# Women at Work: The Intergenerational Effects of World War II

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how exposure to women working during World War II influenced adolescents future labor market decisions and educational attainment. Using a difference-in-differences framework and U.S. Census data, I exploit variation in female labor force participation shocks across State Economic Areas (SEA's) during WWII. My analysis focuses on individuals who were adolescents during the war period, comparing outcomes between those in areas that experienced positive employment shocks versus those that did not. Results indicate that women who grew up in areas with higher female labor force participation during WWII were 1.6 to 7 percentage points more likely to enter the workforce themselves, suggesting a significant role model effect. This relationship remains robust across multiple specifications. The findings contribute to our understanding of how exposure to working women during formative years shapes long-term labor market decisions and highlights the lasting impact of temporary labor market shocks on intergenerational outcomes.

## 1. Introduction

In December of 1941, the United States entered World War II, a decision that brought rapid military mobilization and industrial expansion. The US was faced with an urgent need to produce military equipment, from guns and ammunition to airplanes and bombs, which caused American businesses to dramatically expanded their production, and build additional factories across the county. This expansion prompted an increase in labor, and

as a result, millions of women began to work. For example, these manufacturing jobs made up 34 percent of female employment in 1944 compared to just 21 percent in 1940 (Rose, 2018), and had more than double in size by 1944. Surprisingly, "female wartime workers were not primarily the wives of soldiers picking up new jobs to supplement meager military pay" as the BLS shows that "married women constituted 44 percent of the female workforce, but only 7.7 percent of workers had a husband absent in the armed forces" during the war (Rose, 2018). By the end of the war, approximately 35% of women aged 25 to 44 were employed, though studies indicate that most women wartime workers left the labor force by 1946 (Goldin, 2006, Jaworski, 2014, Goldin, 1991). Ford, for example, "had employed women as one-fourth of its wartime labor force producing airplanes and military vehicles; by 1946 only four percent of Ford's employees, including clerical workers, were women" (Schweitzer, 1980).

Importantly, these employment shocks were not uniform across the country, but they varied across the US. Rose, 2018 studies the regional variation in female labor force participation using State Economic Areas (SEA's[1]), in which he showed that some regions experienced significant increases and others witnessed declines. This heterogeneity offers a unique setting to study the effects of early exposure to female labor force participation on labor market decisions of these adolescence.

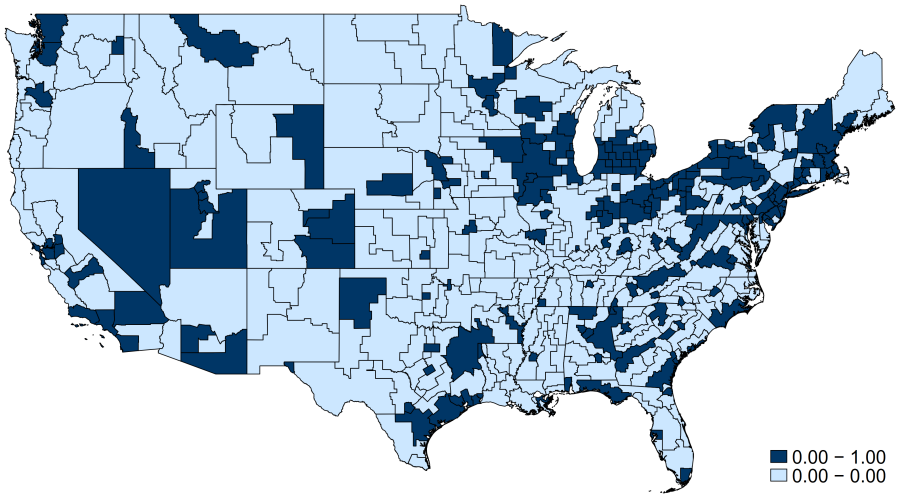



Figure 1: Data compiled by Rose, 2018. Map shows positive growth areas in Female Labor Force Participation across the US.

