

Increasingly Influential Notes on the history of women at Siemens

Women have played a key role at Siemens since the company's early days. Just as society has changed, the importance of women workers at the company has steadily grown. From the first women workers in incandescent lamp production to power at the top levels of management: here are some historical notes on how women have contributed to the company's success.

Already essential to production

Women have been indispensable to production at Siemens since 1875. While at first they worked mostly in incandescent lamp production, during World War I they took on an increasing range of tasks as men were drafted, and by the 1920s they were making an important contribution to the company's success in mass production.

The first women in Siemens production

Women have been working at Siemens since January 1, 1875, when the first women were hired at Siemens & Halske's plant in Berlin. By year's end there were already ten women at the company, with numbers continuing to grow.

Siemens & Halske's workshops moved to Markgrafenstrasse in Berlin in 1853. As the company's business grew, so did the need for workers, and the first women joined the workforce in production here in 1875. If contemporary witnesses are correct, they first worked mainly in the spinning mill and the paint shop.



Incandescent lamp production in the Charlottenburger Werk, Berlin 1899



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The beginnings of mass production – Women take a hand in incandescent lamp production

By the turn of the century, about a tenth of all Siemens & Halske employees were women. The various plants in Berlin employed 1,250 women out of a total workforce of about 12,000 employees at all levels.

Incandescent lamp production was a particular province for women's work. When production began, there were 86 women compared to 130 men in the unit, but the proportions soon reversed. By 1900 some 550 women working here, compared to 90 men – impressive evidence that even then, women were the preferred workers in the mass production of meters, installation materials and, yes, light bulbs.

World War I – Women take over from drafted men

Before the outbreak of World War I, women represented about 33 percent of the blue-collar workforce and about seven percent of the white-collar staff at Siemens & Halske's Berlin plants. The numbers of women would climb sharply in the first years of the war.

Increasing numbers of women started to join the staff as hourly-wage workers in 1915. Where the company had 62 percent men and 38 percent women on the payroll on January 1 of that year, by October the figures had reversed: 42 percent men and 58 percent women. The reason was obvious – women took over as men were drafted and sent to the front. But the change didn't last. At the end of the war, jobs went back to the returning men.



Successful mass production – Women made it all possible

The era between the world wars saw an increasing mechanization and streamlining of working procedures. Where women had worked primarily in production for decades, now the number of women in salaried positions began to grow.

To keep production effective and profitable, as many components and electrical equipment products as possible were standardized. And new work was subdivided so fully that more and more tasks could be handled by machine, or by untrained staff or staff trained on the job – most of whom were women. Depending on the general economy, in the 1920s women accounted for between 26 and 29 percent of the Siemens team in Berlin.

A conscientious employer – Support for women on the staff

Siemens has traditionally always desired to be a conscientious employer. Besides financial support measures already in place, from 1907 onward the company had its own facilities to assist groups that were especially in need – including single mothers. And in 1911 Siemens began offering “factory care workers” who maintained direct contact with women workers and provided them with support.

In 1907 Siemens assisted with setting up a residence for women workers in Berlin-Charlottenburg. The home was based on a very advanced concept for the age – residents should have control of their own lives and support themselves. It was followed by a Siemens children’s home (1912), which especially provided care and supervision for children while their single mothers worked, and a year later by the Siemensgarten convalescent home for unmarried women (1913).



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A pillar of strength in times of crisis

Women were especially crucial to the company's survival in challenging times like the two world wars. And they continued to play that role during postwar reconstruction. It was women's work that really made the postwar German "economic miracle" possible.

Third Reich – Women make up for capacity shortages

In keeping with the dominant ideology, the image of women in the Third Reich took a twistedly nationalistic turn. Housewife and mother were seen as a woman's highest roles. Yet preparations for war amended the image: after 1936–37, the state propagandized working women, if only because of the labor shortage.

By 1938, German electrical companies were already working at full capacity. In that situation, Siemens needed every man – and every woman. For a time, the economy had caused a slump in the number of women in the company's workforce, but in 1934 the figure began rising slowly but steadily to more than 30 percent. Many women worked in mass production of consumer and capital goods like radios, telephones, mini-motors and vacuum cleaners.

