

Are daughters' labor force decisions influenced by their mothers' employment history?

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Over the last several decades, women's participation in the labor force has increased greatly compared with the period prior to the 1960s. Many people intuitively think that girls and young women are influenced by their mother's labor force choices—that is, the more hours a mother worked outside the home, the more hours her daughter is likely to engage in paid employment.

In their study "[Mothers, friends and gender identity](#)" (National Bureau of Economic Research working paper no. 19610, November 2013), Claudia Olivetti, Yves Zenou, and Eleonora Patacchini, through empirical study using the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health data set, suggest that this intuition may be correct. The analysis looks at the influence of young women's mothers and the mothers of their peers by using the three main channels of gender role socialization: reinforcement by parents of appropriate behavior, girls modeling their behavior on their mother and boys modeling their behavior on their father, and the effects of the social-economic environments. One innovation within this analysis is including the labor force decisions of mothers of the girls' peers as a variable.

The paper comprises eight sections: an introduction, the authors' model, the data used, empirical strategy, analytical results, checks of the results' robustness, mechanisms underlying the findings, and a conclusion. The authors factor in socio-economic conditions—including the level of education attained by parents—ethnicity, mother's immigration status, and the daughter's GPA. Also addressed is the question of whether the study's findings are driven by preference rather than by human capital—that is, whether a daughter's choice of career and her hours spent on the job are primarily due to the human capital she attained through an education provided by her parents.

All in all, the paper shows empirically what many assumed to be true. Young women are influenced by the choices their mothers made during their adolescence. When making decisions about whether and how much to participate in the labor force as an adult, a young woman is more likely to make traditional choices if presented a traditional gender identity by her mother. Similarly, the young woman is apt to spend more hours in the labor force if that's what her mother or her peers' mothers did. Although young women's decisions are influenced by the labor force attachment of their mothers and the mothers of their peers during their adolescence, the authors note that women's increasing attachment to the labor force also could be related to their changing economic role.