



Short communication

The economic consequences of being widowed by war: A life-cycle perspective[☆]Sebastian T. Braun^{a,b,c}, Jan Stuhler^{d,b,c,*}^a University of Bayreuth, Germany^b CReAM, United Kingdom^c IZA, Germany^d Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Despite millions of war widows worldwide, little is known about the economic consequences of being widowed by war. We use life history data from West Germany to show that war widowhood increased women's employment immediately after World War II but led to lower employment rates later in life. War widows, therefore, carried a double burden of employment and childcare while their children were young but left the workforce when their children reached adulthood. We show that the design of compensation policies likely explains this counterintuitive life-cycle pattern and examine potential spillovers to the next generation.

1. Introduction

In many conflict zones, war widows constitute a large share of the population (Buvinic et al., 2012). For example, World War I (WWI) resulted in 3–4 million war widows (Bette, 2015), the Rwandan genocide in 500,000 (United Nations, 2001), and one to two million war widows lived in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s (IRB, 2007; Chandran, 2020). These women, many with young children, play a central role in rebuilding postwar societies, but we lack evidence on their economic situation (Brück and Schindler, 2009; Brounéus et al., 2024). While there is some work on the (gendered) consequences of spousal loss due to natural causes (e.g., Drèze and Srinivasan, 1997; Burkhauser et al., 2005; Fadlon and Nielsen, 2021), war widows face unique challenges due to the sudden and violent nature of their spouse's death, their often young age, and limited childcare and financial support in postwar societies.

This paper provides first quantitative evidence on the individual economic effects of being widowed by war. We focus on World War II (WWII), the deadliest conflict in history. Although more than 20 million soldiers died, and the support of their survivors was a key policy issue

after 1945, the literature on the individual effects of WWII (e.g., Ichino and Winter-Ebmer, 2004; Kesternich et al., 2014; Akbulut-Yuksel et al., 2022) has not yet examined the economic plight of surviving widows. Drawing on rich life course data for West Germany, our analysis focuses on labor market effects over the life cycle. In particular, we test the hypothesis that war widows increased their labor supply due to the adverse income shock of losing their husbands (Boehnke and Gay, 2022). In addition, we examine whether the daughters of widows held more progressive norms about female employment and increased their labor supply accordingly (Fernández et al., 2004; Gay, 2023).

We indeed find that war widowhood significantly increased employment in the immediate postwar period. In 1950, war widows born in 1906–1914 were 13.8 percentage points (pp), or 67%, more likely to be in market work than otherwise comparable women who did not lose their husbands in the war. However, this positive employment effect gradually declines, and by 1971 war widows were 1.9 pp less likely to work (and 2.5 times more likely to rely on welfare) than their peers. This finding is especially surprising given that most war widows remained unmarried (they were 73% less likely to be married in 1971)

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and labor force participation was higher for unmarried than married women at the time.

The children of war widows left school and entered the labor force earlier than their peers, presumably due to financial hardship in the postwar period. This educational penalty is particularly pronounced for boys, who lose a full year of education. However, we find no long-run effects of widowhood on either sons' or daughters' employment rates. Overall, widowhood leaves a clear mark on the employment trajectories and socioeconomic outcomes of the 1.0–1.2 million war widows living in West Germany after 1945 (Niehuss, 2002), but did not have a lasting effect on women's labor force participation.

We derive these results by comparing war widows, which we can directly identify in our data, with other women who had comparable prewar socioeconomic characteristics. Several observations support a causal interpretation of our estimates. First, differences in prewar characteristics between widows and non-widows are small and explain only about 1% of the variation in widowhood status. Second, adding control variables leaves our estimates unchanged while improving model fit. Third, war widowhood is uncorrelated with spousal or parental characteristics either. These findings are consistent with the fact that the women in our sample were married to men whose cohorts were largely or entirely conscripted for the war, minimizing selection into war service and death (Braun and Stuhler, 2023).

The widow's counterintuitive labor supply trajectories are likely explained by the design of the compensation system. Initially, financial support for war widows was limited, forcing many into employment. With Germany's economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s, compensation became more generous, especially its means-tested component, which created disincentives to work through standard substitution effects. This pattern is typical: compensation for war widows is often inadequate in war-torn societies, while more generous policies become feasible as the economy recovers and the number of widows eligible for compensation shrinks. Boehnke and Gay (2022) document that pension payments to French war widows after WWI were initially low but increased in the 1930s. Similarly, Skocpol (1993) documents how benefits to US Civil War veterans and their dependents expanded massively over time. We find that such back-loaded compensation schemes force widows to bear the double burden of employment and child care while they are young, but incentivize their withdrawal from the labor market later in life.

Moreover, we show that war-induced labor market entry does not necessarily increase women's labor force participation in the long run. The work experiences of war widows were often negative: working widows were accused of neglecting their childcare responsibilities, and many widows struggled to balance work and household responsibilities in the face of social stigma and a lack of childcare (Schnädelbach, 2007). Likely as a consequence, war widows did not hold more progressive views on the compatibility of family and work, as we show using survey data on attitudes and gender norms. They also did not place a higher value on work than non-widows, likely contributing to their withdrawal from the labor market later in life. In fact, daughters of war widows were more likely to agree with the statement that women with young children should *not* work.

Literature. Our paper is the first to provide representative individual-level evidence on the effects of war widowhood on labor market outcomes.¹ We contribute to a growing literature examining the effects of war mobilization and military fatalities on female labor force participation (FLFP).² Much of this literature has focused on the case of WWII in the US, suggesting that the mobilization of men drew women

into the labor force (Goldin, 1991; Acemoglu et al., 2004; Goldin and Olivetti, 2013; Jaworski, 2014; Doepke et al., 2015). However, recent evidence cautions that WWII decreased female opportunities in white-collar jobs (Bellou and Cardia, 2016) and suggests that war production rather than mobilization was the primary cause of the wartime surge in FLFP (Rose, 2018).

