

Labor force participation of married women in the United States, 1880-1940

Dissertation Proposal

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Introduction

Married women's increased participation in the paid labor force was one of the most important social changes in the United States in the twentieth century.¹ The most rapid rise in married women's participation came between 1950 and 1980.² This rapid change, however, can be better understood by exploring its antecedents in the late-nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

This dissertation will use a series of related case studies to examine the growth in married women's labor participation between 1880 and 1940. I will use the electronic version of the complete 1880 census as a basis for studying how accurately women's work was enumerated by the census. Within households, I will examine how women's labor market behavior was influenced by their husband's income, and how this relationship changed over time. Within firms I will examine, both quantitatively and qualitatively, changing views by employers about the employment of married women, and how the entry of married women into the workforce was experienced within firms.

Background

There is an important and relatively large literature on married women's labor force participation. Claudia Goldin's 1990 book *Understanding the Gender Gap* used published census data to explain the growth over time of married women's participation. Goldin argues that the growth in married women's participation before 1930 can be explained by increases in the supply of labor by married women as education levels rose, fertility declined, and opinions about women's work changed. Between 1940 and 1960, married women's propensity to enter the labor force did not alter significantly but they entered the labor force in response to higher wages — there was higher demand for married women as workers. Since 1960 supply and demand factors have both contributed to growing participation by married women.³ Recent work by Carolyn Moehling, William Sundstrom, and T. Finegan and Robert Margo confirms Goldin's impression that between the two World Wars married women's labor force behavior changed relatively rapidly, with women's labor supply becoming less responsive to their husband's income and employment.⁴ However, these researchers use slightly different models and include different groups in their analyses, hindering direct comparison of the change in behavior. Historians have also seen the interwar period as significant, showing how latent hostility to married women workers in the 1920s manifested itself in Depression era attempts to bar married women from employment to preserve 'male' jobs. However, the "family wage" ideology that a man was able

¹ Claudia Goldin, "Labor Markets in the Twentieth Century," *Cambridge Economic History of the United States*. Stanley Engerman and Robert Gallman (eds), New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.572-579.

² Dora L. Costa. "From Mill Town to Board Room." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2000, 14(4), p.106.

³ Claudia Goldin. *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp.136-138.

⁴ T. Aldrich Finegan and Robert A. Margo. "Work Relief and the Labor Force Participation of Married Women in 1940." *Journal of Economic History*, 1994, 54(1), pp. 64-84. Carolyn M. Moehling. "Women's Work and Men's Unemployment." *Journal of Economic History*, 2001, 61(4), pp. 926-49. William A. Sundstrom. "Discouraging Times: The Labor Force Participation of Married Black Women, 1930-1940." *Explorations in Economic History*, 2001, 38(1), pp. 123-46.

to support his family without his wife working was challenged by the reality that many families faced of needing two incomes, however meager, to survive.⁵

Despite this important body of work, there are gaps in the literature which need to be addressed. Goldin's work did not use nationally representative microdata samples to analyze the pre-World War II period. While her general picture of the evolution of married women's work is plausible, the changing labor supply behavior before 1940 can be better understood using microdata samples and estimating models which can be directly compared across time. Additionally, the experience of married women *qua* married women in the workplace is comparatively understudied. Historians' research on pre-1940 views about married women's labor have concentrated on public debates about women's participation, while the substantial historical literature on women's experience in the workplace does not focus on the experience of married women. While Goldin and Scharf analyze company policies and public debates about married women's work, it is not well researched how policies such as the "marriage bars" instituted in teaching and clerical work, operated in practice, and how they were experienced by women workers. For example, it is not clear how consistently stated policies were observed, or whether women attempted to circumvent the policies by not revealing their marriage to their employers.

Figure 1 shows the labor force participation rates of married and single women by race since 1880.⁶ It is possible to discern a long, slow climb in participation for married women between 1880 and 1920, when overall participation rates rose from approximately 4.5% to 9%. Between 1920 and 1940, participation jumped as much again in just half the time. Researchers have often seen the inter-war and World War II eras as somehow "setting the stage" for the more rapid rises that occurred in the 1950s and beyond. World War II used to be seen as an epochal change, but recent research by both economists and historians has emphasized the long term antecedents of married women's increased participation, diminishing but not eliminating the importance of the war.⁷

