

## Married women's labor force participation in the United States, 1880-1940

### Abstract

My dissertation analyzes the most important change in the twentieth century United States labor market: the increased participation of married women in paid work. The rapid rise in married women's labor force participation since World War II has received considerable attention from economists and other social scientists. The recent availability of large historical census samples makes a re-examination of the preceding sixty years timely. In the dissertation I address the roles of individuals and households, businesses, and government, in the changing patterns of women's work. My approach combines both economic and business history.

With a complete transcription of the 1880 census now available in machine-readable form, I use that as a benchmark from which to measure later changes in married women's participation in paid work. I find that changes in individual behavior occurred slowly in the 40 years to 1920, but that change was rapid from 1920 to 1940. Because of the rapid inter-war changes, the succeeding chapters focus on the 1920s and 1930s. From 1920–1940 married women's work gained social acceptability and families altered how they made decisions about work. Using staff magazines and other sources from within firms, I find that within the firm married women's work was more accepted than historians have traditionally argued, and that public hostility to married women's during the Depression was somewhat superficial. Within families, I find that women's work decisions became increasingly independent in the inter-war decades. Although more married women entered the labor market, the average hours worked by employees declined significantly before World War II. Legislation was responsible for less than 20 per cent of these declines in weekly hours of work. The foundations of the post-World War II transformations in married women's participation in paid work were mostly laid in the decades before the war, through important changes in household and firm behavior.

### Background

Much of the historical literature on American women's entry into paid work presents World War II as the significant turning point (1981; Chafe 1972). The popular imagination views Rosie the Riveter as an icon of women who patriotically left traditional roles as home-makers and mothers to work in war industries, thus planting the seeds for the later increase in women's paid work (Honey 1984). This story has two problems. First, while women's participation in paid work rose considerably during the war, many women were laid off in 1945 (Kossoudji and Dresser 1992). Second, the antecedents of the later rise in married women's paid work lie in two important changes between the world wars, not in World War II itself. First, the way in which American families made decisions about who worked changed substantially. Second, paid work by married women became increasingly socially acceptable during the 1920s. Although historians have recognized some changes in family economic relationships during the 1920s, they have attributed married women's entry into the workforce to popular pressure to buy consumer goods (Wandersee 1980).

Historians have argued that there was great hostility to married women working during the 1930s Depression (Scharf 1980; Cott 1987). For example, the 1932 Economy Act prohibited the employment of both spouses in the federal government. Many large firms would not hire married women. For example, a significant minority of utilities and insurance companies that employed large numbers of clerical workers had policies that prescribed firing single women who married, or not hiring women who were already married. Before World War II more than half of all school districts fired women who married, and did not hire married women as teachers (Goldin 1990). Amongst the wider population, surveys showed extensive popular opposition to married women working (*New York Times* 1938). Yet historians have not examined whether attitudes in the workplace amongst employees were this hostile. Popular opposition to paid work by married women may have been somewhat superficial. Examining attitudes and behavior in

the workplace provides an opportunity to test whether rank-and-file employees acted on their expressed opposition to married women's work. Despite a burgeoning literature on women's work in specific industries and occupations over the past quarter century, little of it addresses the place of married women *qua* married women.

Partly because of the apparent regression in acceptance of women's work, historians have debated whether American women's lives changed significantly after suffrage was achieved in 1920, and before the "second wave" of organized feminism in the 1960s (See Deutsch 2000a for a recent summary of the literature). Historians recognize that women's political activism did not cease after nationwide suffrage was achieved, but argue that its immediate effects on the lives of American women were relatively limited (Deutsch 2000b). Other women's historians, who have examined the development of government policy in the Progressive era, and during the New Deal, argue that policy-makers were strongly influenced by prevailing views that paid work by married women was outside the norm (Kessler-Harris 2001). Even women who had influential roles in shaping federal policy believed that married women had low attachment to the workforce, entering work largely in response to family financial crises, and not seeking a career (Gordon 1992). The belief that married women's paid work was largely driven by perceived shortfalls in male income mirrored popular support for the "male breadwinner wage": the notion that male household heads should be able to support a wife and children on the head's wages alone (Greenwald 1989; Sommestad 1997). However, research by Moehling (2001), and Finegan and Margo (1994), suggests that the influence of shortfalls in male incomes on married women's labor force participation declined significantly before World War II. In short, while historians have looked for changes in politics after suffrage, they have neglected evidence that family economic relationships may have changed significantly in the two decades after universal suffrage was achieved. Thus, there is an opportunity to resolve some outstanding questions in the social history literature by a close examination of changing decision making about labor supply by American families.