While the extant literature emphasizes shifts in aggregate labor demand, we examine how the individual experience of being widowed by war affects women's labor supply over the life cycle. Especially in countries with high military casualty rates, such as Japan, Germany, or the Soviet Union, the experience of war widows is indispensable for understanding the overall impact of WWII on FLFP. Related to our study, Boehnke and Gay (2022) note that the negative income shock of losing one's spouse may have led war widows to enter the labor force after WWI. Using variation across French regions, they show that higher military deaths increased FLFP and estimate that widowed women accounted for nearly half of this effect. However, they do not study individual labor market careers, as we do here.

Our paper also relates to studies that analyze the intergenerational persistence of war shocks on FLFP.³ Fernández et al. (2004) use variation in WWII mobilization rates across US states to document intergenerational spillovers in women's labor supply. Fernández (2013) develops a learning model of cultural change, in which WWII mobilization increases FLFP in the next generation, as women drawn into the labor force during the war learn the true cost of working. And Gay (2023) finds that women born in French counties that experienced higher military death rates in WWI were more likely to work decades after the war ended. While these studies also capture intergenerational spillovers from demand-driven shifts in women's employment (due to war mobilization), we focus on spillovers from individual changes in labor supply (due to spousal loss).

2. Institutional background

The total number of German military dead and missing was over five million, and a similar number of soldiers were injured (Overmans, 1999; Müller, 2016). The fate of surviving family members and the war-disabled was thus a pressing social problem in postwar Germany. The *Bundesversorgungsgesetz* (BVG) of October 1950 aimed at the physical and vocational rehabilitation of war victims and their families, and paid social assistance to those for whom rehabilitation was not, or only partially, possible (Diehl, 1985).

However, the difficult financial situation at the time limited the generosity of the compensation payments. War widows initially received an unconditional basic pension (*Grundrente*) of DM 40 and a means-tested compensatory pension (*Ausgleichsrente*) of up to DM 50 per month. The latter was not paid to women under age 50 unless they had children to care for or were unable to work. The maximum pension of 90 DM represented roughly 30% of the average gross labor income at the time. Children under age 18 received additional orphan's pensions.

As in other postwar societies (Skocpol, 1993; Boehnke and Gay, 2022), pension levels gradually increased over time. By 1960, the maximum amount of basic and compensatory pensions was about 49% of average labor income. Moreover, the conditions for receiving a compensatory pension were lowered and the age limit decreased from 50 to 45 years. Additional damage compensation (*Schadensausgleich*)

¹ Salisbury (2017) studies the impact of pension payments on the remarriage rates of Union Army widows whose husbands died in the US Civil War.

² A related literature explores the effect of war-related scarcity of men on the marriage market and fertility (Abramitzky et al., 2011; Bethmann

and Kvasnicka, 2013; Brainerd, 2017; Kesternich et al., 2020; Battistin et al., 2022). Brodeur and Kattan (2022) connects these two literatures. A more distant literature strand studies the effects of direct exposure to warfare, including our related paper on the individual consequences of battlefield injuries, imprisonment, and displacement (Braun and Stuhler, 2023).

³ Relatedly, Dupraz and Ferrara (2023) show that sons whose fathers died in the US Civil War had lower incomes later in life, but do not examine the effect on the spouses of fallen soldiers.

was introduced in 1964 for widows whose income was less than half of what their husbands would have earned, further increasing the maximum pension to nearly 60% of average income in 1970. Appendix A describes how maximum pension payments increased since the mid-1950s, both in real terms and as a share of gross labor income.

Three features of the BVG are worth highlighting. First, the compensatory pension was reduced in proportion to the earned income above a basic allowance. This means-tested part of the widow's pension gained importance from the mid-1950s onwards, especially with the introduction of the likewise means-tested damage compensation (see Appendix A). Second, women were not entitled to a compensatory pension until later in life, unless they were unable to work or had to care for children. Third, war widows lost their pension rights if they remarried and received a lump-sum settlement upon remarriage.

War widows frequently faced a dilemma in their labor market participation (Schnädelbach, 2007). Women's employment was still controversial in the early 1950s, and the employment of war widows was considered particularly undesirable due to concerns they would neglect the care of their children. With scarce institutional childcare available, working mothers often depended on relatives for childcare (Niehuss, 2002). On the other hand, gainful employment was often essential for financial reasons, given the initially low compensation payments.

3. Data and empirical strategy

3.1. Data

Microcensus 1971 (MZU71). The main data source for our analysis is the MZU71 (Mikrozensus-Zusatzerhebung, 1971). This representative and mandatory survey provides detailed information on changes in the social and occupational structure of the West German population between 1939 and 1971. Covering 1% of the population aged 15 and over with German citizenship, the survey contains information on 456,000 individuals.

The survey asked respondents in 1971 about their employment status and occupation in 1939, 1950, 1960, and 1971. It also recorded whether respondents owned a house in 1939 and 1971, their education level, their main source of income, and their net monthly income in 1971. The latter is recorded in seven categories and is missing for farmers. The survey also contains the place of residence in 1939, which allows us to identify persons displaced from Eastern Europe in the wake of WWII and refugees from the GDR.

