EPoS Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224

Economic Perspectives on Societal Challenges: Equality of Opportunity, Market Regulation, and Financial Stability - EPoS

UNIVERSITÄT BONN

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INTERVIEW

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How Tech Innovation Widened Social Gaps in the 19th Century, Interview

Interview with Philipp Ager

- Adoption of sewing machine affected rich and poor women differently, study finds
- Interview with Philipp Ager, EPoS Economic Research Center

Bonn, Mannheim, 09. September, 2026 - **In Massachusetts, one of the early US industrial hubs of the mid-19th century, the introduction of the sewing machine changed the lives of women profoundly. Depending on their social background, the effects were very different, a new study finds. While many poor women were employed in prospering textile factories, wealthy women used the technology as a time-saving household appliance, but did not seek employment. The findings suggest that technological progress can reinforce existing inequalities instead of reducing them. These are results of a new study by the EPoS Economic Research Center at the Universities of Bonn and Mannheim, published in the discussion paper "Liberation Technology? The Impact of the Sewing Machine on Women".**

Mr. Ager, what makes the introduction of the sewing machine interesting for economists?

Philipp Ager: The technology profoundly changed women's lives in the 19th century. Sewing was an everyday activity across all social strata – rich, poor, young, and old women on farms and in cities. We look at the dual role of the sewing machine – as a manufacturing technology and as a household appliance in Massachusetts.

What did you find?

Philipp Ager: In factories, the sewing machine revolutionized garment making, transforming it from slow, handcrafted production to a booming mass-production industry. Many poor young women started working in the textile industry until they married. They often delayed marriage and had fewer children.

In wealthy households, Singer's "New Family" model spread rapidly from 1865 onwards. For these women, time savings did not lead to more female employment. Instead, women married earlier and had more children. At the same time, wealthy women also used the time savings for civic engagement. Evidence from women's clubs suggests that the sewing machine facilitated a shift toward organized social reform and community leadership. The bottom line is that the same technology had divergent effects across socioeconomic groups.

INTERVIEW

Which lessons can we learn for the adoption of new technology today?

Philipp Ager: Technological change produces heterogeneous outcomes, especially across income groups. Our study shows that the effects of new technologies can depend heavily on the social and economic context as well as on existing social norms. While these findings cannot be directly applied to today's technologies, such as automation or AI, they suggest that it is important to consider the potentially differing impacts on various social groups from the beginning. When introducing AI in schools and businesses, it may therefore be advisable to take into account the different circumstances and uses of various groups and to create appropriate training and support programs.

The presented discussion paper is a publication without peer review of the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS. Access the full discussion paper here: https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers/archive/dp761

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The Collaborative Research Center (CRC) Transregio 224 EPoS
Established in 2018, the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS, a cooperation of the universities Bonn and Mannheim, is a long-term research institution funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). EPoS addresses three key societal challenges: how to promote equality of opportunity; how to regulate markets in light of the internationalization and digitalization of economic activity; and how to safeguard the stability of the financial system.

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