This paper will focus on the question of whether exposure to higher female labor

[1]For more information, please see IMPUS USA's description, linked here.

force participation during World War II created a role model effect, influencing the later employment decisions of women who were in their formative years at the time. While this topic is not new to the economics literature, it is important to understand the effects of short term shocks on decision making. In the current literature, Fernandez et al., 2004 find that sons exposed to working mothers tend to marry working women, but did not find that daughters of mothers in high mobilization areas were more likely to work. Recently, Binder, 2021; Galassi et al., 2024 suggest that maternal employment is strongly correlated with the employment deccisions of children, with the impact being particularly pronounced for daughters. However, the existing literature does not directly exploit the World War II shock to identify the causal role of short term early childhood exposure to female employment on daughters' future labor market participation choices.

Additionally, a decision to join the work force may limit the amount of education received by these individuals. Jaworski, 2014 finds that women approaching high school graduation during World War II were often attracted to work opportunities, often at the expense of continued schooling, which brought lower educational attainment for female cohorts who were exposed to mobilization by 1960. However, this literature does not examine the impact for adolescence who witnessed women engage in work. This paper will extend the literature by assessing the educational outcomes associated with exposure to female labor force participation as a result of the World War II shock. Specifically, I will examine if the exposure effect brought lower educational attainment for those children.

Finally, there are other factors the may play a role in advancing or mitigating the role of the employment effect. Papers by Agostinelli & Sorrenti, 2018 and Caucutt et al., 2020 find that lower income families tend to gain more by joining the labor force. Thus, in this paper, I will investigate whether the employment shocks had heterogeneous effects along the income distribution in SEA's.

Using a difference-in-differences framework that exploits the variation in female employment shocks, I compare the labor market outcomes of women who were adolescents during the war in areas with high versus low exposure. My findings indicate that women who grew up in regions with higher female labor force participation were between 1.6 and 7 percentage points more likely to participate in the labor market later in life. Moreover,

triple-differences estimates suggest that the role model effect is particularly more powerful on those individuals from low income households.

By linking historical shocks to intergenerational labor market decisions, this study help us to understand of how temporary disruptions in social norms can have lasting effects on behavior in the labor market. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the empirical methodology and identification strategy. Section 3 describes the data and sample selection. Section 4 presents the main results, and Section 5 discusses robustness checks. The final section concludes with the implications of my results and suggestions for future research.

# 2. Methodology

The wartime shocks to female labor force participation were not uniform across SEA's. In some SEA's, children were exposed to the shock as women entered the workforce during World War II, while in other SEA's there was little change or even a return home. To analyze the impact of this exposure on employment decisions of the exposed adolescences, I employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) framework that compares individuals who live in SEA's that had a positive employment shock with those in SEA's that did not. The baseline DiD specification is given by:

$$\begin{aligned} employed_{ist} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 pos\_shock_s + \beta_2 post_t \ + \beta_3 (pos\_shock_s \times post_t) \\ + \gamma X_{ist} + \alpha_s + \epsilon_{ist} \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where *employed* is an indicator variable for whether an individual $i$ in SEA $s$ at time $t$ is employed or not. The variable *pos_shock* is an indicator variable that equals one if the individual lives in a SEA that had a positive employment shock, *post* is an indicator variable that equals one if the year is after the employment shock (1950 and beyond). The interaction term, $pos\_shock \times post$ captures the causal effect of the shock on employment decisions, with $\beta_3$ being the parameter of interest. $X_i$ is a vector of individual controls and $\alpha$ denotes fixed effects based on the SEA.

In addition to the binary shock measure, I also exploit a continuous measure of the

shock using the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation[2]. The only difference in the estimation is that the binary shock indicator is replaced with with the actual transformed shock value. This framework is presented in Callaway et. al (CITE).

I apply the same strategy to assess the affect exposure has on educational attainment. The equation is:

$$\begin{aligned} education_{i,s,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 pos\_shock_s + \beta_2 post_t \\ + \beta_3 (pos\_shock_s \times post_t) + \gamma X_{i,s,t} + \alpha_s + \epsilon_{i,s,t} \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Here, education represents the highest grade of education that the individual has completed, while all other variables are defined in Equation (1).