Importantly for our purposes, the survey asked women whether they "were or had been war widows". This allows us to identify war widows even if they have remarried. Our treatment group consists of all women who were married at the time of WWII and whose husbands were killed in the war, died in captivity, or were missing in action. We focus on women born in 1906–14 who were between 25 and 65 years old during our observation period (1939–71). Women of the same birth cohort who were married by 1945 but did not lose their spouses in the war form our control group. We drop women who never married or who married only after 1945, as they were not 'at risk' of losing their spouse in the war.⁴

Table 1 reports means and standard deviations of prewar covariates for war widows (Columns (1) and (2)) and non-widows (Columns (3) and (4)). Column (5) reports t-statistics for testing the null of no differences in covariate means between the two groups. Given the large sample size of 30,351, even small differences will be statistically significant. Therefore, Column (6) also reports normalized differences,

which scale differences in means by the square root of the sum of the variances to assess overlap in the covariate distribution (Imbens and Wooldridge, 2009).

All normalized differences in prewar covariates are smaller than 0.10, except for two: age and displacement status. War widows tend to be slightly older than non-widows; as earlier cohorts were more likely to be married before WWII, they were more likely to lose their husband. War widows were also somewhat more likely to be displaced than non-widows, presumably because of the elevated death rates of soldiers from Germany's former eastern territories (Overmans, 1999). However, even these differences are small so that they can be (robustly) controlled for in standard linear regressions.

German life history study (GHS). For more detailed life-cycle analysis, we use the GHS, a retrospective survey of eight West German birth cohorts. We draw on the second wave (GHS-2, conducted in 1985–88), which surveyed 1412 respondents born in 1919–21, of whom 853 are women (Mayer, 1995, 2018a). While the sample size is much smaller, the GHS contains the respondents' complete marriage, education, employment, and occupational history.⁵ We can thus study war widows' labor market outcomes over the entire life cycle. We classify women whose husbands died in or before 1945 ($N = 95$) as war widows. The control group are women who also married in or before 1945 but did not lose their husbands during the war ($N = 428$).

ALLBUS. For complementary evidence on work attitudes and gender norms, we consider ALLBUS, a survey of the attitudes, behavior, and social structure of the German population that has been conducted biannually since 1980. The data allow us to examine the work attitudes of war widows and their children. Appendix D describes the data in detail.

3.2. Empirical strategy

To examine whether widows and non-widows who were comparable before the war fared differently after 1945, we estimate OLS regression models of the following type:

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \mathbf{x}_{i,39}\beta + \delta D_i + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where y_{it} is a particular postwar outcome of person i at time t , D_i is a dummy variable identifying war widows, $\mathbf{x}_{i,39}$ is a row vector of prewar control variables, and ϵ_{it} is an error term. Our main parameter, δ , measures the "widowhood effect," i.e., the average difference in a given outcome between war widows and otherwise (as of 1939) comparable non-widows.⁶ We report robust standard errors, clustered at selection districts.⁷ We also compare the OLS estimates to estimates based on inverse probability weighting (IPW).⁸

Identification requires that conditional on $\mathbf{x}_{i,39}$, widowhood status D_i is uncorrelated with unobserved prewar differences that still affect economic outcomes in postwar Germany. This assumption would be violated if women with better unobserved labor market skills married

⁵ We use the Standard International Occupational Scale (Treiman, 1977) to study occupational success, with scores ranging from 18 (unskilled laborers) to 78 (medical professionals, professors).

⁶ The large number of widows may have affected the economy as a whole and thus also the control group. Our regression does not capture such general equilibrium effects. However, from a policy perspective, the relative economic fortunes of war widows are of primary interest, not the situation that would have prevailed in their absence.

⁷ The survey drew a sample of districts, interviewing all persons of the selected districts (Tegtmeyer, 1979).

⁸ IPW models the treatment rather than the outcome (Imbens and Wooldridge, 2009). It estimates the widowhood effect by comparing weighted outcome means of widows and non-widows, giving higher weights to control group observations with a high probability of losing their husbands based on prewar covariates.

⁴ The MZU71 reports only the year of the last marriage for those married in 1971. Appendix B addresses potential issues from this limitation and presents robustness checks confirming our main findings with alternative control groups. Additionally, we demonstrate that our results hold in the German Life History Study, which records complete marriage histories.

Table 1
Prewar differences between later war widows and non-widows.

	War widows (N = 5,129)		Non-widows (N = 25,222)		Differences	
	mean (1)	st.d. (2)	mean (3)	st.d. (4)	t-stat (5)	norm. (6)
<i>Socio-demographic characteristics:</i>						
Birth year	1910.331	2.479	1909.889	2.556	11.349	0.176
House ownership (0/1)	0.488	0.500	0.466	0.499	2.877	0.044
Years of education	8.944	1.580	9.046	1.655	4.039	0.063
Years of schooling	8.356	1.065	8.408	1.148	3.044	0.048
Siblings	4.807	2.731	4.674	2.724	3.182	0.049
<i>Place of residence:</i>						
Eastern Europe (incl. eastern territories)	0.208	0.406	0.155	0.362	9.293	0.137
Soviet occupation zone	0.047	0.212	0.052	0.221	1.319	0.020
<i>Employment and occupational status (%):</i>						
Employed	0.419	0.494	0.388	0.487	4.233	0.065
Market employment	0.331	0.471	0.289	0.453	6.064	0.092
Self employed ¹	0.025	0.157	0.022	0.146	1.421	0.021
Farmer ²	0.023	0.151	0.012	0.111	5.894	0.081
Civil servant	0.003	0.056	0.003	0.058	0.240	0.004
White collar	0.082	0.274	0.091	0.288	2.119	0.033
Blue collar	0.197	0.398	0.159	0.366	6.651	0.099
Apprentices	0.001	0.031	0.001	0.030	0.135	0.002
Helping family	0.088	0.284	0.099	0.298	2.364	0.037
In education	0.002	0.044	0.003	0.052	1.007	0.016
Unemployed	0.001	0.024	0.001	0.026	0.227	0.004
Out of the labor force	0.578	0.494	0.609	0.488	4.110	0.063
<i>Sector of employment (%):</i>						
Agriculture	0.121	0.326	0.099	0.299	4.707	0.070
Industry	0.143	0.350	0.123	0.329	3.918	0.059
Construction	0.002	0.039	0.003	0.054	1.689	0.028
Trade	0.073	0.261	0.079	0.270	1.427	0.022
Finance	0.013	0.114	0.016	0.127	1.714	0.027
Services	0.066	0.249	0.065	0.247	0.302	0.005
Not employed or unknown	0.581	0.493	0.614	0.487	4.353	0.066