Understanding how women's labor force participation changed in response to changes in their husband's income is critical to understanding the growth in married women's labor supply before 1940. Models of family labor supply predict that when a husband is unemployed or has lower earnings, some women not currently working or looking for work will enter the labor market and seek work. This is known as the "added-worker" effect. Recent studies have documented a small added-worker effect in the late-twentieth century, as married women's labor force participation is not very sensitive to temporary fluctuations in their husbands' employment and earnings.⁸ However, in the first half of the twentieth century the added-worker effect was large. For example, in 1937 Erika Schoenberg and Paul Douglas used census data aggregated to the level of cities to calculate labor supply equations for married women, and found a negative

⁵ *Inter alia* Lois Scharf. *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980. Winifred D. Wandersee. *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980. Alice Kessler-Harris. *Out to Work: Wage-Earning Women in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

⁶ Except 1890 for which the manuscripts were destroyed in a fire, and 1930 for which the microdata sample has not yet been completed.

⁷ Claudia Goldin, "The Rising (and then Declining) Significance of Gender", National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 8915, April 2002. ; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, New York, 1982. ; Claudia D. Goldin, "The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment." *American Economic Review*, 1991, 81(4), pp. 741-56 all downplay the impact of the war, though in different ways. Cf. William H. Chafe. *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Role, 1920-1970*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972 who attributes more significance to the change.

⁸ *Inter alia* Shelly J. Lundberg. "The Added-Worker Effect." *Journal of Labor Economics*, 1985, 3(1), pp. 11-37 and Tim Maloney. "Unobserved Variables and the Elusive Added-worker Effect." *Economica*, 1991, 58(230), pp. 173-87.

correlation between average wages in manufacturing and the proportion of 25-44 year old women employed, commenting that this relationship was expected as “the higher the earnings of the men are, the more this permits some of the families to do without the earnings of the wives and mothers...”⁹ The rising participation by married women after World War II as average male earnings continued to rise was puzzling. In a classic 1962 study Jacob Mincer showed that the apparent contradiction could be explained by women responding less to the increase in their husbands’ income, and more to the increased wages available to them — demand for married women’s labor rose.¹⁰ However, as Goldin argues, Mincer’s argument applies poorly to the period before 1940.¹¹

As well as understanding the behavioral determinants of married women’s work it is important to accurately determine the level of participation. Scholars have raised concerns that the census did not accurately enumerate women's work in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. For example, Susan Carter and Richard Sutch argue that the returns of the 1880 census were edited to conform to the Census Bureau's view that married women did not do substantial work outside the home for pay.¹² They argue that women enumerated as “housekeepers” should be included in the labor force, which would more than double the participation rate of married women in 1880, from 5.7 per cent to 12.3 per cent. Nancy Folbre and Marjorie Abel raise the related issue that women who returned the response “housewife” or some other response indicating non-market work may actually have worked part-time in paid employment. Revised instructions to census enumerators in 1910 that attempted to eliminate the presumption that married women (or children) did not work produced a higher rate of labor force participation by married women than the 1900 census.¹³ Interpreting the 1910 enumeration in relation to earlier and later censuses has divided scholars between those who argue that the 1910 census was essentially an overcount (e.g; Stanley Lebergott), and those who argue that the 1910 census gives a more informative upper bound estimate of women's labor force participation.¹⁴

Objectives

My dissertation will address several key problems in understanding married women's labor force participation in the United States.

Accuracy of census enumeration of married women's work

I will use payroll records in conjunction with the recently released database of the entire 1880 census to evaluate how accurately the census collected data about work by married women. Comparing payroll records to the census will provide new information on the accuracy of census data about women’s labor market and occupational behavior. There is no published research in

⁹ Erika H. Schoenberg and Paul H. Douglas. “Studies in the Supply Curve of Labor: The Relation in 1929 between Average Earnings in American Cities and the Proportions Seeking Employment.” *Journal of Political Economy*, 1937, 45(1), p.50. This article updated the results in Paul H. Douglas. *The Theory of Wages*. New York: Macmillan, 1934.

¹⁰ Jacob Mincer, “Labor Force Participation of Married Women,” H. G. Lewis, *Aspects of Labor Economics*. Princeton: National Bureau of Economic Research and Princeton University Press, 1962, 63-97.

¹¹ Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, p.137.

¹² Susan B. Carter and Richard Sutch. “Fixing the Facts: Editing of the 1880 U.S. Census of Occupations with Implications for Long-Term Labor-Force Trends and the Sociology of Official Statistics.” *Historical Methods*, 1996, 29(1), pp. 5-24.

¹³ Nancy Folbre and M. Abel. “Women's Work and Women's Households: Gender Bias in the U.S. Census.” *Social Research*, 1989, 56, pp. 545-555.

