

THE EFFECT OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS ON WOMEN'S WELFARE: EVIDENCE FROM A NATURAL EXPERIMENT*

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This paper explores whether the welfare of women increased following the extension of women's rights between 1960s and 1990s. Using individual level data on life satisfaction and focusing on changes in birth control rights in twelve European countries, it shows that the extension of both abortion rights and the pill is strongly linked to an increase in life satisfaction of women of childbearing age. Birth control rights also increased women's investment in education, probability of working and income. Other women's rights have proved less beneficial. Mutual consent divorce laws decreased women's welfare. High maternity protection on the job has negligible effects.

What's college? That's where girls who are above cooking and sewing go to meet a man so they can spend their lives cooking and sewing.

(an advertisement for an American department store in 1950)

Modern life is based on control and science. We control the speed of our automobile. We control machines. We endeavor to control disease and death. Let us control the size of our family to ensure health and happiness.

(an American family planning poster in the early 1940s)¹

A key issue in public economics is to evaluate the effects of public policies. Between the late 1960s and the 1990s vast and deep changes in social norms and institutions took place in relation to women's rights. Women as a pressure group became influential in politics and equal treatment and reproductive rights laws were enacted in the majority of Western countries. Their goal was to improve women's welfare, and similarly to other public policy initiatives, they required funding to implement them. After ten to thirty years of such public policies, we can evaluate their effects.

There is no bet *a priori* on the direction and the size of these effects. With some exceptions, economists generally expect an increase in welfare from policies that remove binding constraints on choices. In the public debate the opinion is fragmented. Some qualitative evaluations report that women ended up with a double burden from being both the primary caregiver in the family and a worker and that ultimately women 'could not have it all'.

The data show that in the last thirty years women had fewer children, studied longer, worked more and earned a higher wage. The positive link between wage, education and welfare is generally assumed. Instead of imposing this assumption, I

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¹ The first quote is reported by Watkins (1998), the second by Marks (2001).