Finally, to investigate how the employment shock affected individuals across income distributions, I use a triple-differences (DDD) framework. Families are classified into five income quintiles, with the first quintile serving as the baseline category. The DDD specification is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} employed_{ist} = \beta_0 + \sum_{q=2}^{5} \beta_{1q} (pos\_shock_s \times Post_t \times Quintile_{qi}) + \beta_2 (pos\_shock_s \times Post_t) \\ + \sum_{q=2}^{5} \beta_{3q} (pos\_shock_s \times Quintile_{qi}) + \sum_{q=2}^{5} \beta_{4q} (Post_t \times Quintile_{qi}) \\ + \sum_{q=2}^{5} \beta_{5q} Quintile_{qi} + \gamma_s + \delta_t + X_{ist}\beta + \epsilon_{ist} \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where $Quintile_{qi}$ is an indicator for whether individual $i$ belongs to income quintile $q$. The first quintile serves as the base category. This specification allows me to determine how the role model effect varies across the income distribution, rather than just between high and low income groups. The coefficients of interest are the $\beta_{1q}$ terms, which capture the differential effects of the employment shock on employment choices for each income quintile (relative to the lowest quintile) in the post-period. The coefficients $\beta_{3q}$ reveal how the general relationship between employment shocks and work decisions varies between income quintiles, while the coefficients $\beta_{5q}$ show baseline differences in employment across

[2]I cannot calculate the log for a traditional percent change since some values are equal to zero. Thus, I use the inverse hyperbolic since transformation, which yields roughly the same interpretation.

income groups.

Overall, this framework will allow me to see how the employment shocks from World War 2 effect the decision making of women in their adolescence during the war.

# 3. Data

This paper uses samples from the US Census from 1930 to 1960[3], as well as locational female labor force shock data from World War 2 put together by Rose, 2018. The samples that I use are repeated cross-sections, meaning that I do not track the same individuals through time. With this, my analysis focuses on SEA's, defined in the 1940 and 1950 Census. SEA's are either counties, or groups of counties with similar characteristics. Across the United States, there are about 500 SEA's, however, my analysis only includes 362 SEA's, as some were not included in the sample pulled from the IMPUS Census, or were not in the data put together by Rose, 2018.

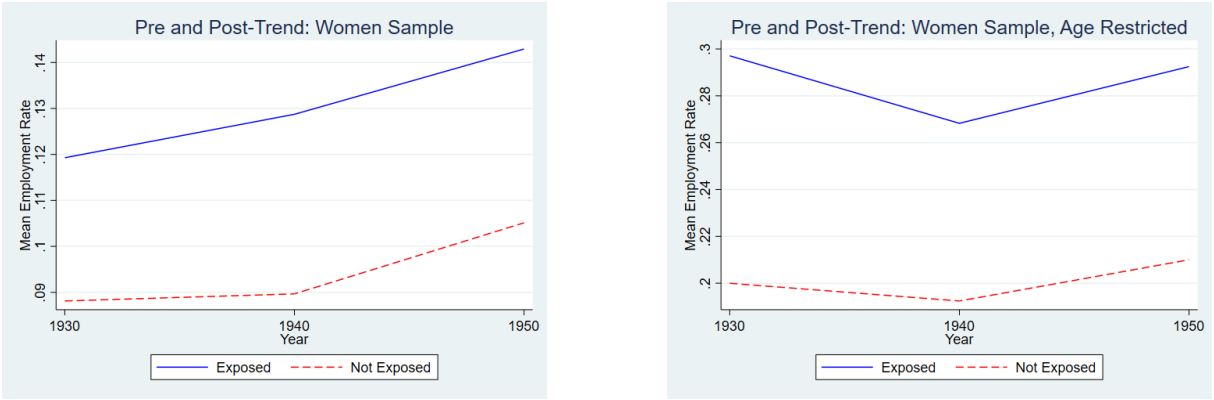
To focus only on intergenerational effects, I first restrict the data first to households with children. Further, observations from situations where a child does not have both parental figures in the home are exluded as well. From here, I create cohorts of individuals who are between the ages of 15 to 26 in the years 1930, 1940 and 1950, since Jaworski, 2014 finds cohort effects. I restrict the ages of individuals and therefore will be comparing cohorts ages 15 to 26 across time. This age restriction is motivated by the fact that children who were between ages 5 and 16 when the war began were likely to have been most affected by their mothers labor force participation. So, I want to see their employment decision, and compare it to a baseline. I do this cohort comparison to track the behavior of individuals in these cohorts to see how the shock from the war effects the decisions of people in these cohorts. While gaining a pre-trend baseline of behavior of previous cohorts. This pre-trend behavior is an important baseline of my diff-in-diff analysis. Finally, as previously stated, we do not have to worry about selection problems with women joining the work force.