Economic historians have given more recognition to the inter-war decades as a turning point in American women's lives. Claudia Goldin argues that until 1930 changes in married women's labor force participation were nearly exclusively determined by changes on the supply-side—i.e. within households. From 1940 to 1960, married women were drawn into paid work by increasing demand for their labor, and from 1960 onwards supply and demand forces both operated to increase the labor force participation of married women (Goldin 1990). Goldin's work was largely completed before the availability of high-density samples from historical censuses: the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS). In the past decade, the availability of a series of representative statistical samples from each decennial census between 1850 and 2000 has transformed our understanding of American society.\* These samples contain information on the key economic and demographic factors influencing women's work decisions (Ruggles et al. 2004). Despite the potential of the census samples for understanding economic behavior, until 1940 they lack information on wages and incomes. Addressing this omission is critical to any study of labor market behavior in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The outlines of Goldin's account of married women's rising participation in the labor force are unlikely to change significantly with additional data on individuals and families. However, the variation in decision making about labor supply across income-levels, regions, and ethnic groups can be better understood with the census samples and other microdata sources.

Some scholars have argued recently that the census enumerators deliberately understated women's participation in paid work understated their participation in market work (Folbre and Abel 1989). Indeed, Susan Carter and Richard Sutch have argued that the returns of the 1880 census were tallied inaccurately to fit pre-conceived notions of which work women should be doing (Carter and Sutch 1996). A database of the entire 1880 census has recently been released

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\* Except for 1890, for which the manuscripts were destroyed in a fire.

for social science research, with the actual occupational responses of all respondents coded for analysis (North Atlantic Population Project and Minnesota Population Center 2004). This database provides an unprecedented opportunity to construct new estimates of participation in market work by married women for the late nineteenth century.

**Goals and objectives:** The dissertation will provide a comprehensive overview of changes in married women's participation in the labor force between 1880 and 1940. This research will address several outstanding questions in the existing literature. Most importantly, the dissertation will reshape the existing chronology of American social history during the twentieth century by emphasizing the significant changes in attitudes and behavior that occurred between 1920 and 1940. These decades saw the emergence of family economic relationships that became the norm in the second half of the twentieth century.

- (1) I will provide new estimates of the extent of women's paid work in the late-nineteenth-century using the recently released database of the complete 1880 census. The estimates will be a benchmark for measuring later change in married women's participation in paid work. Additionally, I will provide estimates of women's work on the fringes of the labor market, on farms, in other family businesses, and other income-earning activity such as taking in boarders and lodgers.
- (2) I will estimate how income earned by other family members affected wives decisions to work and how this relationship changed between 1880 and 1940. Consistent estimates of how objective economic and demographic factors changed women's work decisions are necessary to distinguish these factors from cultural and attitudinal change.
- (3) I will examine the role of paid work by married women in supporting immigrant families and the factors which influenced immigrant women's wages and work histories.
- (4) I will analyze changes in business and employee attitudes about the employment of married women. This research will focus on the rapid rise in paid work by white married women during the inter-war period.
- (5) I will examine what influenced women's decisions about how many hours to work per week. I will estimate how much of an impact government legislation had in limiting weekly hours of work.

**Design and methodology:** The five chapters in the dissertation follow from these goals.

*Chapter 1:* In the first chapter I will provide an overview of changes in the level of married women's labor force participation between 1880 and 1940. I focus on how race, ethnicity, and the presence of children affected married women's decisions to work, showing (1) convergence between black and white women in their work behavior, and (2) the increasing numbers of women combining work and motherhood, though this combination was still a choice of a minority of women. The overall increase in married women's labor force participation rates between 1880 and 1940 was largely due to participation among white women beginning to catch up with participation by black women. I use the recently released complete-count dataset of the 1880 census to examine married women's participation and their occupations in the late nineteenth century, and to benchmark later changes. This source provides the complete transcription of responses to the census enquiries about occupation. As well as recording paid work by women, the responses also provide some indication of whether women worked in family businesses, or regarded themselves as housekeepers. Because the 1880 census data provides information on the composition of households, I will provide estimates of how many women could have been earning income by taking in boarders and lodgers.

*Chapter 2:* I will analyze how income earned by other family members affected married women's decisions to work (Lundberg 1985; Maloney 1991). Because the census lacks wage or income information before 1940, I use the following alternative sources of wage information.

