

How moms are taking the lead in shaping children's education

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A new global study, which takes a gender-sensitive approach, has found that a mother's educational status plays an increasingly important role in shaping their children's educational status, while the importance of the

father's educational status has declined.

Education expansion was expected to create greater [social mobility](#) around the world, but new global evidence from Lancaster University and the University of British Columbia challenges this assumption and shows how gender really matters.

Contrary to expectations, [education](#) expansion has not necessarily made [educational opportunities](#) more equal for children with different backgrounds of parental education across many regions of the world, the study finds.

Existing research on social mobility—the extent to which children can achieve educational success irrespective of [family background](#)—has focused primarily on the role of the father but not the mother.

But the importance of a mother's educational status for their children's and especially daughters' educational mobility has caught up with or overtaken that of a father's status, particularly in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and Europe including the UK, says the research.

"Gender, education expansion and intergenerational educational mobility around the world" by Professor Yang Hu, of Lancaster University, and Professor Yue Qian, of the University of British Columbia, in Canada, is published today in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

For this study, the researchers assembled a large-scale global dataset, which contained 1.79 million individuals born between 1956 and 1990 from 106 societies worldwide. The societies examined in the study host nearly 90% of the world's population.

With the rise of gender equality and an increase in the proportion of mothers paired with a less-educated father, mother-child associations in

educational status become stronger but father-child associations become weaker, says the research. Conversely, in less gender-equal contexts that have a larger proportion of mothers paired with a more-educated father, mother-daughter associations in educational [status](#) are weaker.

"Given women's rise in education, the gender-blind patriarchal measurement of intergenerational educational mobility is increasingly untenable," says Professor Hu.

"And our findings show that with the global expansion of education, the rising importance of mothers' education has effectively maintained, if not increased, the influence of parents' education on their children's social mobility in many regions."

He added, "Existing evidence focusing only on fathers provides an over-optimistic picture of social mobility. Our findings call for a gender-sensitive approach to measuring intergenerational mobility, for academics, governments, and [international organizations](#) to more accurately capture and better understand the implications of education expansion."

As the number of single-parent, particularly single-mother, families increase globally, it is possible that this change in [family structure](#) would further bolster the importance of the mother in children's social mobility, says the research.

Professor Qian said, "Given the persistent gendered division of labor in the family, mothers still bear the brunt of childrearing responsibilities across many parts of the world."

"Scarce attention has been paid to the role of mothers in their children's social mobility, a question with implications for socioeconomic inequality on a global scale."

"This study was initially motivated by our discontent with the patriarchal and western-centric focus of mainstream social mobility research."

"As our research evolved, it became apparent to us how a gender lens and a global scope enable new understandings of what happens when education expansion meets with the gender revolution."

"As we celebrate International Women's Day, we hope our findings help catalyze new, gender-sensitive approaches to [data collection](#) and measurement development, to inform educational and social policy."

More information: Yang Hu et al, Gender, education expansion and intergenerational educational mobility around the world, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-023-01545-5](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01545-5)

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