

Keepers at Home? Amish Women and Entrepreneurship

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Despite the overt patriarchy of Old Order Amish society, Amish women play a key role in maintaining the economic and social health of family and community. Drawing on qualitative research, including interviews of Amish women entrepreneurs and participant observation, this study explores the relationship between the Amish construction of gender and Amish women’s entrepreneurial activities. Although suggesting that Amish women are more likely to operate businesses that extend their culturally and religiously defined role as husband’s helpmeet, homemaker, and nurturer, it also explores how Amish women’s businesses are contributing to the growing diversity of the Amish world.

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Introduction

- 1 In a review of Erik Wesner’s 2010 book about Old Order Amish businesses, *Success Made Simple*, journalist Geoff Williams suggests that “Amish” and “entrepreneurs” are “two words that don’t belong in the same sentence” (25). “Amish women entrepreneurs” seems an even less likely phrase. Like their male counterparts, Amish women are restricted in their entrepreneurial activity by church-defined limits on technology and social interaction. But while Amish men are expected to support their families financially—even though doing so may take them into the public domain and lead to prolonged interaction with those outside the Amish community—Amish women have traditionally been constrained by a religiously informed understanding of gender roles to be helpmeets to their husbands and “keepers at home” (Titus 2: 5).^[1]
- 2 Nevertheless, the growing technological diversity in the Amish world has had an enormous impact on family life and community relationships, economic interaction with non-Amish society, the role of the church in the lives of Amish men and women, and Amish notions of appropriate gender behavior (Johnson-Weiner). Amish women are still running households, but they may also be writing books, working on an assembly line, waiting tables in restaurants, or running businesses. Thus, this essay explores the changing roles of Amish women, looking in particular at their entrepreneurial activities. It suggests that Amish women are more likely to operate businesses that extend their culturally and religiously defined roles, thereby contributing to the growing diversity of the Amish world.

Methodology

- 3 My research is based on fieldwork and participant observation in a number of Old Order Amish communities, including settlements in New York, Michigan, and Ohio. Participant observation allows the personal interaction favored by the Old Order Amish, who tend to be suspicious of questionnaires and surveys. My focus has been on the world of Amish women, and I have talked with them while helping to prepare meals, washing dishes, and bagging vegetables at local farm stands. Drawing on these long-established relationships, I informally interviewed Amish women who actively contribute to the economic stability of their families and communities by operating businesses that cater to their church communities and/or engage with the non-Amish world. I have also drawn on similar interviews of Amish women entrepreneurs conducted by Florence Horning on behalf of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.^[2] Rather than yielding quantitative data, this ethnographic approach allows a qualitative

interpretation of the influence of religious and cultural norms on Amish women's entrepreneurial activity, enhancing our understanding of how Amish women engage in economic activity in mainstream society while remaining faithful to the values and expectations of their own communities.

Continuities across the Amish Spectrum

- 4 Grounded in faith, the roles Amish women play in their church communities have generally remained unchanged across the decades, and the ideal of "Amish womanhood" has stayed constant. Across the spectrum of Amish life, Amish women hope to marry and raise families within the church. As baptized members of the fellowship, they find their religious identity in giving up egocentric needs, instead committing themselves to family and community in order to live lives that they hope will be worthy of salvation. They expect to help their husbands—indeed, the prayer covering every Amish woman wears indicates that she "accepts the position in which God has placed her as her husband's helpmeet" (*1001 Questions* 59) Finally, Amish women expect to contribute to the spiritual, social, and economic health of the household and, by extension, the church community.
- 5 Even in the most progressive Amish communities, women talk of activities common to their counterparts in earlier times: gardening, homemaking, and child-rearing. For example, author Lena Yoder, writing about her life in the large northern Indiana community near Shipshewana, tells of sewing, cleaning, canning, and helping her husband milk cows. Similarly, a Lancaster Amish mother said that she doesn't see many differences between her life when she was 20 and her 20-year-old daughter's life. She expects her daughter's married life to be much like her own and says her own is much like her own mother's was. "We do a lot of canning or freezing. In summer that's about all I do" (personal communication). Adding that she cans fruit and vegetables as well as meat, she noted simply, "I do about the same amount as my Mom [did]." Asked how her community had changed over the years, she replied "the fundamentals are still the same, what they teach, the Bible. Actually, it hasn't changed much."
- 6 But the world is changing, and some Amish have embraced practices, tools, and activities that would have been unimaginable in generations past. A century ago, the Amish world was only a fraction of its current size: 34 settlements in 13 states and the province of Ontario. Today there are about 500 settlements spread across 31 states and 3 Canadian provinces. Fifty years ago farming was still the Amish way of life, but even then, with the Amish population growing and affordable land for farming becoming more limited, some Amish were already searching for employment off the farm. Now, in the 21st century, although the small, low-tech, labor-intensive family farm has remained the primary source of income in the most conservative Amish church communities, other settlements have shifted from farming to entrepreneurship and wage labor. Today, fewer than 50% of the Amish claim farming as the primary occupation, and settlements no longer devoted to agriculture are accommodating a growing number of families in the same geographic area (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 282).
- 7 Faced with a booming population, a lack of affordable farmland, and a changing market, the Amish have had to make difficult choices. Regarding the small family farm and the shared labor of family and neighbors as essential to the religious and social health of the church-community, some groups have tried to limit technological innovation, choosing instead to move to regions where cheap, available farm land allows them to continue a pre-industrial, agrarian lifestyle. Others, however, have innovated technologically, allowing the establishment of larger manufacturing enterprises or permitting church members to work for wages outside the home for Amish or even non-Amish employers. As groups have begun redrawing the boundaries between their church communities and mainstream society, redefining in community-specific ways what it means to be Amish, women and men both have been challenged to maintain their religiously and socially defined roles, performing old tasks in new ways with new tools even as they strive to meet traditional expectations.

