

The effect of women's rights on women's welfare: evidence from a natural experiment

Silvia Pezzini*

London School of Economics

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Abstract

Between the late 1960s and the 1990s vast changes in social norms and institutions took place in relation to women's rights. This paper explores the issue of whether women's rights have brought women higher welfare. Using individual level data on life satisfaction and focusing on the staggered timing of law changes on abortion rights in twelve European countries, I obtain an average treatment effect on the treated from differences-in-differences. The identification strategy uses the fact that exposure to women's rights varied by gender, country of residence and date of birth. I show that the extension of abortion rights is strongly linked to an increase in life satisfaction of women of childbearing age. The introduction of the pill in national public policies had an analogous effect, while mutual consent divorce laws decreased women's welfare. Being in a country with high maternity protection does not affect the results. These findings are true after controlling for age effects, unobserved heterogeneity across countries and time, and country-specific trends. It is robust to various econometric concerns.

Keywords: Natural experiment, Differences in differences, Women's rights, Welfare, Life satisfaction.

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