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## Mismatches in finding a romantic partner: Education and gender values in the Spanish marriage market



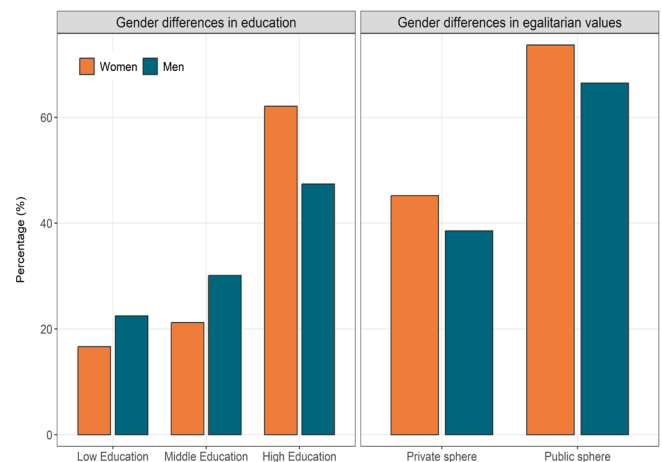
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The last decades the ‘romantic partner market’ has been changing drastically. Well-known changes in the structure of this market have been found in the discrepancies in educational level of potential spouses due to the educational expansion for women. If there is no potential spouse with similar resources or characteristics available (in a certain population), there is no possibility to partner homogamous, for many being the preference. Research from the Centre d’Estudis Demogràfics (CED) at the Autònoma University of Barcelona (UAB) examines for the first time the aspect of gender role values to mismatches between potential spouses. The importance of the (second) half of the gender revolution cannot be overlooked. We might expect that, as feminism becomes more widespread, the role of men in household tasks increases in importance, and women would therefore more and more look for a potential partner that values such an egalitarian view. Using the most recently available data, the *Encuesta de Fecundidad* (2018) for young Spanish men and women, the combined education-values gender gap in Spain is examined.

## The gender gap in education

In the sociological literature on heterosexual romantic partner choice three factors have been defined: Homogamous preferences, third-party influences, and constraints of the marriage (partner) market (Kalmijn, 1998). Partner market constraints have to do with the logic of numbers (as well as the locations where potential spouses can meet). This study focuses on the structure of the potential partner market in Spain. The importance of this structure has been shown in ample research on the consequences of female educational expansion for union formation in post-industrialized countries (Permanyer, Esteve, & Garcia, 2019), and Spain is no exception (Esteve & Cortina, 2006). As more and more women became higher educated, the ‘male deficit’ for highly educated women has been growing. That is, assuming that men and women prefer a partner with a similar or higher educational level (in the case of women), the growing number of highly educated women poses more and more difficulties to find a male partner that is ‘alike’. Using the *Encuesta de Fecundidad* (2018) for young Spanish men and women, I primarily show that this also holds for Spain.

In the left panel of Figure 1, I show that the education gap (the absolute difference in the percentage of women minus the percentage of men with a particular educational level) is negative for those with low and medium level of education, but positive and rather large (15 percentage points) for those with



**Figure 1.** The distribution of educational levels and egalitarian gender role values (for two different indices: private sphere and public sphere) among women and men (aged 25-34) in Spain, 2018. Weighted by age and province of residence.