Paid Labor to Fill Free Time

- 8 Many Amish women no longer find their daily lives filled with housekeeping chores. For example, preserving food is still the traditional task of the housewife in communities across the Amish spectrum, but those in more progressive communities who are able to freeze their produce have access to a labor-saving technology that enables one woman to do the work of several. Other chores, too, have become much less onerous, enabling many women to take on other activities away from the home. As a minister's wife with a part-time job put it, it's "no longer a full-time job to keep house." Her own grandmother, she noted, "wouldn't have dreamed of working away, but it took her all day to do things like washing clothes." With appliances, such as a diesel-powered automatic washer, this woman can get such chores done quickly.
- 9 The result is a world that is far more individual, with community members acting alone or in much smaller groups to accomplish tasks that used to require many hands. They may even turn to others to purchase what they would have grown, manufactured, or done without in the past, and, in so doing, foster new enterprises. While discussing the Iowa community in which her daughter-in-law had grown up, one woman commented that "a lot of families out [there] don't even have a garden. They get their things from the produce growers." While their ultra-conservative Swartzentruber counterparts still make almost everything they wear, including caps, underwear, and straw hats, Lancaster and other more progressive Amish housewives can find men's shirts at local department stores and buy other necessities, including caps and bonnets, at Amish retail establishments.
- 10 As communities have moved away from their agrarian base, children no longer work with parents and grandparents to learn traditional skills because those particular skills are no longer relevant. Instead of sharing labor with neighboring farmers, as would have been done in generations past, one Lancaster Amish woman noted that most farmers in her community get non-Amish custom harvesters who arrive with big equipment to do the harvest because "there's no one around to help."
- 11 These changes bring others. After all, a household increasingly dependent on technology requires more cash income than a subsistence farm on which the entire family labors and neighbors come together to help each other work. Unsurprisingly, with more free time and bills to pay, women in more progressive communities often look for paying work. One Lancaster Amish business woman asserted that "most Amish women have jobs, have a business at home, or work in shops" (Horning notes). Another noted that many women had a source of income on the side, generally something that balanced well with chores at home, such as tailoring or part-time employment in another Amish woman's business. The work they are doing is not necessarily something new, she added. "It's that there are more opportunities to do sewing, baking, or craft work" for profit (Horning notes).
- 12 Often characterized as "jointly owned" or "family businesses"—even when the husband is not involved—Amish women's businesses are generally seen as supplementing the husband's income, thus maintaining the woman's status as a helpmeet. For example, one young woman began to bake to help support her family when her husband became ill. Although he had little to do with the bakery, she characterized it as something she and her husband had together. Another woman characterized her business serving Amish suppers to tourists as something she shared with her husband although his only role seemed to be to eat with the guests.
- 13 Amish women entrepreneurs seldom see themselves as professionals and generally describe their businesses as just something they do to keep busy. The baker, for example, noted that she had baked for the first three years of her marriage, "just for something to do" and still describes herself as "a widow who bakes." Similarly, an Amish flower shop owner in Lancaster County said her goal in starting the shop "was just to have something to do, have a life, [and] pay bills."

