labor force during this time, views into women’s business ownership have been limited by data availability. In this paper, the authors use new data to characterize female-owned manufacturing.

The authors use newly digitized records from the Census of Manufactures to identify female-owned establishments between 1850 and 1880. They use information on 3,589 female-owned establishments, which represent 1% of their data.

**Figure 1** • Female Ownership Shares Across the Ten Most-Common Industries

Note: This figure shows the industries with the highest share of female-owned establishments.
to provide the following view into the distinctive features of female-owned manufacturing:

- Female-owned establishments were smaller than male-owned establishments and had lower capital-to-output ratios, likely reflecting their relatively constrained financial access.
- Female-owned establishments employed more women and paid female workers $2 more per month, or roughly 20% more.
- Female-owned establishments were more prevalent in specialized industries, particularly women’s clothing and women’s hat making.
- Female owners tended to differ from other women in the general population. Female owners were older, more often literate, white, and immigrants, and they were less likely to be married and more likely to be widows.

The United States’ industrial revolution coincided with the first wave of the women’s rights movement, and American women became more involved in manufacturing during the late 1800s. The research described here is among the first to characterize female ownership of manufacturing businesses during this time, and highlights challenges and opportunities for women’s historical participation in business ownership that complement ongoing research across modern contexts.