**Source:** *Encuesta de Fecundidad* (2018). Author’s calculations

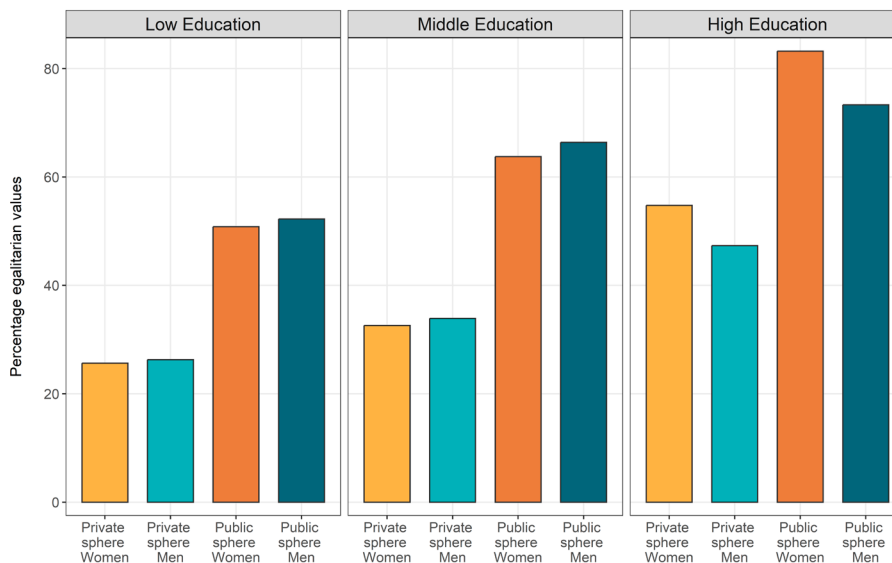
high education. Assuming that amongst the population there are an equal number of men and women of which an equal proportion prefers a partner of the opposite sex, that both of these populations entirely would be available as a partner to the other sex (and that one would not look outside of the age group 25-34), and that all men and women would want to 'mate assortative', this education gap of 15 percentage points means that a quarter of highly educated women  $[(62-47)/62]$  would remain single due to the lack of an available partner as there are simply not enough potential male partners present in the Spanish population, unless they would 'partner down'. The opposite occurs for low and middle educated men.

### The gender gap in values

A similar exercise can be done for the beliefs of men and women about the division of labour between spouses (gender role values of potential spouses). Despite the fact that the end of the first half of the gender revolution seems to come closer as more and more women are accepted to participate on the labour market, the second half of the revolution seems to be stalled (England, 2010; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). Still many men do not step in and participate to a larger extent in domestic work and child care. This impedes the development of a 'new stable equilibrium' as to what constitutes similar gender roles and identities in family life: the egalitarian equilibrium (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015) with consequences for partnering, separation, and fertility.

Also here, a 'male deficit' might occur since, despite increasing feminism among both men and women in the last decades (Knight & Brinton, 2017), women are still more egalitarian than men when it comes to gender role values. This has recently also been shown in other studies for Spain, with even a 'backlash' effect for the younger generations (Valdés, 2024). Using the *Encuesta de Fecundidad* (2018), I create two indices that measure peoples' gender role values: (1) values concerning the 'private sphere' (values that have to do with the extent to which women 'ought' be responsible for domestic work); and (2) values concerning the 'public sphere' (values that have to do with the acceptance of women in the labour market). The first index is constructed by the average of those answering 'egalitarian' to the following items: a) 'Manage the household (domestic work and child care) is just as satisfying as paid work'; b) 'A working mother can have just as close a relationship with her child as a non-working mother'; c) 'For a woman, her family should be priority, not her professional career'. The second index consists of two items: d) 'A woman earning more income than her partner, is not good for the relationship between partners'; e) 'When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women'.

In the right panel of Figure 1, the value gap among young Spanish men and women is shown to be 7 percentage points, both for values concerning the 'private sphere' (a male deficit of 13%  $[(45-39)/45]$ ) as well as for those concerning the 'public sphere' (a male deficit of 11%  $[(74-66)/74]$ ).



**Figure 2.** The distribution of the combination of educational level and egalitarian gender role values (for two different indices: private sphere and public sphere) among women and men (aged 25-34) in Spain, 2018. Weighted by age and province of residence.