[3]See the appendix for a table of summary statistics.

## 3.1 Parallel Trend Analysis

A critical assumption of the DiD approach is the parallel trends assumption. To ensure I do not violate this assumption, I examine the trends in employment aged 15 to 26 across time.

The figure below shows the employment trends from 1930 to 1950. Although one graph (Graph b) initially suggests a potential violation of parallel trends, a regression test seen in the table below confirm that the pre-treatment differences between treated and control groups are statistically insignificant. This provides allows me to continue with my DiD framework, and gives me confidence that I do not break the parallel trend assumption.




(a) Graph a.

(b) Graph b.

Figure 2: The above figures show the trends in employment from 1930 to 1950.

Table 1: Pre-Trend Test

| | (1)<br>employed |
|---|---|
| pos_emp_diff | 0.0825*** |
| | (0.00278) |
| post | 0.0140*** |
| | (0.00239) |
| treated_pre | 0.00323 |
| | (0.00364) |
| Constant | 0.196*** |
| | (0.00151) |
| Observations | 227352 |

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

### 3.2 Data from the 1950 Extract of the Census

One problem with this data is weak education data in 1950. Education variables were only answered by one person in the household in the 1950 census, leaving much of our observational groups educational values being left blank [4]. Therefore, I will have to use 1960 educational data in this paper.

There are a few problems with this. First, I have concerns of a spillover effect from the large gap in time from the end of the war. Another problem is mobility. In the 15 year period, it is possible that a lot of people moved. However, both of these would bias our estimator downwards, so if an estimate is found significant, it would still indicate a robust estimator.

One final problem is that the US Census Bureau stopped using SEA as a location identifier after the 1950 Census. So, I had to merge files in provide by the IMPUS[5] This merger may differ slightly on the boarders of SEA's, but should not cause any real problems.

Thus, despite some data limitations from these samples from the Census, I still have a credible way to examine how the female labor force supply shocks influenced labor market and educational attainment for the next generation.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 The Role Model Effect

Table 2 presents the results of the role model effect regression. Here, I find that the shock interacted with the time period is not significant when predicting employment status, holding all else equal. However, when I add controls to further specify the DiD, we find that the interaction is statistically significant. This suggests that the model being unspecified may have obscured the true effect of exposure.

Additionally, when testing on the continuous diff-in-diff, I still find results to be statistically significant, in the fully specified model. The results are seen below in table 3.

[4]For more information, please see IMPUS, or click here.
[5]For additional information, please visit IMPUS, or click here.

Table 2: Effects of WW2 Labor Supply Shocks on Female Employment (Binary)

| | (1) Binary DiD | (2) Binary DiD w/Controls |
|---|---|---|
| Positive Employment Shock=1 | 0.0857*** | 0.0000 |
| | (0.0024) | (.) |
| Post Treatment=1 | 0.0140*** | 0.0162*** |
| | (0.0024) | (0.0033) |
| Positive Employment Shock=1 × Post Treatment=1 | -0.0032 | 0.0166*** |
| | (0.0036) | (0.0048) |
| hh_head_occscore | | 0.0010*** |
| | | (0.0001) |
| hh_head_inc | | -0.0000*** |
| | | (0.0000) |
| black | | 0.0119*** |
| | | (0.0042) |
| Constant | 0.1960*** | 0.2708*** |
| | (0.0015) | (0.0034) |
| Observations | 227,352 | 149,783 |
| Adjusted R-squared | 0.010 | 0.038 |

Standard errors in parentheses
Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01
All specifications include SEA fixed effects.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note, that the positive employment shock is removed in column 2 for collinearity issues, since I include fixed effects in the regression design.