- (1) Payroll records for men providing wage information linked to the 1880 census; the resulting dataset will have information on husbands' incomes from payroll records and family demographic characteristics from the 1880 census. Because the dataset will use income information from payroll records, it will not be possible to estimate how male unemployment impacted wives' work decisions. However, the dataset will provide information on how married women's participation varied across different levels of husband's income.
- (2) A wage survey, supplementary to the 1880 census (Meyer 2001, 2004). This dataset contains summary information on wages by region, occupation and industry. For example, it distinguishes between laborers' wages in steel mills and saw mills, and further differentiates these wages by geographic location. I will classify the occupations into the same coding scheme as used for the IPUMS and 1880 NAPP datasets. This data is most informative about wages in manufacturing, materials processing, and mining. Although the use of average wages will reduce variation in this variable, the effects of omitting income from models of labor force participation are likely to be greater.
- (3) Cost of Living surveys from 1890, 1917/19 and 1935/36 (Haines 1979; Moehling 2001; Margo 1993). The survey from 1935/36 is particularly valuable, and has not been used much since its release in the 1990s. The Cost of Living surveys are largely consistent with each other. The 1890 and 1917 surveys focused on families in urban areas, but the 1935/36 survey has more information on families in rural areas. Because the effects of income on women's work decisions varied substantially between black and white families, I will examine black and white families separately where there are sufficient numbers of black families.

*Chapter 3:* I will explore family income and cultural factors affecting married women's decisions to work using a unique 1924 survey of 2,146 European immigrant women working in Pennsylvania. I am the first researcher to use the responses to this survey since publication of the initial report in 1930.

The survey was carried out by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor in 1924. It was commissioned in response to concerns about the adaptation of immigrant women to the American labor market. Focusing on 2,146 immigrant women in Philadelphia and the Lehigh Valley, the survey collected migration, work and marital histories, as well as information on education, family employment and income, housing situation, reasons for working, and community involvement. The data quality is high and few forms have missing responses to any questions. The survey will be invaluable for my dissertation research. Information on education and earnings are rarely available before 1940. The retrospective questions in the survey are even rarer, and will provide valuable new data on immigrants' social and economic transitions.

My analysis focuses on three questions:

- (1) How immigrant women's wages are related to time living in America, educational attainment and language ability, and demographic variables. I will compute the returns to education, and compare the results for these women to estimates for native born women (Goldin 1984; Goldin and Katz 2000).
- (2) How work histories are related to time living in America, educational attainment and language ability, and demographic variables. I will analyze the life-cycle labor force participation and occupational attainment of the women (Goldin 1989). Adaptation to the American labor market can be analyzed in part by measuring the extent to which

immigrant women were able to enter jobs requiring English language ability such as clerical and sales jobs.

- (3) Married women's contribution to immigrant families' earnings. I will measure the share of women's earnings in the family budget, and compare the results to information available in the 1917/19 Cost of Living Survey.

*Chapter 4:* I will use business records and trade publications to analyze changes in business policies and practices about married women's work, and the place of married women in the workplace. This chapter focuses on the more rapid growth in married women's labor force participation between 1920 and 1940. A key source is 500 employee interview transcripts from the Western Electric company in 1929-1931, held at Harvard Business School's Baker Library. The interviews give a unique insight into the concerns of employees. While surveys and other indicators of public opinion suggest widespread opposition to married women working, interviews and other sources from within the workplace reveal that disapproval of married women's work was somewhat superficial, and not as pervasive as has previously been argued. Only one in six employees raised the topic of married women's work, and disapproval was concentrated amongst single women with parents and siblings to support.

*Chapter 5:* I will analyze variation in weekly hours of work in 1940. Previous research on the effect of legislation on hours of work has concentrated on the period before the Fair Labor Standards Act (Goldin 1988; Landes 1980). The 1940 census included a question on exact hours worked in the previous week. The federal Fair Labor Standards Act did not restrict weekly hours of work in all occupations and individual states varied in restrictions across industries (Mettler 1998). There was also inter-state variation in the ages of workers covered by legislation, as well as substantial differences in the resources devoted to enforcement of the legislation (Brandeis 1935). I use the variation in coverage of state and federal legislation over different industries to estimate the effectiveness of legislation in restricting weekly hours of work, after accounting for individual-level factors influencing the choice of hours. My initial research suggests that legislation was of relatively little importance in reducing working hours in the first half of the twentieth century.

**Potential significance of the research:** Married women's entry into paid work during the twentieth century transformed American society with profound consequences for families, businesses, and public life. The extent of paid work by married women continues to be controversial, with recurrent public and scholarly debates about the effects on children and marriages. My dissertation will reshape our understanding of the early decades of this transformation in women's roles. The study will be the first detailed investigation of women's work in the late nineteenth century since the complete returns of the 1880 census became available. By emphasizing the pre-World War II changes in opinions about married women's work and family economic behavior, this research will demonstrate that paid work by married women has deeper historical roots than generally acknowledged and will resolve outstanding questions about the social history of the United States following suffrage. My research on immigrant women's wages and work histories will complement an existing large literature in economic history on the integration of immigrant men into the United States labor market that has largely neglected immigrant women.

I envisage my dissertation as melding business and economic history. My graduate training and preparation has encompassed both approaches. In my dissertation and subsequent academic research I want to continue bringing those approaches together. After completing the dissertation I will revise the chapters for publication. I anticipate that chapters 2, 3 and 5 will be most suitable for journals such as the *Journal of Economic History* or *Explorations in Economic*

*History*, and that chapter 3 will be revised for submission to *Business History Review* or *Enterprise & Society*.

