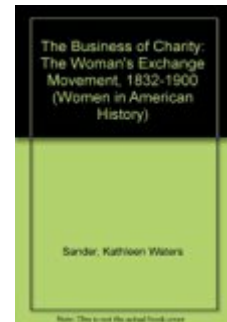


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathleen Waters Sander. *The Business of Charity: The Woman's Exchange Movement, 1832-1900*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xi + 165 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06703-7; \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02401-6.

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Published on H-PCAACA (March, 1999)



*The Business of Charity: The Woman's Exchange Movement, 1832-1900* by Kathleen Waters Sander adds an important piece to the history of the women's voluntary movement. Her study traces the history of the Woman's Exchange Movement from 1832 through the early twentieth century. Sander discusses several aspects of the Woman's Exchange Movement which contribute to the readers understanding of the movement, including women's roles as entrepreneurs, the importance of anonymity of consignors, and the changing roles of women throughout the century.

Wealthy women in Philadelphia sought to help their less fortunate sisters when they opened the Philadelphia Depository in 1832. This was an early effort to assist the "genteel poor" (p. 26) with selling their handiwork for a commission, rather than for a pittance to the retail shops. The women of Philadelphia "sought to provide a stable, permanent outlet where consignors could sell handcrafted "useful and decorative" needlework (p. 26). By 1891 there were seventy-two Exchanges, according to F.A. Lincoln's *Directory of Exchanges for Women's Work*. A chronological listing of the Exchanges is included in Appendix A of Sander's book. While the success of the Exchanges varied from city to city, many women were able to earn an admirable living from the commissions they received. By the turn of the century the "idea of women being ashamed of paid work" was no longer acceptable and the Exchange flourished. Figures are included within the study about the average amount a woman might be able to earn, and further information about the commissions paid is included in Appendix A.

Sander details the organizational framework of the movement throughout the study. "The early Exchanges

functioned as quasi-producers' cooperatives by providing a retail outlet for consignors" (p. 24), according to Sander. Exchanges required the members and the consignors to purchase shares, which made everyone involved a stockholder. Tickets were purchased for women who could not afford the membership fees by those who could afford more. Rules for the consignors were also a prominent part of the organizational structure. Shoddy goods were not acceptable.

The viability of the Exchange depended in part on the geographic location within a city. Women gained skills and became astute businesswomen who "took great pains to borrow entrepreneurial ideas from the commercial world" (p. 81) to increase their chance of success. The women not only sought the best location for the Exchange, usually near downtown, they also learned to arrange the handiworks they sold to the best advantage. Sander discusses the formation of departments and the arrangement of good within the Exchange. This was particularly important when the department store became more popular later in the century. Frequently, an Exchange opened a lunchroom or a tearoom which not only served as a gathering place for women, but also as a major moneymaker and a place where women could gain vocational skills.

The Exchange traded on the idea that "not only [was a person] purchasing quality, handproduced items but also helping a needy consignor" (p. 90). The founders of the first Exchange had created a "specific niche" (p. 26) that catered to the affluent and drew upon the "nostalgic idea" (p. 26) of handmade items being of better quality than machine made items. The Exchange also acted as a "gentle buffer between producers and employers" (p.

86). They sought employees who would remain for many years and become the familiar face to the customer who returned to the store.

This is a fascinating study because it explains the vital place of the Women's Exchange Movement in creating financial independence for women. It also, however, is a very enjoyable book to read. Sander captures the spirit of the women in her study as well as outlining the histori-

cal facts through her use of primary sources, photographs and charts providing additional details.

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**Citation:** Millie Jackson. Review of Sander, Kathleen Waters, *The Business of Charity: The Woman's Exchange Movement, 1832-1900*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

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