Notes: Sample means and standard deviations of prewar covariates for war widows and non-widows in our baseline sample (after dropping observations with missing prewar characteristics). All data refer to 1939 except for education, schooling, and the number of siblings, which are measured in 1971. ¹ Self-employed outside agriculture. ² Farmer with own land. The *t*-statistic in Column (5) refers to a two-sided mean difference *t*-test. Normalized differences in Column (6) are calculated as $|\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_0| / \sqrt{(S_1)^2 + (S_0)^2}$ where \bar{X}_1 and \bar{X}_0 are the sample means and $(S_1)^2$ and $(S_0)^2$ the sample variances of war widows and non-widows, respectively.

high-skilled men who were less likely to die in WWII. Non-widows then had better labor market prospects on average, which would explain why we do not find any lasting impact of widowhood on employment. Several pieces of evidence speak against this concern.

First, women in our sample were predominantly married to men whose cohorts were largely or entirely conscripted for the war. This is important because differences in conscription rates, rather than unequal survival rates, are the main explanation for why mortality rates differed between birth cohorts (Overmans, 1999).⁹ Importantly, our results also apply to younger women born 1915–21 (see Appendix B), almost all of whom were married to men born 1910–25. Their cohorts were fully conscripted during the war, so that selection into military service played a negligible role. These cohorts were also far too young for middle and higher officer ranks, which might have promised better survival prospects. Consistent with these arguments, Braun and Stuhler (2023) show that socioeconomic background does not predict war service or injuries among war survivors born in 1919–21.

Second, Table 1 documents only small prewar differences between widows and non-widows for our main MZU71 sample (explaining merely 1% of the variation in widowhood status, see Appendix Table E1). Third, Appendix Table E2 shows for the GHS auxiliary sample that war widowhood is not only uncorrelated with women's own prewar

characteristics,¹⁰ but also with their spouse's and parents' characteristics. Fourth, we show below that adding the extensive set of prewar covariates listed in Table 1 has virtually no effect on our estimates, while helping to explain variation in the outcome variables. It is thus unlikely that omitted variables drive our results.

4. Socioeconomic effects of WWII widowhood

4.1. Sociodemographic outcomes

Table 2 shows the effect of war widowhood on sociodemographic outcomes in the MZU71, a quarter century after the war's end. The women in our sample were 56–65 years old at that time. Column (2) presents estimates from a parsimonious OLS model, controlling only for age. Column (3) adds control variables for house ownership in 1939, the displacement status, the number of siblings, and a full set of education dummies. The full-fledged specification in Column (4) additionally accounts for the sectoral and occupation affiliation in 1939. Finally, Column (5) presents IPW estimates using the full set of controls to predict treatment status. In what follows, we discuss the point estimates from the IPW model, but the estimates hardly change across specifications. This supports the unconfoundedness assumption we invoke for identification.

⁹ While skilled workers in the armaments industry were initially spared military service (Müller, 2016), more than 80 percent of German military deaths occurred after 1942 (Overmans, 1999), when all reserves were mobilized.

¹⁰ Widowhood does correlate with the marriage year, as women who marry earlier face a longer risk of losing their spouse. Therefore, we control for the marriage year in all GHS regressions. While we cannot control for the marriage year in the MZU71, we restrict this sample to women who were well above the average age of first marriage in 1945.

Table 2

The impact of WWII widowhood on demography, labor market status, income, and wealth in 1971.

	Control mean	OLS			IPW	Obser- vations
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>A. Demographic outcomes:</i>						
Married (0/1)	0.664	−0.488 (0.007)	−0.489 (0.007)	−0.485 (0.007)	−0.486 (0.007)	30,251
Living with non-relatives (0/1)	0.010	0.012 (0.002)	0.012 (0.002)	0.012 (0.002)	0.012 (0.002)	30,351
Living alone (0/1)	0.246	0.335 (0.008)	0.338 (0.008)	0.335 (0.008)	0.335 (0.008)	30,351
Number of children	2.130	−0.253 (0.025)	−0.287 (0.025)	−0.278 (0.024)	−0.282 (0.024)	30,351
<i>B. Labor market status:</i>						
Market employment	0.162	−0.018 (0.006)	−0.014 (0.006)	−0.018 (0.006)	−0.019 (0.006)	30,351
Helping family member	0.061	−0.033 (0.003)	−0.033 (0.003)	−0.031 (0.003)	−0.031 (0.003)	30,351
Out of the labor force	0.776	0.052 (0.006)	0.048 (0.006)	0.050 (0.006)	0.051 (0.006)	30,351
<i>C. Income:</i>						
Personal income (unconditional)	241.018	243.295 (5.768)	250.198 (5.459)	248.311 (5.435)	246.919 (5.423)	28,763
Personal income (conditional on market work)	676.935	118.043 (18.325)	98.186 (16.083)	104.075 (15.690)	105.252 (15.882)	4,561
Welfare support as main income	0.297	0.454 (0.007)	0.451 (0.007)	0.448 (0.007)	0.449 (0.007)	30,351
Household income, square-root scale ^a	765.377	−64.782 (6.881)	−50.846 (6.587)	−45.984 (6.515)	−46.630 (6.485)	26,673
<i>D. Wealth:</i>						
House ownership	0.406	−0.096 (0.008)	−0.095 (0.007)	−0.095 (0.007)	−0.095 (0.007)	30,351
Sociodemographic controls		no	yes	yes	yes	
Labor market controls		no	no	yes	yes	