Women's Work, Church Rules

- 14 Amish women are not limited to "women's work." As one Old Order woman put it, "There are no church rules. They can have a hardware business—if they're widowed, [they] can run the business their husbands built." Asked about her church's view of women owning a business, a variety store owner in

Lancaster County replied, “They don’t say anything about it if we aren’t doing anything that they don’t want.” A greenhouse owner said simply, “I never felt discouraged by the church.” Asked if she had ever felt any criticism because she was a woman in business, she answered, “No.”

- 15 What is important is not the work women do, but rather whether in doing that work, women meet the religious and cultural expectations of the church community. As a greenhouse owner put it, “As long as they [women] are not operating their business in a way that breaks church rulings, there is no problem.” Success comes in staying within the guidelines. A Lancaster County artist—whose paintings command up to \$4000 each—noted that the only time members of her church reproached her for her work was after an article about her painting appeared in a local newspaper. “Our minister came, quite kindly, and asked that I do not speak with reporters. But he did not ask me to discontinue painting.”
- 16 Maintaining their identity as “keepers at home,” even when working full-time at non-housewifely chores, Amish women generally locate their businesses close to home, often operating out of the house or in an out-building on the farm. For example, one of the first Amish women to open a quilt shop in Lancaster County noted that, “At first some people showed me a hard time. [...] The bishop, who was my uncle, said that I could have this business as long as I had it in the home. [...] The church wanted their women to be at home. [...] And now I am glad that’s the way it worked out. That way I was here when the children were small” (Horning notes). Keeping the business in the home also helps to ensure that women’s entrepreneurial activity takes second place to family responsibilities.
- 17 As men turn to manufacturing or wage labor work off the farm, earning a living at workplaces that cannot accommodate children, Amish women entrepreneurs also find their home-based businesses offer the opportunity to extend their mothering responsibility to teach children to work hard and be responsible to others in their family and community. A greenhouse owner in Lancaster County noted that she started her business because she “needed something to keep [her] children busy [since they didn’t live on a farm].” One quilt shop owner hires her grandchildren to help package quilt pieces, and another, whose youngest child is 18, employs the neighbor’s daughters, noting “we will have 6 or 7 girls in [...] strictly for cutting fabric” on days when she expects tour buses to stop (Horning notes). The woman offering “Amish suppers” worked with her own daughters and now has help from her granddaughter. Seeing her chicken butchering business as helping to teach her children to work hard, one woman assigns each one particular responsibilities, and they have learned that if they do not complete their assigned tasks, all will suffer—an important lesson for future church members.
- 18 As Amish women have found new ways to fulfill traditional roles, widows and single women have also been able to acquire financial stability, ensuring that they will not be a burden to others. At the same time, entrepreneurial activity allows them to contribute to the community by employing others. Home-based businesses even provide single and childless women the opportunity to help prepare the next generation for a productive life in the church community. One young woman started a housecleaning business that enabled her to set her own hours and work near her home to support herself and her aging mother. As her reputation spread among her non-Amish clientele, she was asked to take on other cleaning jobs. By her early 30s, she employed several young Amish girls who helped her clean three large automobile dealerships. The business kept her busy, helped to cover her mother’s medical bills, and enabled her to play a role in preparing the community’s young folk. Similarly, by taking over her parents’ variety store housed in an out building on the family’s Lancaster farm, another single woman provides her community with such hard-to-find items as the type of stockings mandated by the church. Thus, in her modern role as a store owner, this single woman serves her community, and, by mentoring her young employees, instructs others in the tasks she learned as a child.

Traditional Roles, New Opportunities

- 19 In adapting traditional roles, women in more progressive Amish church communities must make choices their more conservative counterparts cannot imagine. As Amish businesses use the internet to reach outward to a non-Amish market, some Amish entrepreneurs are rethinking what it means to be Amish and in business. In extreme cases, this may motivate a different attitude towards the church and what

some come to see as arbitrary rules. One successful Lancaster County businessman asserted, for example, “Business is business and church is church.” Another wondered why the church didn’t “just stick to church things on Sunday and let businesses alone during the week” (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 410).