**Source:** *Encuesta de Fecundidad* (2018). Author's calculations

## The education-value gap

To what extent can women find a male partner with the same education and values characteristics? The education-value gap between men and women for each combination is shown in the Figure 2. The gap is negative for low and middle educated persons with a gap of -1 percentage point for the low educated, both for private and for public sphere values; a gap of -1 percentage point for the middle educated for private sphere values and -3 percentage points for public sphere values; and a 'deficit' of equally characterised men for high educated women of 7 percentage points for private sphere values and of 10 percentage points for public sphere values. These numbers imply that of all egalitarian highly educated women 15% would not be able to find a highly educated male partner with similar egalitarian 'private sphere' values and 12% with similar egalitarian 'public sphere' values.

## The structure of the potential partner market of the Spanish population of young men and women

As a final exercise, I analyse the total structure of the potential partner market of young Spanish adults. Of the total population of women around 12% combine a low education

with traditional values in the private sphere, whereas this percentage is 17% of the population of men (Table 1). Again, assuming that the population of men and women is of equal size, that an equal share of women compared to men look for a partner of the opposite sex, and that all women and men prefer to partner homogamous, this implies that (rounded) 4 percentage points of low educated traditional men would not encounter a female partner with the same characteristics with respect to education and gender role values of the private sphere. This equals to that 42% of all traditional, low educated men would not find a female partner with similar education and gender role characteristics. The other cells of Table 1 can be interpreted in a similar way. Most striking is the 'male deficit' for egalitarian highly educated women of 12 percentage points in the case of private sphere values and 17 percentage points in the case of public sphere values. This would imply that about one third of the highly educated, egalitarian women would not be able to find a homogamous male partner match.

	Gender roles – private sphere				Gender roles – public sphere			
	TRAD.	EGAL.	Percentage point difference		TRAD.	EGAL.	Percentage point difference	
<b>women</b>								
Educational level								
LE	12	4	-4	-2	8	8	-3	-3
ME	14	7	-6	-3	8	14	-2	-6
HE	28	34	3	12	10	52	-2	17
			Percentage deficit				Percentage deficit	
<b>men</b>								
Educational level								
LE	17	6	-42	-50	11	12	-38	-50
ME	20	10	-43	-32	10	20	-25	-43
HE	25	22	11	35	13	35	-30	33

**Table 1.** The distribution of the combination of education and gender role values characteristics among women and men (aged 25-34) in Spain, 2018. Cell percentages. Weighted by age and province of residence.

**Source:** Encuesta de Fecundidad (2018). Author's calculations

## Discussion

Obviously, this study is a theoretical exercise of the number of potential opposite sex spouses assuming that all men and women would prefer homogamous relationships with respect to education and gender role values. The reality shows additional complications for this exercise to hold true as people might prefer non-homogamous relationships with respect to these characteristics (such as educational hypergamy: men having higher education than women; or educational hypogamy: women having higher education than men; or, for gender role values: egalitarian women might prefer a traditional man or (less common) vice versa)<sup>1</sup>. Studies have even shown a reversal in the gender gap of education with hypogamy becoming more prevalent than hypergamy in more and more nowadays societies (Esteve et al., 2016). What could be the consequences of the education-value gap for partner formation? Could this gap explain (part) of the increasing amount of highly educated single women and low educated single men? And how is this gap evolving

in the most recent years? New data on singles, families, their resources, and their values could shine light on this. Hence, I strongly endorse a new *Encuesta de Fecundidad*.

## Conclusion

The positive consequences of trends towards a higher educated population and an increase in egalitarianism in society are unquestioned, well-known, and highly supported by many. Yet, we should be conscious of certain prevailing negative consequences of these trends (e.g. for partner formation, couple well-being, and family formation) when these increases in education and egalitarianism do not take place at the same pace for both men and women, thereby creating a dissimilarity in the distribution of educational levels and gender role values of men and women. Support to reduce these education-values gaps is thus highly recommended, whereas in the meantime, potential partners should be conscious of the imperfect partner market of Spanish young adults.

<sup>1</sup>Individuals might still prefer homogamy on other resources and characteristics though (of which 'beauty', religion, and ethnicity are amongst the most common indicators preventing intermarriage).

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