

"Frontier Gender Norms: History and Legacy"

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Abstract: This paper shows how frontier settlement shaped gender inequality and left a persistent imprint on gender norms across the United States. We present evidence that integrates contrasting historical narratives about the roles of women on the frontier---some emphasize its potential for empowerment, others its regressive tendencies. Among women working for pay in the 19th century, relatively more worked in high-status occupations on the frontier. However, higher fertility and lower chances of paid employment characterized frontier life for most women, with isolation and lack of social infrastructure limiting opportunities outside the home. Over the long run, counties with greater historical frontier experience exhibit lower female labor force participation. Time use data suggests this does not come with additional leisure but rather with more household work. These gender inequalities are accompanied by lower female political participation and more conservative gender norms. Overall, our findings suggest that the isolating conditions on the frontier worked against the additional bargaining power found in other female-scarce environments and fostered inegalitarian gender norms at critical junctures of development across America.