¹⁴ Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1964, pp.71-72. Cf. Claudia Goldin. *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p.224.

the United States which compares firm and census records about work and occupations.¹⁵ The 1880 census is the best censuses to link with payroll data, because it is available in electronic format, with identifying information such as name, age, occupation and residential location available for all respondents.¹⁶ I will consider the feasibility of comparing payroll data to the 1900 or 1930 censuses. Indices of these censuses are also being compiled by ProQuest Information & Learning Services.

The 1880 dataset is also useful for analyzing detailed occupational data for the entire country. For example, there are a significant number of women who are recorded as “blacksmith's wife” and similar terms indicating a relationship to a worker, often an artisan worker. It is possible that these women's response indicated they had a role in their husband's business, or it may be that enumerators were only clarifying information about household relationships. I will investigate what distinguished women who reported that they were the wife of a worker from women who did not. Using multinomial logit models I will attempt to work out what demographic and economic characteristics distinguish four kinds of relationship to the labor force: women who gave no occupational response, women who said they were housekeepers, women who indicated a relationship to a worker, and women who indicated definite gainful employment. In working with the 1880 dataset coding the occupational responses I observed that there were not many responses such as “laborer's wife” or “accountant's wife”, but more responses indicating marriage to an artisan worker.

Estimating the added-worker effect

Before 1940 income information was not collected in the census. This is a significant disadvantage for understanding women's labor force participation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as the census — the most representative source — lacks a key variable. I will explore two main strategies for overcoming this problem.

First, I will integrate available survey data that includes income information, such as the 1917/19 Cost of Living Survey, with the IPUMS to create synthetic and weighted samples for analysis of women's work behavior.¹⁷ Similar surveys were conducted in the late 1880s and in 1935/36.¹⁸ I will also use data from the Historical Labor Statistics Project which has collected wage information in state labor surveys conducted between the 1880s and the early 1900s.

Second, I will investigate the creation of a sample combining payroll records and census data. Because the complete 1880 census is available in electronic form it will be most feasible to experiment with this strategy in 1880. Working from payroll records of male employees I will find their household's 1880 census records and create a dataset that includes census information on the household including wives' work and demographic characteristics, and the husband's income data from payroll records. The resulting dataset, however, will have an inherent selection bias from using the records of a small number of firms whose records survive. Accurate income

¹⁵ This has been done in Britain: Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work, 1840-1940*, London, 1988. M. Woollard, "Shooting the nets": a note on the reliability of the 1881 Census Enumerators' Books'. *Local Population Studies*, 59 (1997) pp. 54-57

¹⁶ <<http://www.nappdata.org>>

¹⁷ Cf. C. Moehling, "Women's Work and Men's Unemployment", *Journal of Economic History*, 61(4), 2001, pp.926-949.

¹⁸ U.S. Dept. of Labor. *Cost of Living of Industrial Workers in the United States and Europe, 1888-1890* [Computer file]. 3rd ICPSR ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social, 1986. Study No. 7711. U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Bureau of Home Economics, et al. *Study of Consumer Purchases in the United States, 1935-1936* [Computer file]. 2nd ICPSR ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1999. The latter dataset has not been used extensively, though there is one article which uses a sample of respondents from Atlanta. Andrea G. Hunter, "The other breadwinners: The mobilization of secondary wage earners in early twentieth-century black families," *History of the Family*, 6(1), 2001, pp.69-94.

information for this time period is hard to uncover from other sources, and I will quantify the extent of biases in the payroll-augmented sample by comparing the marginal distribution of occupations and household structure with national statistics.

I will examine payroll records from textile and tobacco firms in the South (University of North Carolina and Duke University), manufacturing and railroad companies in the Mid-Atlantic (Hagley Library), manufacturing firms in the Northeast (Baker Library at Harvard Business School) and manufacturing and railroad companies in the Midwest (Newberry Library), and Minnesota companies whose records are held at the Minnesota Historical Society. Including a variety of industries and regions in the data will make the analysis more representative.

Variation in individual hours of work

Labor force participation is commonly measured as a binary variable indicating participation or not. Understanding the extent of participation in the labor market in hours and weeks worked is also important. The availability of microdata on hours worked in the 1940 census provides an opportunity to explore this question. Elizabeth Landes and Claudia Goldin have shown how state-level maximum hours laws affected female employment and hours worked using 1920 data on scheduled hours summarized by state and industry.¹⁹ They focused on 1920 because legislation had just been passed in many states. In 1940 many states still had this legislation in effect. Although the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) had been passed in 1938 restricting weekly hours in many occupations, variation in coverage of the FLSA across industries will be informative. Indeed, because women in industries such as retailing, domestic service, and agriculture were among the principal groups not covered by the FLSA, and left under the aegis of state laws, the 1940 census offers an excellent opportunity to understand the impact of laws and personal characteristics on working hours.²⁰ After combining individual-level data on hours worked, occupation and industry with state-level data on hours legislation, I will estimate models that show the separate effects of state and federal legislation and individual characteristics on working hours.

