Gender Role Attitudes and Women’s Labor Market Participation: Opting-Out, AIDS, and the Persistent Appeal of Housewifery

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Abstract

After a century of remarkable growth, female labor force participation (FLP) has leveled-off in the late 1990s, despite continuous improvement in fundamental economic variables, such as educational attainment. Using data from the 1977-2006 General Social Surveys (GSS), this paper studies the impact of changing gender role attitudes on the evolution of FLP in the United States. The analysis accounts for non-linear time-period, life-cycle, and cohort effects, as well as a host of background variables. It uses a double prong instrumental variable strategy appealing to extraneous attitudes found in the GSS, and to an exogenous shock to attitudes, namely the AIDS scare, which may have acted as a counter-current to the “Pill Revolution”, using repeated cross-sectional data from the 1988-2006 National Health Interview Surveys (NHIS) in the context of a variant of two-sample two-stage least squares (TS2LS). Gender role attitudes, whose progression stalled in the mid-1990s when the AIDS crisis peaked, are found to explain at least a third of the recent leveling-off in FLP that is, as much as all the usual variables combined.

Keywords: Gender role attitudes, opting out, female labor force participation, HIV/AIDS scare, Pill Revolution, cohort effects, economic identity theory.