Notes: Means of the control group and estimates for war widowhood. Each estimate stems from a separate regression. Estimates in Columns (2)–(4) are by OLS, estimates in Column (5) by IPW. Regressions include the following prewar covariates: (2) full set of age dummies, (2) = (1) plus an indicator for house ownership in 1939, indicators for expellees from Eastern Europe and refugees from GDR, number of siblings, full set of education dummies, (3)/(4) = (2) plus seven categories for the sector of employment in 1939 (agriculture, industry, construction, trade/transport, finance, public and private services, unknown) and seven categories for the occupational or employment status in 1939 (self-employed, farmer, civil servant, white-collar worker, blue-collar worker, helping family member, out of the labor force including apprentices, in education, and unemployed). Robust standard errors clustered at selection districts (*Auswahlbezirke*) are reported in parentheses. ^a The square-root scale divides total household income by the square root of household size. We do not observe younger household members born 1956 or later in the MZU71.

Panel A. of [Table 2](#) shows that war widowhood had striking long-term demographic consequences. By 1971, war widows have a 48.6 pp lower probability of being married (from a baseline probability of 66.4%, see Column (1)). Finding a new partner often proved elusive, as the war led to an acute shortage of men. Although war widows were more likely to cohabit with a non-family member, the overall probability was low, about 2%. Thus, we find little evidence to support the widespread belief that many war widows cohabited without marrying in order to retain their pension rights.¹¹ War widows were also more than twice as likely to live alone, but had only slightly fewer children (as women in our sample often had children before 1945).

The top panels of [Fig. 1](#) illustrate these demographic consequences over the life cycle, based on the GHS and a pooled OLS regression in which we interact a full set of age indicators with the indicator for war widows. [Fig. 1\(a\)](#) shows that war widows were 80 pp less likely to be married by the war's end. This gap then shrinks as some widows remarry, but stabilizes at around 40 pp when widows reach their late 30s. The gap starts shrinking again when widowhood becomes more common also in the control group. [Fig. 1\(b\)](#) illustrates that war widows had fewer children only after the war ended.

4.2. Labor market outcomes

Panel B. of [Table 2](#) shows that in the MZU71, war widows were less likely to be employed in 1971, having a 1.9 pp lower probability to

be in market employment, a 3.1 pp lower probability to be a helping family member, and thus a 5.1 pp higher probability to be out of the labor force than non-widows. This finding is surprising, as most war widows remained unmarried, and unmarried women had considerably higher participation rates at the time.

To better understand these patterns, [Table 3](#) reports the effect of war widowhood on employment and occupational status in 1950, 1960, and 1971. We focus on IPW estimates with the full set of controls. Panel A. shows that in 1950, war widows were 13.8 pp more likely to perform market work than non-widows with similar prewar characteristics (from a baseline probability of 20.5%). However, the difference shrinks to 4.7 pp by 1960, and by 1971 war widows were less likely to work. These life-cycle patterns cannot be explained by changes in aggregate labor demand, which would affect both treatment and control groups. The negative long-term effect on labor force participation is reinforced by the fact that, in all years, war widows were only half as likely as non-widows to work as helping family members.

Appendix C highlights that women who were not in market work before the war were particularly drawn into the labor force in 1950. Among those who were helping family members, war widows were 26.1 pp (or nearly 300%) more likely to be in market employment in 1950. But even for this group, the positive employment effect eventually disappears. Moreover, highly educated women were much more likely to enter employment after their spouse's death than low-educated women, with a modest positive employment effect persisting into old age. This aligns with US findings that WWII mobilization increased employment only among highly educated women ([Goldin and Olivetti](#),

¹¹ All adult household members are legally obligated to provide information for the microcensus, ensuring that non-response is not an issue.

