

Women's property rights and creative production: Evidence from American authorship 1800-1999

Christiane Hellmanzik
Technical University of Dortmund

Lukas Kuld
University of Limerick

Sara Mitchell
University of Southern Denmark

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This paper investigates differences between female and male productivity in literary production using a novel dataset of eminent American writers of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. We use yearly data on the residence and creative output (including data on publications, critical acclaim, and commercial success) of 472 American writers. We show that differences between male and female literary productivity were not as large as expected given the gender norms of the time. We also find that career profiles over time are relatively similar when controlling for other factors. This is different from what we observe in other occupations, historically and contemporaneously. Moreover, we use information on property laws in the US and exploit variation between states to test whether control and ownership over their works impacted female literary careers. We investigate the expansion of women's rights on both the choice of authorship as an occupation, representation of women in authorship, and the productivity of female authors. Preliminary evidence suggests that the liberalisation of trading laws had a positive impact on female literary careers. One explanation is that economic incentives granted through legal autonomy spur women on to engage in creative activity. These findings are consistent with the literature on the negative impact of discrimination / persecution of African Americans in creative and innovative activity in the United States.