Changing business attitudes towards the employment of married women

Married women's labor force participation would not have continued to rise without changes in the attitudes of employers. I will examine this change qualitatively and quantitatively. In the qualitative research I will examine trade publications (e.g; *Dry Goods Economist* in the retailing industry), firm's staff magazines, and personnel files to see how business attitudes towards employing married women changed. At the firm level I will examine how marriage bars operated in the workplace, and were experienced by women workers. For the quantitative analysis, I will use employer surveys carried out by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor.²¹ After examining the survey forms which are held at the National Archives in College

¹⁹ E.M. Landes, "The Effect of State Maximum-Hours Laws on the Employment of Women in 1920," *The Journal of Political Economy*, 88(3), 1980, pp.476-494. ; C. Goldin, "Maximum Hours Legislation and Female Employment: A Reassessment", *The Journal of Political Economy*, 96(1), 1988, pp.188-205.

²⁰ On the differential coverage of the FLSA, see *inter alia* Suzanne B. Mettler. "Federalism, Gender, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938." *Polity*, 1994, 26(4), pp. 635-54. Suzanne Mettler. *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. Phyllis Palmer. "Outside the Law: Agricultural and Domestic Workers under the Fair Labor Standards Act." *Journal of Policy History*, 1995, 7(4), pp. 416-40. Dora Costa. "Hours of Work and the Fair Labor Standards Act: A Study of Retail and Wholesale Trade, 1938-1950." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 2000, 53(4), pp. 648-64.

²¹ C. Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, New York, 1990, pp.229-230.

Park (MD), I will attempt to locate the records of the firms surveyed for use in the qualitative analysis.

Significance

Married women's labor force participation has increased significantly since the 1950s. Understanding the antecedents of this change in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries is critical to fully appreciating the recent changes. My dissertation will address some important gaps in the literature on this important social and economic change. Although there is already an important body of work on married women’s labor force participation my dissertation takes advantage of nationally representative census samples that were not available when Claudia Goldin's *Understanding the Gender Gap* was published, and takes advantage of the complete-count 1880 census data which has only recently been released to researchers.

Work plan

I have done some preliminary work on this topic already, presenting papers about interwar changes in married women's labor force behavior at two conferences, and publishing a paper in *Labour History* that dealt in part with attitudes towards married women's work in retailing.