Training as an electrical assistant – A new occupation arises

The electrical industry was already working at the limits of its capacity when the war began. As hostilities continued, the need for skilled workers only grew more acute. To compensate for the shortage of male skilled workers, at the end of the 1930s the company started its first training courses for women.



Cleanup after the end of the war
at the Nuremberg Werk, 1945



At first, some research departments trained their own female lab assistants, whose job description was then expanded and upgraded to an electrical assistant. The requirements and training for the new vocation were clearly defined. There was a special preference for women with a high school diploma that qualified them for university study, combined with a “special predisposition and inclination” for scientific fields and mathematics. The occupation was officially introduced in the spring of 1942. The first electrical assistants were assigned to the Siemens laboratories.

War economy – Women as forced laborers

After 1939 the Siemens plants, like all of German industry, were increasingly sucked into the war economy. The gradual shift of production to essential military goods and the shortage of male laborers altered the structure of the workforce; the percentage of women soared.

Siemens’ day-to-day business during World War II was plagued by shortages of raw materials, transportation problems, and shortages of skilled and unskilled workers. Yet the authorities kept demanding for production to expand still further. In 1940, more and more civilian workers began being shipped in from the occupied territories in Poland, Ukraine and Russia. Although these men and women came voluntarily at first, as the war went on they were impressed into forced labor.

Reconstruction – Women shape a new beginning

Immediately after the war, employees mainly worked at repairing and clearing away damage, and in emergency production of items for everyday use.



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The company could not begin making simple electrical equipment products until its production facilities in Berlin and the western occupation zones had become operational again. Yet a considerable number of male employees were still prisoners of war in 1946–47, so women had to take on their duties. The percentage of women working at Siemens rose.

The “economic miracle” – Needed: Nimble fingers and precision

Siemens consistently enjoyed double-digit growth rates during Germany’s postwar “economic miracle” – thanks most of all to women, whose nimble fingers and precision proved their worth in making small appliances and telecommunications products.

Most women were untrained or trained on the job; the pathway to higher levels of the hierarchy was largely barred to them. So the requirements for potential applicants for jobs in industrial technology were correspondingly low. Want ads from the era always emphasized that the work was “clean, physically undemanding, not difficult to learn, and performable while seated.”



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A new environment with new possibilities

In the early 1960s, Siemens began systematically expanding its production sites all over the world. The women's workforce too became more international. Technical advances, especially in microelectronics, opened up new possibilities for women in the electrical industry.

Crossing borders – Women's power takes Siemens back to the global market

After World War II, all the company's international tangible assets were confiscated and it was stripped of all its rights to trade names, trademarks and patents. Regardless, Siemens invested heavily in reviving its international business.

The return to its former global standing also meant setting up production sites abroad. It started building a number of "international factories" in Western Europe and overseas in the 1960s. Analogously to the German plants, the telephone and measuring instrumentation factories here mostly employed women. These employees, who mostly trained on the job, assembled and adjusted components and tested products.

Guest workers – The team becomes more international

During the boom years of the "economic miracle," the German economy had a critical labor shortage. Following an early bilateral recruitment agreement with Italy in 1955, more and more "guest workers" came to take up employment in Germany.



Siemens workers in front of the factory in Kalwa, India 1966



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The number of women among non-German employees throughout Germany increased by a factor of sixteen between 1960 and 1973 – from 43,000 to 706,000 female guest workers. At the Siemens plants in Berlin, sometimes far more than half of all workers from other countries were women. All the guest workers were housed in gender-segregated dormitories.

New opportunities – Women in technical professions

The use of new technologies – especially electronics – began changing production and employment structures in the electrical industries in the 1970s. Demand for skilled personnel soared. New courses of training were specially designed to prepare girls for technical professions.

Many young women were trained as electrical and engineering assistants in data and telecommunications technology at vocational schools in Erlangen and Munich. Their diplomas not only improved their employment opportunities in industrial technology, but also helped relieve the looming shortage of skilled workers. Most apprentices were hired by Siemens after completing their training

A change in outlook – An inventive mind in research

Prof. Dr. Doris Schmitt-Landsiedel was working in corporate research for Siemens as early as 1981. Ultimately this university-trained electrical engineer, the inventor of more than 50 patents, headed her own research unit. But in those days this was the exception, not the rule.