- 20 Confronting the same pressures as men to make use of new technology, each Amish woman must determine for herself where to draw the line. An herb shop owner notes that she’s “had lots of chances [to use the internet] but [...] is not interested. Why start on something the church wants to stay away from?” Similarly, the flower shop owner has a phone in her shop and advertises on the Intercourse, Pennsylvania, website. Yet, like the herb shop owner, she has drawn the line at using the internet herself, noting that all her business is done face-to-face.
- 21 Nevertheless, the decisions of other Amish women entrepreneurs are helping to drive change. In the office of the business she inherited from her mother, the owner of Emma’s Gourmet Popcorn noted that she felt bad because her use of electricity and computers “is not the way they [the church] want it,” and she’s concerned that “if it gets too much, then someone will fuss.” Noting how much things had changed, the owner remembered that her mother “was popping corn by hand when she started. She had a machine, and when it broke down, she’d pop by hand. We started packaging for wholesale, gift items, and the website.” The company line has now expanded to include candy, nuts and other snacks, all of which can be shipped nationally.
- 22 Commenting on the shift in his community from farming to business, one Lancaster man asserted that life had become a lot more complicated. “With farming,” he said, “we had a couple hundred years of tradition that no longer applies. Those with businesses realize that there are exceptions and learn how to bend the rules. [...] It’s difficult to draw the line once an innovation begins to be accepted.” A Lancaster Amish business woman seems to agree. Talking about her decision to accept credit cards in her quilt shop, which required her to install a system that runs with batteries and solar power, she said simply, “That’s what it means to have a business. Everything changes.”

Holding the Line

- 23 Unwilling to advance any further than they have to, those in the most conservative communities have rejected much of the technology that now troubles their more progressive counterparts. Without gas refrigerators and freezers as well as self-heating irons, women in those communities have little time to contemplate leisure activities or work outside the home. Unlike their less traditional counterparts, conservative Amish women remain active participants in labor exchanges that bring neighbors and extended family members together in regular face-to-face interaction, whether it’s to ready the home for church, make potato chips, or can produce. For example, after making egg noodles with her sisters—an all-day job that involves mixing dough and cutting noodles—one ultra-conservative Swartzentruber woman looked at the finished product and pondered the notion of a mechanical noodle maker. She noted that such a machine might be a time-saver but then added, “What would we girls do?”
- 24 Nevertheless, while they are less challenged by technological creep, conservative Amish communities confront daily the pressure of changes in the world around them. In response, they emphasize the importance of small farms to the health of family and to the raising of children in the ways of the Amish community, privileging activities that reinforce shared labor over those that take church members away from home and family. One conservative Amish dairy farmer characterized farming as “a good way to keep the boys out of trouble. And I can be at home with my work. I want my boys to grow up to be farmers.” As a mother in the same community put it, “It’s easier to teach [children] on a farm.” Maintaining a subsistence agrarian lifestyle has meant reinforcing the traditional ways of working together. Women take on the tasks of the household while men are occupied in the field, and children help whichever parent needs it.
- 25 The entrepreneurship of conservative Amish women is focused on reinforcing these social ties as well as the economic health of family and community; businesses remain small, home-based, and reliant on

personal interaction. One woman in a conservative Swiss Amish community has joined with several of her sisters-in-law to start a variety of small businesses that help to keep their families solvent. While their husbands work at pallet making and running the community sawmill, the women raise produce, sell seedlings, and supply non-Amish neighbors with baked goods. Any commercial interaction with the non-Amish public is face-to-face, and the primary market is local. As one woman put it, “If I had to go away to do it—leaving the children—I wouldn’t want that.” Similarly, a woman who ran a farm stand offering produce and home-made baked goods noted that this work allowed her to be a stay-at-home mom and not a working mother.

- 26 In Amish communities in which members still come together to accomplish tasks like threshing, butchering, and home-building rather than hiring outsiders, women’s businesses are more likely to provide services to fellow Amish than to meet the demands of a mainstream clientele. Indeed, the value the Amish place on serving others in the church community empowers women to become entrepreneurs, and even those who do not need to supplement a husband’s income or keep children busy may start a business if it serves others in the settlement. Generally, these enterprises are not advertised, and even the most thriving may be invisible to non-Amish neighbors. For example, one unmarried Swartzentruber woman runs a dry goods store from her home with her only clientele being family members—an extended social network that includes hundreds of relatives.^[3] Sisters, aunts, cousins, nieces, and wives of various male relatives arrive regularly to purchase fabric, thread, and other sewing notions that, without a family to care for, she has the time to stock.
- 27 To meet community needs, other women start shoe shops, fabric stores, shops selling dishes and cooking supplies, and shops offering dietary supplements. All are either in the home or in close proximity. When one shop-owner first began her bulk food business, she put items in a small shed next to the house. When winter arrived she moved things into her cellar, and her daughters escorted customers into the shop through the wash house entrance. Today, the store is housed in a room adjacent to her husband’s furniture shop, approximately ten feet from the house. Although it is less convenient because someone must go outside when a customer arrives, she and her husband can easily talk to each other when working, and customers of one business often stop at the other.
- 28 As in more progressive communities, single women, childless married women, and women with older children are able to enter the business world more freely than married women with small children. For example, one married but childless woman runs a quilt shop, which is located in a spare bedroom of her home. With her husband,^[4] who also manages the farm, she sells a variety of quilts to passersby and provides quilt tops to those in her community who might need them for events. “My mother was a quilter,” she notes, adding “I always enjoyed it. That was always my dream: when I’m on my own, I want to do quilts. After marrying I got some fabric. [...] I got my dream.” Yet, it was a dream with strict limits: Though her quilt business also serves a non-Amish public, these customers can only find it by looking for the small wooden sign in front of her home with the single word “quilts.” Adhering to her community’s guidelines, this quilter will never have a phone, much less take credit cards or welcome tour buses. To buy something, one has to knock on her door and hope she’s home, for she often closes the shop to help out with her nieces and nephews.