These results conclude that women who grew up in areas in which they experienced the shock from World War II were more likely themselves to work. Specifically, in SEA's that experienced a positive employment shock, the probability of female employment increased by 1.66 percentage points in the post-exposure period, compared to areas that did not experience a positive shock, holding all else equal. Thus, the results show that exposure to women working in adolescence can help shape labor market decisions of women.

Additionally, higher occupation scores are associated with higher employment outcomes as well. Finally, income is significantly significant, and says that a $1,000 increase to income would be associated with a 0.3 percentage point decrease in the probability of

female employment. These results suggest that women who come from wealth may have different expectations when it comes to their decisions to work.

When analyzing the continuous case, Table 3 reports that a one unit increase in the continuous measure of the employment shock is associated with approximately a 0.13 percentage point increase in female employment probability. These estimates are statistically significant when accounting for individual factors, as well as SEA controls. Additionally, I once again find that income is negative related to probability, while occupation score is positively related.

Table 3: Effects of WW2 Labor Supply Shocks on Female Employment (Continuous)

| | (1) Continuous DiD | (2) Continuous DiD w/Controls |
|---|---|---|
| Post Treatment=1 | 0.0177*** | 0.0294*** |
| | (0.0023) | (0.0030) |
| Post Treatment=1 × asinh_emp_dif | 0.0005 | 0.0017*** |
| | (0.0004) | (0.0005) |
| hh_head_occscore | | 0.0010*** |
| | | (0.0001) |
| hh_head_inc | | -0.0000*** |
| | | (0.0000) |
| black | | 0.0120*** |
| | | (0.0042) |
| Constant | 0.2359*** | 0.2708*** |
| | (0.0012) | (0.0034) |
| Observations | 227,352 | 149,783 |
| Adjusted R-squared | 0.034 | 0.038 |

Standard errors in parentheses

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

All specifications include SEA fixed effects.

Continuous shock measured using inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of employment difference.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Together, these results support the hypothesis that having exposure to an increase in female labor force participation during formative years has a measurable, and significant effect on employment decisions in the future.

## 4.2 Education Effect

Table X presents the results of the impact of the role model effect on education attainment.

Currently, I am having coding problems with this section.

## 4.3 Impact of Wealth

In the table below, I report the results from the triple differences that examines how the role model effect varies across the income distribution, using the lowest group as a reference. First, we see that all income quintiles see higher amounts of employment when compared to quintile one. However, only quintile three is statistically significant here.

Furthermore, when interacting income quintiles with the positive employment shock, the coefficients are negative across all groups, with the estimates for the third and fifth quintiles being statistical significance. The interpretation in the third quintile for example, is that exposure to the positive employment shock is associated with a reduction of the probability of female employment relative to the lowest group at approximately 4 percentage points. This suggests that while the role model effect generally increases labor market participation for individuals who are exposed to it, its magnitude varies by income group. In particular, my results suggest a stronger role model effect among women from lower income backgrounds. Additionally, more controls in the regression indicate that being black and having a father with a higher occupational score are both positively correlated with female employment.

Overall, these results imply that societal norms and wealth have a complex relationship. Yet, it is safe to say that the strength and direction of the employment shock depend on family income. Thus, in areas where economic conditions are worse, or individuals have worse wealth, the role model effect appears to have a particularly pronounced impact on labor market decisions.

Table 4: Effects of WWII Female Employment Shocks Across Income Quintiles

| | Female Employment (1) employed |
|---|---|
| Income Quintile 2 | 0.010 |
| | (0.007) |
| Income Quintile 3 | 0.020*** |
| | (0.007) |
| Income Quintile 4 | 0.003 |
| | (0.007) |
| Income Quintile 5 (Highest) | 0.006 |
| | (0.008) |
| Shock × Quintile 2 | -0.012 |
| | (0.010) |
| Shock × Quintile 3 | -0.040*** |
| | (0.011) |
| Shock × Quintile 4 | -0.017 |
| | (0.011) |
| Shock × Quintile 5 | -0.021* |
| | (0.011) |
| hh_head_occscore | 0.001*** |
| | (0.000) |
| black | 0.080*** |
| | (0.012) |
| Observations | 86191 |