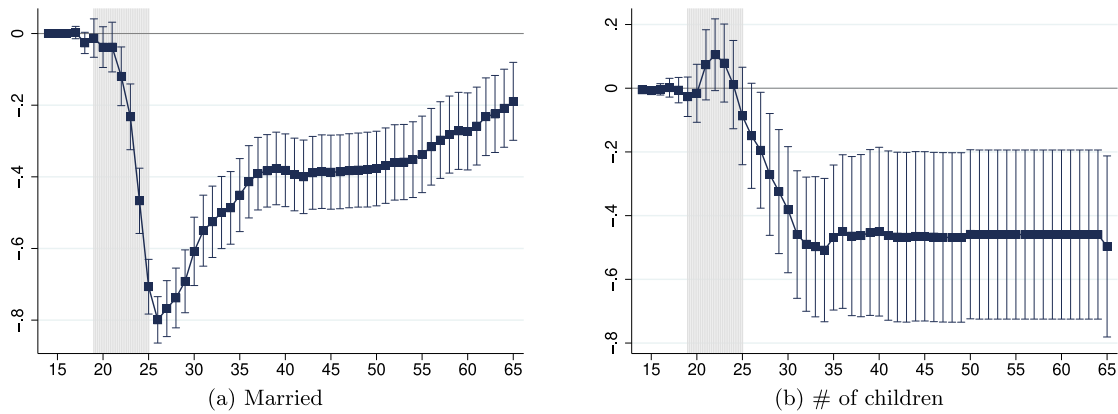
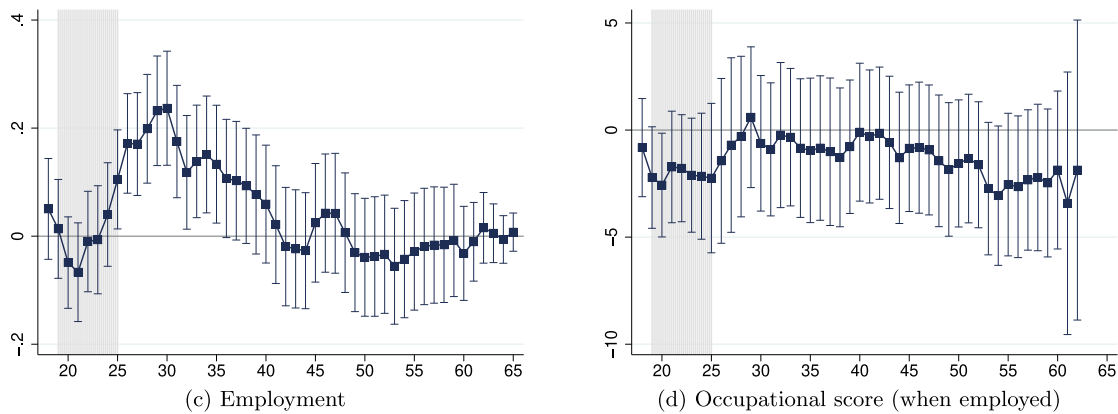
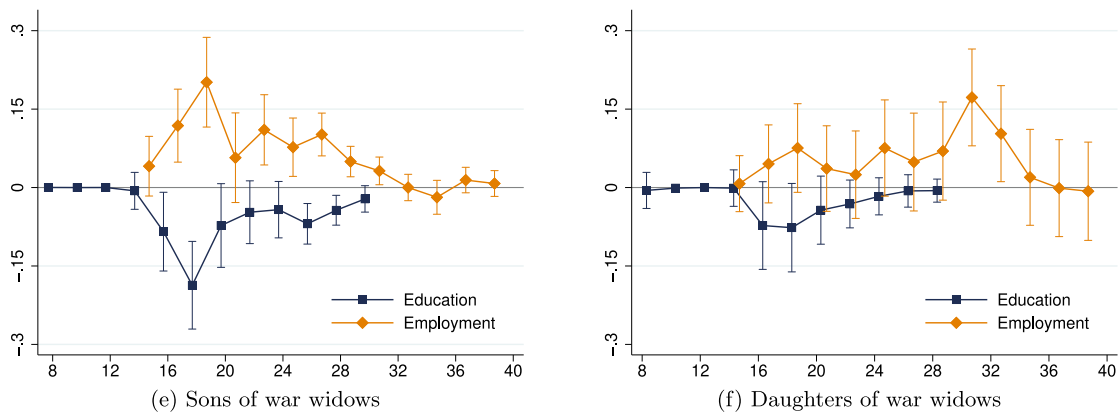
Socio-demographic characteristics*Employment and career outcomes**Intergenerational spillovers*

Fig. 1. Life-cycle effects of war widowhood (GHS). *Notes:* GHS, estimated effect of war widowhood over the life cycle for women born 1919–21. Estimates are from a pooled OLS regression, interacting indicators for war widows (panels (a)–(d)) or their children (panels (e)–(f)) and birth year with a full set of age indicators. Panels (a)–(d) also control for the year of marriage. Point estimates are marked by a dot. The vertical bands indicate the 95% confidence interval of each estimate. The shaded area indicates the duration of WWII.

2013). The negative employment effect at old age is driven by women with children (see again Appendix C).

Fig. 1(c) confirms these life-cycle patterns in the GHS, showing higher employment among war widows compared to non-widows in the postwar period, but similar or lower employment rates by their mid-40s and into retirement. Widows reduce their labor supply at the same age as the share of remarried widows increases (Fig. 1(a)). Appendix Figure E2 confirms that this is no coincidence: widow's employment rate drops

by 20 pp immediately after remarriage. However, in the long run, we also observe a drop in employment for war widows in the GHS who did not remarry and for the older cohorts of widows in the MZU71 who rarely remarried (see Table 2). Despite their higher employment rates at early age, war widows reported similar average occupational prestige scores than non-widows (see Fig. 1(d)).

Panel B. of Table 3 shows evidence on the occupational status from our larger main sample. Conditional on market work, war widows were

Table 3
The impact of war widowhood on labor market outcomes in 1950–1971.

	1950		1960		1971	
	Control mean	IPW	Control Mean	IPW	Control mean	IPW
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>A. Labor market status:</i>						
Market employment	0.205	0.138 (0.007)	0.238	0.047 (0.007)	0.162	−0.019 (0.006)
Helping family	0.089	−0.045 (0.003)	0.084	−0.044 (0.003)	0.061	−0.031 (0.003)
Unemployed	0.004	0.000 (0.001)	0.000	0.000 (0.001)	0.001	−0.001 (0.000)
Out of the labor force	0.703	−0.093 (0.007)	0.677	−0.003 (0.007)	0.776	0.051 (0.006)
Observations		29,302		30,342		30,351
<i>B. Occupational status (conditional on market work):</i>						
Self employed	0.135	−0.023 (0.007)	0.128	−0.013 (0.008)	0.132	−0.012 (0.012)
Farmer	0.055	0.017 (0.006)	0.045	0.017 (0.006)	0.039	0.014 (0.008)
Civil servant	0.009	0.005 (0.002)	0.010	0.010 (0.003)	0.010	0.018 (0.005)
White collar	0.249	0.012 (0.010)	0.265	0.022 (0.011)	0.302	0.031 (0.016)
Blue collar	0.552	−0.013 (0.011)	0.551	−0.036 (0.011)	0.517	−0.050 (0.016)
Observations		6,783		7,547		4,880

