

# Higher education levels in women change relationship patterns

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The number of couples in which the woman has a higher level of university studies than her male partner is growing steadily and in many countries this trend surpasses the opposite situation, which historically has been the predominant. This is the conclusion reached by the Centre for Demographic Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (CED-UAB), which conducted a research in 56 countries to study the effects an increase in education levels amongst women are having on heterosexual relationship patterns. The research also sets the bases to delve deeper into the social dimensions this change in model may represent.

The study conducted by Albert Esteve, Joan Garcia-Roman and Iñaki Permanyer analyses the effects on couples when there are more [women](#) than men with university studies. To do this they gathered data from 138 censuses in 56 countries, dating from 1968 to 2009. The research was published in Population Development Review, one of the most prestigious journals dedicated to population studies.

The study concludes that [higher education](#) levels in women has a direct effect on union formation. Such is the effect that in countries in which there are more women than men with university studies, the number of couples in which the woman unites "downwards" (with a man with lesser studies) surpasses those who unite "upwards" (with a man with more studies).

Traditionally in [heterosexual couples](#), the dominating pattern existing

was the educational hypergamy of the woman, a type of relationship in which the woman marries a man with a higher educational attainment and in which there are important [gender differences](#). In recent years however, an easier access to education for women is altering this model. "Given this historical inertia, one could consider that the increase in education amongst women would make forming unions more difficult and raise the number of single women. However, what we see is that the composition of couples adapts quite well to these structural changes and that if these changes take place, sooner or later they will have an effect on the marriage market", Albert Esteve states.

The census data used in the study, individual and anonymous, is available at IPUMS (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series), a project by the University of Minnesota, which is creating an enormous international population database consisting of microdata samples. Researchers analysed both married couples and partners living together, creating an index to measure the educational difference between men and women, and another index to measure the prevalence of hypergamy over hypogamy couples when related to education.

With only a few exceptions, there is a steady decrease in the level of educational hypergamy in both advanced and developing countries, although there continues to be significant differences between these countries. At the beginning of the 1970s, "upward" couples surpassed "downward" couples in all 18 countries in which there was census data between 1970 and 1975. At the start of the new century, 26 of the 51 countries registered negative educational hypergamy values. These countries are home to diverse societies, such as France, Jordan, Mongolia, Slovenia and South Africa. In the case of Spain, in 2001 for every 100 hypogamy couples there were 67 hypergamy couples.

It was not possible to include some countries in the study due to lack of data. This includes countries such as Japan, South Korea, or China; very

traditional societies in terms of relationships and with high levels of single women among those with higher education levels. Nevertheless, researchers consider that the increase in university women will end up modifying the rules of the game, principally in China, a country in which there are few women and where it is believed that in 2050 there will be 140 female university students for every 100 male university students.

Researchers nevertheless state that the study reveals the universality of a phenomenon previously observed in other countries, such as the United States and Brazil, and amplifies the results, demonstrating that this change is taking place all over the world and can have effects on other dimensions of social life.

If the trends in education continue, prevalence in educational hypergamy will continue to decrease, researchers say. This scenario suggests that the increase in education level amongst women can have important effects on traditional relationship models and represents a step forward in reaching symmetry when forming relationships. "It will be interesting to observe whether this change develops into more equality between men and women in other aspects of their life (decision-making, distribution of home tasks, divorce, fertility, etc.)", Albert Esteve comments.

Theories on couple models have not yet included this new situation. Historically, in opposition to traditional models in which marriage was an alliance between complementary gender roles (the husband providing an income for the family and the wife caring for the home and children), there appeared models in which partners shared both roles (the two-income or bi-active models with regard to the labour market). Albert Esteve considers that "now we must focus on studying the hypogamy model, not only on educational aspects, but also when the woman is the main income earner which, in these times of crisis, is becoming increasingly the case".

The study calls for more research - from a wider perspective - on the consequences these changes may have in the distribution of gender roles. Will this lead to more equality in relationships? How will each person's expectation affect the relationship? What role is education to play in how people choose their partners? These are some of the questions researchers seek to answer in the future.

Provided by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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