Banking, consumption and feminine finance: did the « Bastille Day Law » (July, 13th, 1965) usher in a new era of empowerment for French women?

In global surveys the ownership of a bank account is an important indicator of gender equality (e.g. Global Gender Gap report by World Economic Forum). While the gender gap is still significant in large parts of the world in high-income OECD economies basically all adults, women as well as men, hold accounts in financial institutions. This equal access has however a shorter history than one might think. Still, in the 1960s married women in many Western countries could not open bank accounts or sign for a credit card without their husband’s formal permission. Economic historians have studied women’s economic agency and emphasised their role in home accounting and consumption. There are also studies of women as capital owners, investors and entrepreneurs. This paper, based on the French case with European comparisons, aims to focus more specifically on the gendered aspects of consumer banking in the twentieth century and the banks’ efforts to increase their market among female customers.

How did the practices and institutional frames of female financial agencies change with the legal economic emancipation of women and as women increasingly access the labour market? How did banks target a female clientele before and after women’s full legal economic emancipation? And did the practices of everyday banking shift when female consumers and working women entered the bank?

Based on regulators and banks archives as well as feminine press, this paper will focus on gendered marketing practices and gendered financial products such as women’s bank accounts and women’s credit cards. Analysing the second half of 20th century, it will highlight a major turning point in the women access to banks and their power to manage their own capital.