Notes: Means of the control group and IPW estimates for war widowhood. Each estimate stems from a separate regression. Regression include as controls a full set of age dummies, an indicator for house ownership in 1939, indicators for expellees from Eastern Europe and refugees from GDR, the number of siblings, a full set of education dummies, indicators for the sector of employment in 1939 (agriculture, industry, construction, trade/transport, finance, public and private services, unknown) and the occupational or employment status in 1939 (self-employed, farmer, civil servant, white-collar worker, blue-collar worker, helping family member, out of the labor force including apprentices, in education, and unemployed). Robust standard errors clustered at selection districts (*Auswahlbezirke*) are reported in parentheses.

less likely to work as blue-collar workers. In 1971, war widows were 5 pp less likely to be blue-collar workers (baseline probability: 51.7%). Instead, war widows were overrepresented in white-collar occupations. They were also more than 2.5 times as likely to be employed as civil servants (albeit from a baseline of only 1%), likely as a result of policies that favored war widows for civil service employment.

Panel C. of Table 2 shows that the personal net income of war widows was about twice that of non-widows, largely due to higher support by the state: war widows were 2.5 times more likely to report welfare support as their main income source (baseline probability: 29.7%). If we focus on women in market work, war widows have only DM 105 more than non-widows (baseline: DM 677). This is considerably less than the unconditional basic pension of DM 198 paid to war widows at the time. Panel C. also shows that household income, measured at the square root equivalence scale, is about 6% lower for war widows than for non-widows.

Finally, Panel D. shows that war widowhood reduced the probability of owning a house in 1971 by 9.5 pp (or 23.4%).

4.3. Mechanisms

Despite an initial increase in employment, war widows eventually had lower employment rates than non-widows. In their 20s and 30s, they thus bore the double burden of work and childcare without a partner. However, in their 40s and 50s, after their children had left home, war widows were less likely to work than non-widows. We discuss here the mechanisms that might have contributed to this counterintuitive life-cycle pattern.

To fix ideas, we consider a simple static model of labor supply in which mothers choose consumption c , hours of work h , leisure time l and child-care time t to maximize the utility function

$$\max_{l,t} U(c(l,t), l, q(t); \theta),$$

subject to a “disutility of work” θ , which might vary with age or social norms, and constraints for time $l_0 = h + l + t$, child “quality” $q = q(t)$ with $q' > 0$ and $q'' < 0$, and the budget,

$$c = w(l_0 - l - t) + R_0,$$

$\underbrace{\hspace{1.5cm}}_{=h}$

where w is the hourly wage rate and R_0 are other sources of household income. The optimal choices of leisure and work time are characterized by the slopes of the indifference curves between consumption and leisure and between consumption and child “quality”, and the budget constraint (see Appendix F for details).

Although simple, the model can rationalize the peculiar life-cycle labor supply trajectory we observe. Similar to Boehnke and Gay (2022), we interpret the loss of a spouse as a negative income shock, i.e., a decrease in R_0 . Assuming that leisure is a normal good, such income loss decreases leisure and time spent on childcare, and increases hours worked (*income effect*). Appendix Figure F1a provides an illustration.

War widows also received compensation (see Section 2). But, since this offsets only part of the decline in R_0 (household income decreases, as shown in Table 2), this would not yet explain why war widows were less likely to work at older ages. However, as the widow pensions were partially means-tested, they also decrease the effective take-home wage, which further reduces work incentives (*substitution effect*).

Crucially, the means-tested form of compensation grew disproportionately over time, accounting for 72% of maximum pensions in 1970. Therefore, the budget curve of war widows with respect to hours worked became flatter over time, disincentivizing their participation in the labor force. The implied (negative) substitution effect on hours worked can dominate the (positive) income effect from a reduction in total income, as illustrated in Appendix Figure F1b.

The compensation scheme thus created “perverse” life-cycle incentives for war widows. Low compensation in earlier years forced them into the labor force, despite limited childcare and the stigma that society placed on working single mothers. Once their children

Table 4
Intergenerational spillovers on the children of war widows.

	Schooling	Tertiary	Schooling	Employment (years)		Occupational scores	
		schooling	w/ tertiary	age 16–29	age 30–39	own	spouse
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Father's death	−0.478 (0.127)	−0.524 (0.156)	−1.005 (0.217)	1.337 (0.399)	0.080 (0.118)	−0.704 (1.643)	0.736 (2.454)
Father's death x daughter	0.347 (0.187)	0.476 (0.193)	0.828 (0.296)	−0.451 (0.665)	0.260 (0.594)	−0.972 (2.246)	−2.227 (3.115)
Control mean	8.744	1.722	10.468	8.597	6.839	41.973	39.708
Observations	1,722	1,718	1,718	615	615	615	563

Notes: Estimates of the effect of war widowhood on educational attainment, employment (in years) or occupational scores (maximum score) of their children and partners. Each estimate stems from a separate OLS regression including the mother's birth year and interactions between indicators of the child's birth year and gender as control variables. GHS birth cohorts 1929–31 and 1939–41 (including siblings in Columns (1)–(3)). Robust standard errors clustered at the household level are reported in parentheses.

reached adulthood, war widows had more time available, but the increasingly means-tested compensation scheme discouraged work. A less aggressively means-tested compensation scheme could have maintained labor force participation, reduced public spending, and provided similar utility to war widows (see Appendix Figure F1b).