Successful Entrepreneurship

- 29 Dodd and Gotsis have argued that the more salient the religious beliefs of entrepreneurs, the more likely it is that religious criteria will inform decision-making, even to the detriment of commercial interests. In the diverse Amish world, the traditions and beliefs of each Amish church community shape how it manages entrepreneurship (Dodd and Gotsis 102). The more tightly community members draw the line between themselves and the world, enforcing limits on technology and interaction with mainstream society, the more religious considerations inform entrepreneurial decision-making. In short, the successful Amish woman entrepreneur embodies and enacts the religious and cultural values of her church community and in doing so may limit her own commercial success. The Amish artist, for example, noted that she once struggled to maintain her priorities:

30 A Christian can be an artist but not a *great* artist. The reason being, a great artist becomes obsessed to a degree. I realized at one point that my painting was my working thought. I didn't *want* to do my daily chores. I put in time till I could get back to the easel. So I backed off entirely—cold turkey—so to speak. It was very, very hard. Later I decided it was not wrong for me to paint as I do believe it is a God-given talent, but I've never again and probably never will become as involved as I was at that time. (Horning notes)

Conclusion

- 31 Even in progressive communities, many Amish women have resisted technology, refraining from web-based marketing, for example, although it could expand their markets and increase their income. In keeping their businesses small and home-based, they, like their more conservative counterparts, have made them part of the work of wife and mother. By involving children in the work of the business, they have made businesses another way to teach children community values. In creating businesses based on the activities of the home, they have simply continued to do women's work. Finally, by using the business as another means of supporting family and community, Amish women have fulfilled their roles as mothers, helpmeets, and church members. They serve home and family first.
- 32 Yet even as Amish women entrepreneurs reinforce community ties, some are building businesses that reach beyond the boundaries of their church communities, challenging traditional understanding of what it means to be a helpmeet, homemaker, and nurturer. In figuring out how to accommodate a growing individualism and a widening divide between home and work and parent and child, women entrepreneurs in progressive communities are helping to chart a future for their families that will be quite different from the one envisioned by their more conservative sisters.
- 33 As entrepreneurs, Amish women, like Amish men, work within the guidelines of their church communities. Even as their businesses grow, Amish women entrepreneurs support family and community, fulfilling their roles as mothers, helpmeets, and church members. Locating their businesses in the home and working at traditional tasks, women respect the limits the church places on technology and interaction with the non-Amish world and remain helpmeets, wives, and mothers.
- 34 Nevertheless, Amish women's businesses reflect a growing divide between different ways of being Amish. Although, for the most part, women have lagged behind men in their adoption of technology for business purposes, many, particularly in the most progressive communities, are well aware of the dangers and possibilities offered by changing patterns of social interaction. As church communities have made decisions that open the doors to new technology and church authority becomes less restrictive, women, like men, have access to a wider world and must decide how far they can go without straining church and family bonds.

Notes

[1] This is the rendering in the King James Version; the Revised Standard Version reads "domestic."

[2] This research is supported by a 2005 grant from the Kauffman Foundation to study "Amish Entrepreneurship: The Surprising Success of Homespun Entrepreneurs." Collaborators: D. B. Kraybill, S. M. Nolt, and K. M. Johnson-Weiner.

[3] Because Amish churches do not condone birth control, Amish families tend to be large, and families with 10 to 15 children are not unusual, especially in the most conservative settlements. An Amish obituary may put the number of direct descendants in the hundreds.

[4] Interestingly, in this case the husband is a true partner in the business. His wife praises his eye for design, and he cuts many of the pieces for quilts that she sews.

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