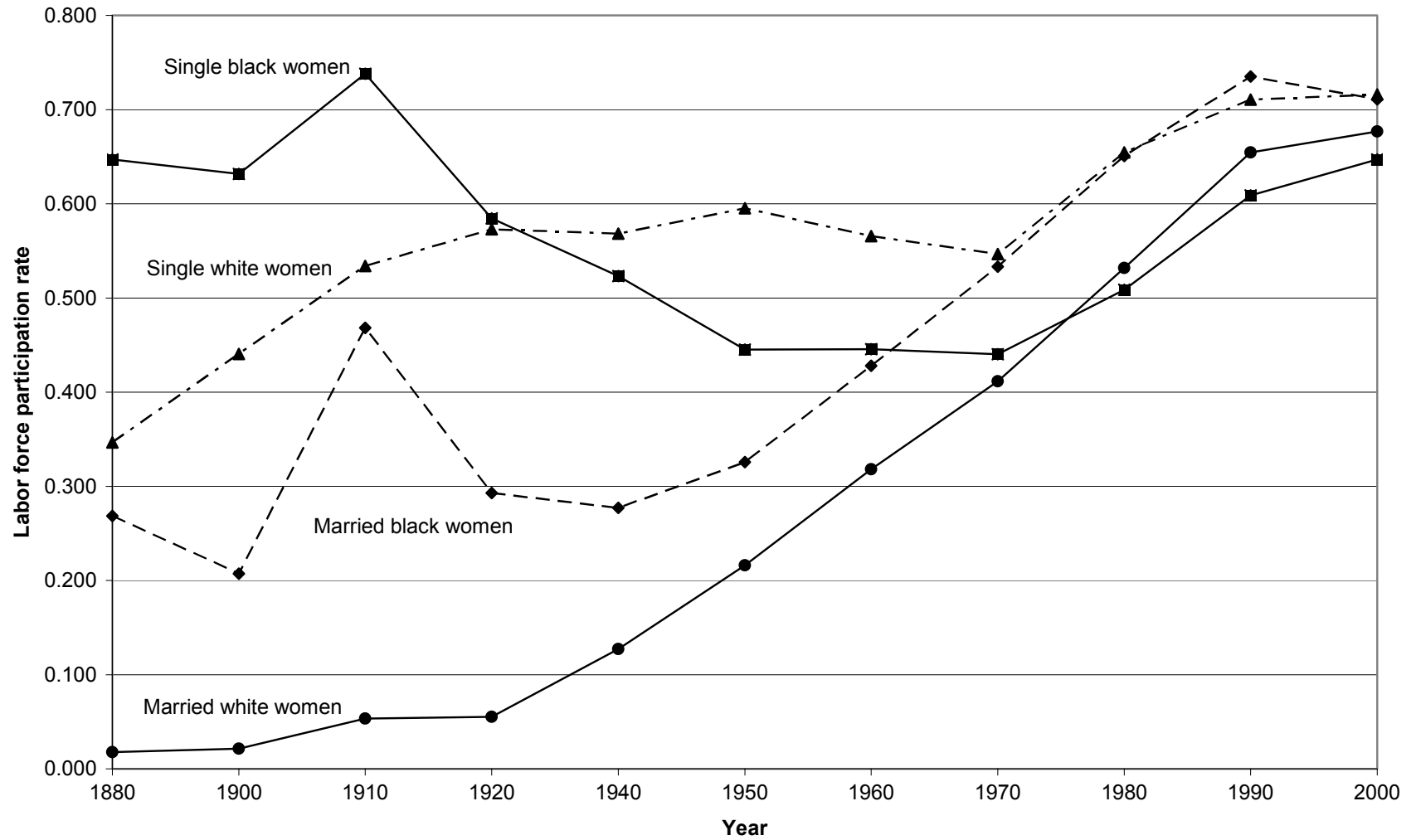
- “Labor Force Participation by Married Women in the United States: Results from the 1917/19 Cost-of-Living Survey and the 1920 PUMS,” presented at the Population Association of America conference, Minneapolis, May 2003.
- “Gender in Store: Salespeople’s Working Hours and Union Organisation in New Zealand and the United States, 1930-60,” *Labour History*, 83 (November), 2002, pp.107-130.
- “Her Real Sphere? Married Women’s Labor Force Participation in the United States, 1920-1940,” presented at the Social Science History Association conference, St. Louis, October 2002.

My plan for researching the dissertation is as follows.

Fall 2003	Seven weeks research at archives on the East Coast and in Chicago. This trip has received funding from the Economic History Association. I have substantial money in this grant for photocopying, and additional photocopying money from the History Department. On this trip I hope to collect the majority of the payroll records I need, view the records about state hours-of-work laws at the National Archives, and scope what collections I will use for the qualitative research on business attitudes towards married women’s employment. When I find payroll records that are suitable for linking to the census I will photocopy the relevant pages, so that I can work on the material in Minneapolis. I will aim to sample a small number of workers from a large number of firms to achieve a broader coverage of occupations and industries in which husbands are employed.
Spring 2004	Initial research with the 1935/36 Study of Consumer Purchases data. I will present the results of my initial research with this dataset in a paper at the European Social Science History Association conference in Berlin in March 2004.
Summer 2004	Linking payroll records to census data: Over summer I will begin the linking of payroll records to the 1880 census. This linking work may continue into fall.
Fall 2004	Archival research on business attitudes towards married women’s

	employment. I will apply for funding to make a return visit to the Hagley and Baker libraries to complete my data gathering for the chapter on changing business attitudes to married women's employment. When I return to Minneapolis, I will analyze this data and draft the chapter.
Spring 2005	Continuation of linking work. I will complete the linking of payroll records to the census data and write up the results of the research using the payroll-augmented census data evaluating the accuracy of the
Summer 2005	Variation in individual hours of work. I will construct a dataset of state-level limits on hours of work that reflects the differential treatment in the legislation of men and women, and different occupations. This will be combined with the individual data from the 1940 PUMS.
Fall 2005 and Spring 2006	Writing dissertation. This year will be used to complete the writing of the individual chapters, and the introductory and concluding chapters.
Summer 2006	Dissertation completed

Figure 1. Labor force participation rates of 16-64 year old women in the United States, 1880-2000



Note: The spike in black women's participation in 1910 is because the census enumerated unpaid workers on family farms as being in the labor