

War and the sexes

• VICTOR GAY •
MISSING MEN

Empirical research by IAST economic historian Victor Gay shows that traditional gender roles still exert a large influence on female labor force participation, even in rich countries. His work explores the impact of the First World War on working women in France throughout the twentieth century. Elsewhere, he finds that women arriving in the US who speak a language with sex-based grammar are less likely to be in the labor force.



In France, labor force participation rates of women aged 30 to 49 surged from 40 per cent in the early 1960s to 90 per cent today. In his search for explanations for this ‘quiet’ revolution, Victor has examined the severe shock to the sex ratio caused by the First World War, in which more than 1.3 million Frenchmen died. Compiling a huge database of military records, he finds that more women entered the labor force in areas where more soldiers had been lost. “Many of these women could not find a suitable husband and so had to work to support their families,” Victor explains. “Similarly, war widows had to work because subsidies were very low, at least until the early 1930s.”

In his paper ‘The Legacy of the Missing Men’, Victor argues that these working women altered the preferences and beliefs about female labor of their daughters, sons, and entourage, and these changes translated into the working behavior of women in

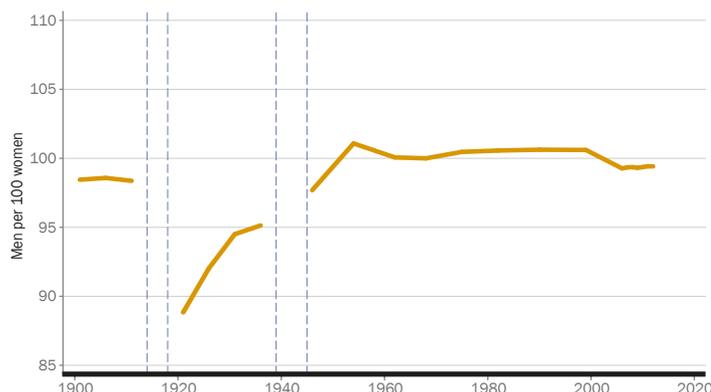
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subsequent generations. “The impact of the First World War is still present today. A woman whose grandmother or great-grandmother worked because of the war is more likely to work today and to hold more progressive views about gender roles. We also witness a similar impact on attitudes, although lower, for men whose grandmother or great-grandmother became labor force participants following the war.”

In a related research project, Victor and his co-authors focus on whether languages, and specifically, the pervasiveness of gender

distinctions in grammar, can help to explain variations in women’s economic behavior across cultural origins. “Measuring culture is very complicated, especially when we consider how culture emerges and changes over time. Our intuition is that language structures reflect deep cultural differences. We find that married female immigrants who speak a more gendered language are less likely to participate in the US labor market. We explore how and why these language structures emerged, and how they might reflect the social structures of pre-modern societies.” ■

THE SHOCK OF WAR



This graph displays the sex ratio among French adults aged 15 to 50. Data are from the censuses 1900 to 2012. Vertical lines indicate WWI (1914–1918) and WWII (1939–1945)

FIND OUT MORE

To measure changing beliefs about gender roles, Victor is collecting information on the legislative behavior of representatives in the French National Assembly during the 20th century. He is also starting a research project on the impact of early nation-states and institutions on long-term economic growth.

See www.iast.fr/people/victor-gay