The negative work experience of the 1950s, with the double burden of work and childcare in an environment hostile to working mothers, may also explain why war widows were not more supportive of women with young children working than non-widows, although they tended to have more progressive gender norms in other domains. As we show in Appendix D, about nine in ten war widows, the same as among non-widows, disapproved of women working outside the home when there are small children at home. War widows also did not place more importance on work in their lives. This probably contributed to their withdrawal from the labor market, as did the physical exhaustion from the double burden of work and childcare at a younger age.¹²

5. Intergenerational spillovers

We can also examine the intergenerational spillovers of war widowhood, as the first wave of the GHS (GHS-1), conducted in the early 1980s, interviewed children born shortly before (1929–31) and during (1939–41) the war (Mayer, 2018b). The treatment group consists of those whose father (but not mother) died during WWII. The control group includes children from the same cohorts whose fathers were absent for at least one year during the war. For educational outcomes, we can also include the respondent's siblings, as the GHS-1 provides educational information for close family members. We use this information to estimate a variant of Eq. (1),

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \mathbf{x}_{i,39}\beta + \delta_m D_i + \delta_{gap} D_i 1(i = \text{female}) + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (2)$$

where D_i is a dummy variable indicating whether the father of individual i died in the war, δ_m measures the intergenerational spillover on the male children of war widows, and δ_{gap} the differential impact on daughters relative to sons. The controls $\mathbf{x}_{i,39}$ include the mother's birth year and interactions between indicators of the child's birth year and gender.

Table 4 reports our estimates. Column (1) shows that the sons of war widows had half a year less schooling, in line with previous findings in Ichino and Winter-Ebmer (2004), who report negative effects of fathers' WWII service and death on children's years of schooling. Tertiary schooling (university or vocational training) is even 30% lower in the treatment group (Column (2)). Overall, educational attainment declines by one year (Column (3)). In contrast, there is little decline in the educational attainment among the daughters of war widows; the estimated effect on the gender gap δ_{gap} is of the opposite sign and almost as large as the main effect δ_m .

With less time spent in education, the children of war widows instead enter the labor force earlier, presumably because of the financial hardship they faced after the war. As shown in Column (4), the sons of war widows spent 1.3 years more in employment during age 16–29 than the control group. Fig. 1(e) and (f) confirm that the decline in educational attainment is mirrored by a corresponding increase in employment. Despite the lower educational attainment of male children, we find no spillovers on their employment at mid-age (Table 4, Column (5)) or their occupational scores (Column (6)).

Importantly, we find no persistent employment effect for the daughters of war widows either and, if anything, a negative effect on their occupational success. While they are more likely to work in their 20s, this gap disappears by their mid-30s. We also find no positive spillovers on work attitudes: if anything, the daughters of war widows held less progressive views on the compatibility of women's work and childcare responsibilities (see Appendix D). We also find no spillovers to their sons' gender norms (Appendix D) or to the occupational scores of their sons' wives (Table 4, Column (7)). While Fernández et al. (2004) show that women's labor force participation can affect their sons' preference for a working wife, we find no such spillovers for the sons of war widows.

Our results complement previous work on the long-term effects of the two world wars on women's employment. While war-induced increases in women's employment can transform work and gender norms and trigger intergenerational spillovers (Fernández et al., 2004; Fernández, 2013; Gay, 2023), we find no such effects in our treatment group: War widows did not have more positive attitudes toward women's work, and did not transmit more progressive attitudes to their sons or daughters—likely reflecting the challenging conditions they endured when working as single mothers in the postwar period.¹³ Employment spells born of necessity (such as for war widows) thus appear to have less lasting effects than those resulting from higher aggregate labor demand (due to men's wartime mobilization).

6. Conclusion

Millions of women worldwide have lost their husbands in violent conflicts, yet little is known about their economic situation. This includes WWII, the most devastating conflict in history. We present first evidence on the complex effects of war widowhood, using life course data from postwar Germany. War widowhood had dramatic long-term consequences for family formation, with most widows remaining unmarried after 1945. Despite the persistent negative shock to household income, war widows were more likely to work only into their middle years. Over the life cycle, the positive employment effect gradually diminished, and by 1971 war widows were less likely to work and 2.5 times more likely to rely on welfare than their peers.

¹² Consistent with this interpretation, war widows report higher levels of illness than the control group, and this gap increases with age; see Appendix Figure E1.

¹³ Bastiaans (2023) propose a similar interpretation to explain why in the Netherlands, a policy-induced increase in labor supply among women with low labor force attachment decreased their daughter's labor supply.

Our findings underscore the importance of public policy in shaping widows' economic outcomes. Low compensation and inadequate child care in the immediate postwar period created a dilemma for war widows with young children who needed earned income but faced accusations of neglecting their children if they worked. The dire financial situation likely also forced widows' children to leave school early. Compensation then became more generous and increasingly means-tested over time, creating disincentives to work long after the war ended. The poor work experiences of war widows in the 1950s may also explain why their war-induced labor market entry did not have spillover effects on the participation of the next generation.

Given the often dire financial straits of governments in conflict zones, the problem of insufficient support for war widows is not specific to our study, but applies similarly to contemporary conflicts (see e.g. Mednick, 2018; York, 2023, on South Sudan's civil war and the Russo-Ukrainian war, respectively). International efforts to address the challenges faced by war widows are thus particularly important during and immediately after conflicts, when many widows face the double burden of childcare and employment. Such support is also critical to break the intergenerational reproduction of conflict-related poverty in widow-headed households (Buvinic et al., 2013), which our study suggests may operate through reduced educational opportunities. Finally, as countries' fiscal space expands with postwar recovery, it is important to design widow compensation in a way that preserves incentives to work.

Declaration of competing interest

I hereby declare that I have no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in the paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2024.105241>.

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