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‘Toward better informed decision-making: The impacts of a mass media campaign on women’s outcomes in occupied Japan’

Is altering norms an effective way of changing socioeconomic behavior? This study examines the impact of women's radio programs that the US-led occupying force aired in Japan (1945-1952). To dismantle the prewar patriarchal norms, women’s programs aired a wide range of topics including gender equality, political participation, freedom to choose a marriage partner, and the benefits of birth spacing. Hereby I investigate how differential exposure to women’s radio programs affects women’s decision-making in terms of electoral turnout, labor market participation, marriage, and fertility. Quantitative data are drawn from the declassified documents of the former occupation authority, prefectural yearbooks, local newspapers, and population census. To address the concern that the radio exposure may be endogenous, I employ the instrumental variable (IV) strategy: I instrument it with the quality of radio signal reception, namely the ground wave field strength. Due to differential soil type, field strength varies locally even after controlling for distance from the closest transmitter. I show that such local variation in the field strength is as good as random and it increases radio exposure.

With the IV, I find that greater exposure to women's radio programs increases women's electoral turnout. Greater women’s turnout further translates into a greater vote share for female candidates. This positive effect contributes to women's greater representation in the national legislature: had there not been women's radio programs in place, the number of female winners would have been halved. Moreover, exposure to women's radio programs contributes to a decline in fertility and therefore had an important implication for the nation's demographic landscape. The declining fertility is due neither to an increase in women's career aspirations nor to a decline in marriages. My results are not driven by a preexisting correlation between radio signal strength and women's behavior before the US occupation. Although research shows that gender norms have historical roots and move slowly, my findings provide evidence that public policy can cut against them to promote equal participation in decision-making.