Standard errors in parentheses
Standard errors clustered at SEA level in parentheses
* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01
Base category is Income Quintile 1 (lowest income)
Controls include household head occupation score and race
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

# 5. Robustness Checks

## 5.1 Bartik Instruments

To validate my results, I use Bartik Instruments, which is becoming increasingly common in economic literature (see Goldsmith-Pinkham et al., 2020). Since I have a baseline in

1940, and an aggregate shock, I can create a Bartik instrument. This is defined below:

$$Z_r = \sum_s (PreWar_{r,s,1940} \times Shock_{s,r,1944-1940}) \tag{4}$$

where $PreWar_{r,s,1940}$ is the share of female labor force participation in SEA r, in sector s, in 1940, and $Shock_{s,r,1944-1940}$ is the regional increase in female labor force participation in region r, in sector s due to the war.

Then, the first stage of the regression will yield the female labor force participation during World War II, in a specific SEA, while also including regional controls. This is defined below:

$$FLFP_{r,t} = \beta * Z_r + \gamma * X_{r,t} + \epsilon_r \tag{5}$$

where $FLFP_{r,t}$ is the estimated female labor force participation in region r during World War II, $Z_r$ is the Bartik instrument defined above, and $X_{r,t}$ is the regional controls at time t.

The second stage will use the estimated female labor force participation, and individual level controls to predict daughter labor force participation. This is defined as:

$$ChildLFPR_i = \delta * \hat{FLFP}_{r,t} + \eta * FC_i + e_i \tag{6}$$

and

where $\delta$ is the parameter of interest, and $FC_i$ is a vector of family controls.

After computing this, the results are seen below, confirming the results that I got using diff-in-diff, suggesting the results are robust.

Table 5: Bartik IV Estimates

| | (1) First Stage | (2) Second Stage |
|---|---|---|
| bartik_instrument | 0.001*** | |
| | (0.000) | |
| pos_emp_diff_hat | | 0.075*** |
| | | (0.023) |
| 0.post | | 0.000 |
| | | (.) |
| 1.post | | 0.013*** |
| | | (0.003) |
| race | | 0.019*** |
| | | (0.007) |
| _cons | 0.540*** | 0.179*** |
| | (0.025) | (0.015) |
| Observations | 228,156 | 228,156 |
| R-squared | 0.510 | 0.004 |
| F-statistic | 79.37 | |

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

First, our instrument is statistically significant, and the regression has an F-Statistic of 79, which is about the conventional threshold of 10, so I conclude that the instrument is strong, and valid. Further, the interaction term is positive and significant, meaning that in areas that experience a positive employment shock, the probability of female employment increased by 7.5 percentage points in the post-exposure period, compared to areas without the shock and holding all else equal.

Interestingly, this result is about 6 percentage points higher than our diff-in-diff estimation, and this could happen for many different reasons. First, since this has LATE interpretation, we are capturing the effect on people whose treatment status is affected by the shock, thus this could boost the estimation. Another possibility falls with selection bias. For example, areas may have characteristics that reduce female employment, however, I find this unlikely, given that Rose, 2018 finds no selection problems.

### 5.2 Quantile Regression

$$Q_\tau(Y_{ist}|X) = \beta_1^\tau(WW2_s \times Post_t) + \gamma_s^\tau + \delta_t^\tau + X_{ist}\beta^\tau \tag{7}$$

Where:

$$\tau \in \{0.1, 0.5, 0.9\} \tag{8}$$

I need help here: I don't know much about quantile regression.

### 5.3 Long Term Impact

This section I am not sure about. Do you think analysis on long term impact is needed?

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the intergenerational impact of female labor force participation during World War II on the employment and educational outcomes of those who were adolescence at the time. By using difference-in-differences framework, my analysis provides strong evidence that exposure to a positive female employment shock during World War II gave females in adolescence a role model. Specifically, the results indicate that women who grew up in areas experiencing higher female labor force participation were significantly more likely to enter the workforce, by an estimated 1.66 to 7.5 percentage points compared to those in non-exposed areas.

