

# Does being smart and successful lower your chances of getting married?

September 7 2018, by Yue Qian

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The myth that educated women over 40 find it impossible to find a mate to marry prevails - but it has long been debunked. What are the actual impacts of higher education on a women's 'marriageability?' Here a wedding pic from Cambridge Mill, Cambridge, Canada. Credit: Anne Edgar/Unsplash

Having a committed partner and good family relationships are important

to most people. Countless novels, fairy tales and movies have told romantic stories about love that endear us to the idea of romantic love.

Sociologists, however, are less romantic. When it comes to falling in love, it's not just fate or serendipity that bring people together—social factors matter.

How so? My research illustrates how our attitudes towards Mr. or Ms. Right are filtered through the lens of social norms.

Though some of us are too young to remember, about three decades ago, the [marriage](#) prospects of highly educated women were the subject of headlines and made the cover of *Newsweek* magazine in 1986.

[The memorable media messages](#) produced strong feelings of anxiety in a lot of women. The story as portrayed in the romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle* went like this: "It's easier to be killed by a terrorist than it is to find a husband over the age of 40."

The conventional wisdom was that women over 40 who had achieved a certain level of professional (and educational) goals had a lower marriageability.

Is it actually true? Do women who spend years in school getting a good education sacrifice their chances of getting married?

Actually, no. [Research](#) has consistently found that American women with at least a bachelor's degree are more likely to get married and stay married than less educated women.



By 2013, women in the U.S. earned 60 per cent of bachelor's degrees. Credit: Andre Hunter/Unsplash

In fact, only a few years after the *Newsweek* story, family sociologist Andrew Cherlin [debunked](#) the misleading and incorrect messages about professional women's marriage prospects.

## Husband-wife education gaps

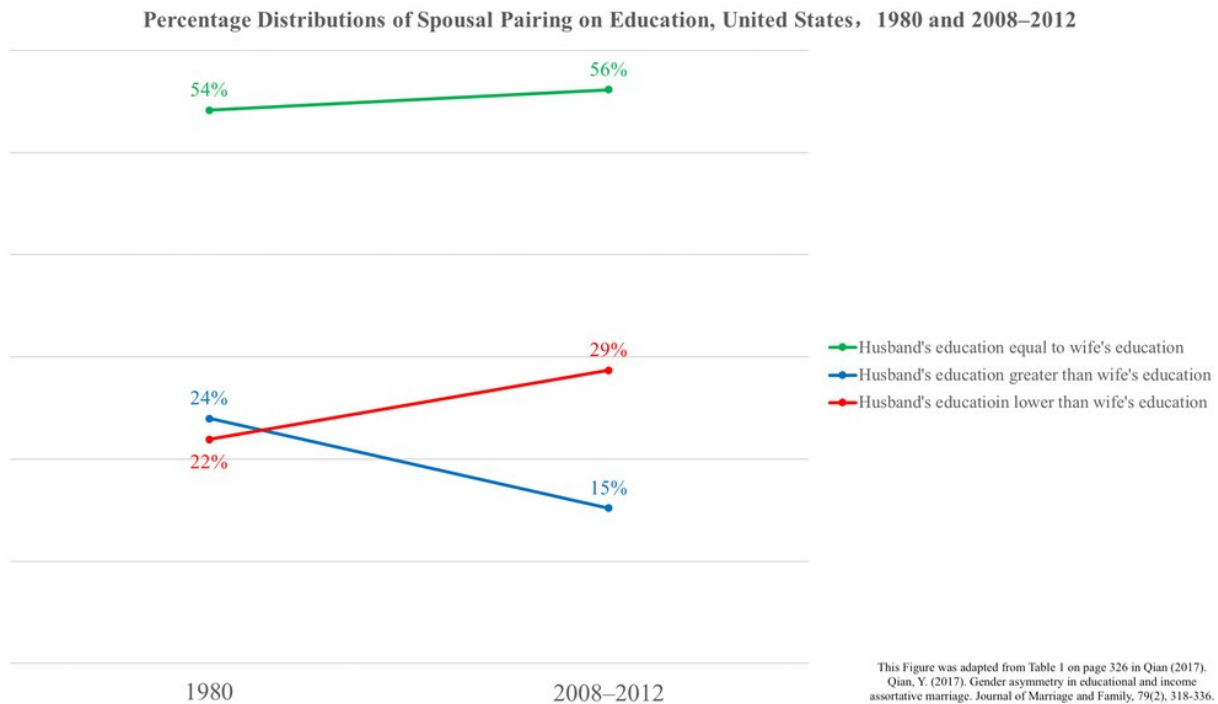
In the United States, women lagged behind men in college completion before the 1980s, but by 2013, women earned about 60 per cent of bachelor's and master's degrees and half of [all doctoral degrees](#).