**Progress to date:** I began research for my dissertation on a two-month research trip funded by an Economic History Association pre-dissertation grant in fall 2003.

*Chapter 1:* As part of my research assistant position at the Minnesota Population Center I have coded approximately 300,000 occupations from the 1880 complete-count census and early twentieth century census samples. This work has given me an intimate knowledge of the IPUMS and 1880 complete-count data, and provides a critical foundation for my analysis. My initial analysis of the 1880 occupational data for married women suggests that some were working in occupations for which no women are tabulated as working in the published census tabulations from 1880.

*Chapter 2:* My research for chapter 2 has been in two areas. (1) I collected payroll records for several thousand male workers in manufacturing and transport from the Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast. I have identified payroll records for 1880 in the West and Great Plains, and have requested photocopies of the payrolls for May-July 1880 (the census was conducted in June 1880). I am also collecting payrolls from the Minnesota and Wisconsin Historical Societies, which hold extensive collections of manufacturing and transportation business records. (2) I have presented a draft section of the chapter looking at the 1917-1940 period at two conferences during 2004. Using a pooled sample and a common definition of participation in both years, I find that the added worker effect dropped significantly between 1917 and 1940. The result is robust to restricting the 1940 census sample to wives of manufacturing workers or women in large cities to more closely match the group surveyed in the 1917/19 Cost of Living Survey.

*Chapter 3:* I discovered the survey forms in the National Archives in fall 2003. I searched the literature and did not find any references to research with the original survey forms. I returned to the National Archives in May 2004 and scanned the supporting documentation and a sample of forms. In a pilot project of 60 forms and 20 cases, I tested the scanning and data entry procedures. Collection of the data and data entry for all the forms has recently been awarded funding by the Economic History Association via a dissertation fellowship. I am planning a research trip to collect the data in summer 2005. The data will be entered by an undergraduate research assistant from the Minnesota Population Center who is experienced in working with historical censuses.

*Chapter 4:* Following preliminary research in fall 2003, I obtained an Alfred D. Chandler traveling fellowship from the Harvard Business School. In September 2004 I conducted three weeks research using the Western Electric Hawthorne Studies collection at Harvard's Baker Library. This collection includes interviews with workers at the Western Electric plant in Chicago carried out in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The interviews were non-structured, with the topics discussed those raised by employees, giving a unique insight into the concerns of rank-and-file employees.

Approximately one in six employees raised the topic of married women's work. Single women employees with family members to support most often voiced disapproval of married women working. Their disapproval was often based on an argument that married women's work was inequitable because it increased inequality of income between households. People who expressed disapproval of both spouses working also made exceptions for women whose husbands were unemployed or unable to earn a wage considered "decent." The issues raised by Western Electric employees show a contemporary awareness of how husbands' income and

unemployment were central to wives' labor market decisions; decisions analyzed in chapter 2. In summer 2005, I will complete research for this chapter at the Hagley library, looking at firms' policies about married women's work in the inter-war period.

*Chapter 5:* In a paper presented at the recent Social Science History Association conference, I used Historical Labor Statistics project data and the 1940 census to examine saleswomen's weekly hours of work, a group not covered by the federal Fair Labor Standards Act in 1940. State maximum hours legislation accounted for one sixth of the decline in average hours of work between 1900 and 1940. However, maximum hours legislation accounted for most of the difference in average weekly hours between states with and without legislation in 1940.

**Schedule for completion:** In *spring 2005* I will be in residence in Minneapolis, and will complete drafts of chapters 2 and 4. I am continuing to work on analysis of the 1880 complete-count census data. I will be presenting material from chapter 4 at the Business History Conference in Minneapolis, and hope to present drafts of chapter 2 at the Economic History Association or Social Science History Association meetings in the fall.

In *summer 2005* I will travel to the East Coast to scan the survey forms for chapter 3, and complete the archival research for chapter 4 at the Hagley Library. When I return to Minneapolis I will begin working with an undergraduate research assistant to enter the data for chapter 3. I expect the data entry to be completed during fall 2005.

Once the data entry is complete in *fall 2005* I will spend approximately a month coding and cleaning this dataset. By matching the data from the immigrant women's survey with responses from similar questions in the 1920 and 1930 census samples I will be able to code the data relatively quickly. I will begin drafts of chapters 1 and 5 in fall while data entry is being completed for chapter 3, and continue working on chapters 1 and 5 through winter 2005/6. During *spring 2006* I will undertake the analysis for chapter 3, and begin drafting the chapter.

In *summer and fall 2006* I will make revisions to all chapters in consultation with my committee, and expect the dissertation to be complete by the end of fall 2006.

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