

Changes in the life cycle of women's employment

Richard Works

How has the life cycle of women's employment changed in recent years? Research shows an increase in labor force experience for women across cohorts, in part because of less leave taken after childbirth. However, what is the effect of taking leave after giving birth on future employment opportunities? According to "[The new lifecycle of women's employment: disappearing humps, sagging middles, expanding tops](#)" (National Bureau of Economic Research working paper no. 22913, December 2016) by Claudia Goldin and Joshua Mitchell, the increased employment of older women is related to a higher frequency of continuous work experience during their career.

Labor market participation of women in the United States is relatively low in comparison with other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development nations. For American women born before 1950, employment increased dramatically from age 20 until they reached the late 40s, then decreased in their early 50s. However, this pattern is different for women born since the mid-1950s: their employment is high for a decade after their schooling ends, decreases during their 30s to early 40s, and then increases slightly before phasing out in their later years (60 and above). According to the study, this pattern suggests that the labor force participation of women from their mid-40s will be similar to that of their male counterparts.

The study used data from the Current Population Survey, a monthly survey conducted by the Census Bureau for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The study also used data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation and the Health and Retirement Study, both of which are linked to earnings data from the Social Security Administration and W-2 income tax records. The data show that women's labor force participation has expanded, while marriage and childbirth have been delayed. Participation rates do not change much until the older age groups, in which labor force participation begins to phase out. According to Goldin and Mitchell, "There has been considerable persistence in participation among women: that is, those who work more when young also continue in the labor force when older."

The authors note that other literature on the topic also suggests important implications for continued employment during one's later years. For example, another study found that an increase in life-cycle employment for individuals between 25 and 54 years of age implies delayed retirement, and Goldin and Mitchell's findings imply that delaying childbirth influences life-cycle labor force participation. The data show that children are being born to older mothers, and families are having fewer children. However, delaying childbirth may lead to greater labor force participation during later years because substantial human capital investments may have been made during earlier years of life; the impact of childbirth on labor force participation is lessened when women give birth at older ages. Goldin and Mitchell show that giving birth during their 20s and early 30s adversely affects the likelihood that these women will participate in the labor force later in life. Therefore, the decrease in leave time taken for childbirth as shown in the new life cycle is predictive of more employment opportunities in later years.