[My research](#) took data from the 1980 U.S. Census and the 2008–2012 American Community Surveys to examine spousal pairings, and looked at education and income levels among newlywed couples. I found that between 1980 and 2008–2012, women were increasingly likely to marry men with less education than they had.

The proportion of couples in which the husband had more education than the wife dropped almost 10 percentage points, from 24 per cent in 1980 to 15 per cent in 2008–2012 (see the blue line in the zoomable graph, right). During the same period, the share of couples in which the wife had more education than the husband increased from 22 per cent to 29 per cent (the red line).

So, during 2008–2012 in the U.S., women were more likely than men to be the more educated spouse in marriage.

Since men have historically been expected to be the breadwinner and "the head of" the family, I wondered if these education pairings changed their breadwinner roles?



The change in education levels between heterosexual married couples from 1980-2012. Author provided (No reuse)

## Does education equal more power in marriage?

The pairing between a better-educated wife and a less-educated husband does not mean that the wife is the person with greater resources or power in marriage.

In general, women continue to marry men whose income exceeds their own. This is not surprising, given that women still [earn less](#) than men and the husband breadwinning norm [persists](#).

[My research](#) found that the tendency for women to "marry up" in terms of income was greater when they "married down" in education. In other

words, men and women still tend to form marriages in which the wife's socioeconomic status does not exceed that of the husband.

Although men have [placed more importance](#) on the financial prospects of a potential spouse over time, they may value women's high status [only up to the point](#) where their partner's status exceeds their own. In this way, men may hesitate to marry women who have both more education and higher income than they do.

Meanwhile, since income inequality has increased dramatically in recent decades, women may [have more to lose](#) if they marry down economically.

## **'Left-over ladies' in China**

So, [in the U.S.](#), highly educated men and women are already more likely than their less educated peers to get married. By contrast, in China, highly educated women, (but not highly educated men), may face great challenges finding a spouse.





Women tend to marry men whose income exceeds their own. Credit: Sebastian Pichler/Unsplash

[Chinese women have outpaced men in college enrolment as well. My previous research](#) on contemporary urban China found that as education increases for women, the likelihood of them finding a match for marriage decreases, whereas the possibilities increase for men.

Chinese media and the public use a derogative term, "[leftover ladies](#)," to describe these urban, highly educated single women. In China, the low marriage prospects of highly educated women are closely linked to the roles that husbands and wives are supposed to play in the family.

The breadwinner role of the husband and the homemaker role of the

wife remain [firmly in place](#) in Chinese families. [In this context](#), career-oriented women are commonly criticized as "selfish," "non-feminine" and "irresponsible to household needs," whereas husbands' failure to fulfil the provider role is often the primary source of marital conflict.

Unlike the U.S., where men now tend to marry women more educated than themselves, the traditional practice of men marrying women with less education than they have persists in China.

Although both China and the U.S. witnessed the gender-gap reversal in higher education, the U.S.-China contrast in marriage patterns suggests that structural factors, such as gender norms in society, play an important role in shaping individual marriage prospects.

It was a widely held social norm that men should marry women who were less educated than themselves. This norm worked well in the past when a college education was uncommon and men generally had more education than women. In the U.S., [the cultural evolution of mate preferences](#) corresponds to changes in men's and women's educational attainment.

But in urban China, this is not the case. The movement toward egalitarian gender roles does not go hand-in-hand with rapid social changes. Highly educated Chinese [women](#) gain little from the male breadwinner-female homemaker marriage; instead, they are likely to delay or even forgo marriage.

Since the reversal of the gender gap in education is [happening almost globally](#), it would be great to get more information so we can understand how the growing female advantage in education will impact marriage and family lives.

When it comes to marriage, it's not fate and love that bring people



together—social factors, like [education](#) and prevailing gender norms, matter.

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