My analysis further shows that this role model effect is heterogeneous across income groups. By using income quintiles, my results suggests that women from low income backgrounds are more likely to join the work force, which may underscore how societal norms play a role in class and labor market decisions.

While the empirical strategy is robust, this paper has several short comings. Notably, the use of repeated cross-sectional data does not allow for me to account for mobility, which may bias the estimates. Further, working with multiple georgraphic identifiers may introduce some amount of measurement error. Despite this, the consistency of my results across multiple specifications allows me to support the conclusions drawn.

The findings of this paper have important implications for our understanding of the

transmission of gender roles and labor market behaviors. They suggest that even temporary shocks can have lasting effects on the career decisions of future generations, especially when dealing with societal norms.

To conclude, this paper contributes to the literature on intergenerational transmission of labor market behaviors and discusses the influence of early exposure to female role models on choices in the labor market.

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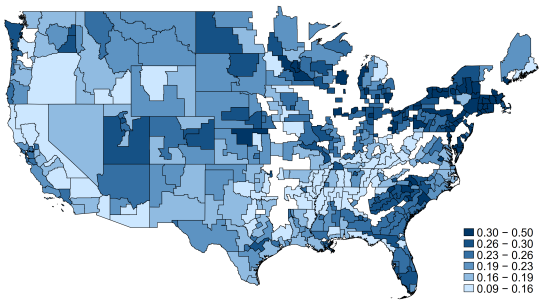
# 7. Appendix

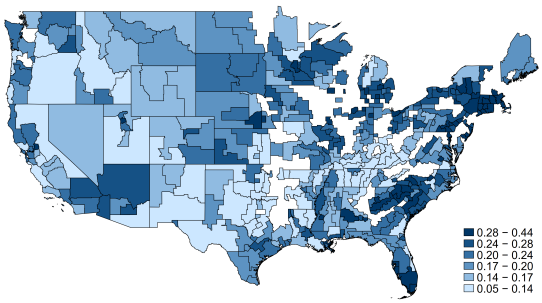
Table 6: Summary Statistics by Employment Growth

| Summary Statistics by Employment Growth | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | | (2) | | (3) | |
| | All | | Low Growth | | High Growth | |
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| Employment Rate | 0.31 | (0.00) | 0.29 | (0.01) | 0.32 | (0.00) |
| Household Head Occ Score | 28.08 | (0.73) | 26.61 | (0.85) | 29.78 | (0.69) |
| Household Head Income | 803.60 | (154.68) | 697.06 | (137.10) | 928.44 | (262.52) |
| Spouse Occ Score | 3.90 | (0.02) | 3.69 | (0.06) | 4.14 | (0.09) |
| Spouse Income | 803.60 | (154.68) | 697.06 | (137.10) | 928.44 | (262.52) |
| White | 658618.33 | (214824.01) | 329891.67 | (95410.75) | 328726.67 | (119432.99) |
| Black | 80031.67 | (39233.09) | 52358.67 | (22353.88) | 27673.00 | (16899.80) |
| Asian | 743470.67 | (256527.07) | 385294.33 | (119365.67) | 358176.33 | (137199.79) |
| Men | 379849.00 | (129671.82) | 197907.00 | (60849.25) | 181942.00 | (68850.30) |
| Women | 363621.67 | (126856.07) | 187387.33 | (58516.47) | 176234.33 | (68351.83) |
| $N$ | 3 | | 3 | | 3 | |

Notes: Standard deviations in parentheses. High Growth indicates areas with above-median employment growth (pos_emp_diff=1).




(a) Graph a. 1950




(b) Graph b. 1940

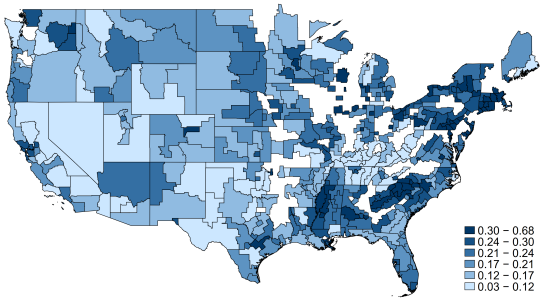



Figure 4: Graph c. 1930

Figure 5: The above figures show female labor force participation across states.