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Doris Schmitt-Landsiedel earned her doctorate in electrical engineering and physics at the Technical University in Munich. From 1981 to 1996 she worked in corporate research at Siemens, while also mothering her two children. As she put it, here she always worked with very able women as her engineering assistants, “all of whom could easily have earned an engineering degree.”

More diversity and more options

Siemens has seen more and more women in management since the 2000s. The establishment of a special Chief Diversity Office, the first woman on the Managing Board, and more women on the Supervisory Board were part of the trend.

Promoting Diversity – With a sharper profile, women begin to rise

The “Promoting Diversity” project began in 2000. For the first time, Siemens offered a wide range of programs to enhance diversity within its team, from fostering the next generation to work-home compatibility. The project was absorbed in 2008 into the activities of the newly established Chief Diversity Office.

This program was an important way to increase the number of women working at Siemens, especially in technical professions. It was also intended to lay the groundwork for more women to become established in specialized and management positions. And the company’s officers also realized it was high time to improve compatibility between job and private life. Promoting Diversity became a declared corporate objective, worldwide.



Nathalie von Siemens, member of the Siemens AG advisory board since 2015



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Chief Diversity Office established – Enhancing diversity in the workforce

The Chief Diversity Office was established in November 2008. Its objective was to increase diversity within the company worldwide. Every position was to be filled by the best person, no matter what their gender, background or ethnicity.

At Siemens, diversity stands for inclusion and cooperation among diverse mentalities, backgrounds, experiences, skills and individual qualities, across all levels and dimensions of the company. So the diversity initiative encourages a multifarious composition of the workforce, without regard to nationality, age, gender, sexual orientation, origin or religion. The initiative also enhances Siemens' global innovative strength and competitiveness, as well as its appeal as an employer.

Women in top management – First women on the Managing Board

In November 2008, Barbara Kux became the first woman to sit on the Siemens Managing Board. Brigitte Ederer followed in 2010. Lisa Davis has been in charge of Siemens' energy business since August 2014. And Janina Kugel has headed the company's HR affairs since the beginning of 2015.

Barbara Kux, in charge of purchasing and sustainability, was the first woman in the company's 170-year history to join the top management body. At that point Siemens was the only company in the DAX 30 index to have a woman in such a top management position. Barely six years later, Lisa Davis was the first woman on the Siemens Managing Board to have a technical remit. Janina Kugel became Chief Human Resources Officer at Siemens AG in February 2015.



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A specific target – Significantly increasing the number of women in management

In 2011, Siemens set itself the target of raising the percentage of women in higher-pay positions in Germany from 10 to 12 or 13 percent by 2015. The goal was already reached in 2014, at nearly 13 percent. Between 2015 and 2017, the percentage of women at the two levels below the Managing Board also rose from 8.5 to 10 percent. All in all, women account for about 23 percent of the workforce at Siemens in Germany, and 24 percent worldwide.

Siemens' commitment to encourage women at all levels of the company doesn't end at mere compliance with the law. The company plans to increase the number of women in top management positions. By the end of June 2022, the number of women is to be kept stable at one of the two top management levels in Germany, and increase to 20 percent in the other. Siemens is also pursuing further initiatives, programs and measures to encourage a change of culture in equal opportunity, diversity and integration.

More women at the top – More women on the Supervisory Board

Gerda Hesse was the first woman to be appointed to the Siemens Supervisory Board, in March 1978. Since 1993 this body has always had at least one woman member. At the start of 2018, seven of the total of 20 members of the Supervisory Board were women, including Nathalie von Siemens, a great-great-granddaughter of the company founder.



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Gerda Hesse, Deputy Chair of the German Union of Salaried Employees (now ver.di), was a member of the Supervisory Board from 1978 to 1983. Women board members were subsequently recruited from among employee representatives. Since 2008 the shareholders have also been represented by women. Another new development: at the end of January 2015, Birgit Steinborn, Chair of the Central Works Council, was the first woman to become Deputy Chair of the company's Supervisory Board.

Further Information

www.siemens.com/history