

# **Five Decades of Marital Sorting in France and the United States – The Role of Educational Expansion and the Changing Gender Imbalance in Education**

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## **Research question**

Over the past half-century, the expansion of higher education and changes in the gender imbalance in education have reshaped the educational composition of the partner market. However, the influence of these concurrent trends on educational sorting in unions and marriages (e.g., the percentage of educationally homogamous unions) remains unclear. Instead of directly examining the effects of these structural changes, most existing research has controlled for changes in the educational composition of partner markets when studying marital sorting, using log-linear models (Kalmijn, 1991; Schwartz & Mare, 2005; Smits, 2003). While some studies have explored the link between gender imbalances in education and marital sorting, they typically did not consider that this gender imbalance correlates with the overall educational attainment, which may also influence marital sorting (Corti & Scherer, 2021; Erát, 2021; Esteve et al., 2016). Addressing this knowledge gap is vital to improve our understanding of the drivers of trends in marital sorting outcomes, which can be closely linked to inequalities within and between couples (e.g., in income or health) (Behrman, 2019; Boertien & Permanyer, 2019; Potarca & Rossier, 2021; Rauscher, 2019).

Our study aims to disentangle the distinct impacts of (a) educational expansion and (b) trends in the education-gender association on changing marital sorting outcomes (the joint education distribution of married and cohabiting women and men). By examining trends in marital sorting in France and the United States from the 1960s to the 2010s, we capture the reversal of the gender gap in higher education and the shift from predominantly low to high educational attainment.

## **Theoretical framework**

Educational expansion can shape trends in marital sorting outcomes. The relative size of a group in a population affects the likelihood of encountering a member of that group (Blau, 1977; Blau et al., 1982; Lewis & Oppenheimer, 2000). For example, as the proportion of tertiary educated women increases, the probability that a man will encounter – and potentially marry – a tertiary educated woman also increases. Consequently, structural opportunities for homogamy peak at the beginning and end of higher education expansion, when the majority of young adults are either low- or highly educated. In contrast, we expect more heterogamous matching during transitional phases with more variation in educational attainment levels.

Because women surpassed men in educational attainment, we expect that the likelihood of matches between more educated women and less educated men (hypogamy) has increased. Conversely, we assume that matches between less educated women and more educated men (hypergamy) have become less likely (De Hauw et al., 2017; Van Bavel, 2012). Moreover, gender imbalances in education reduce the opportunities for homogamous matching. In conclusion, educational expansion and changing gender imbalances in education can shape homogamy and heterogamy outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial to disentangle the impacts of these simultaneous changes on marital sorting trends.

### **Data and methods**

The analyses are based on microdata census samples from France (1962–2011) and the United States (1960–2015), provided by IPUMS International (Minnesota Population Center, 2020). Using cross-sectional samples of women aged 25 to 34, we examined trends in ‘marital sorting outcomes’ among married and cohabiting unions. We distinguish between three educational levels: lower secondary education or less, secondary education completed, and tertiary education completed. Drawing upon a decomposition approach proposed by Leesch and Skopek (2023), we investigate the relative impact of educational expansion and the changing gender-education association on marital sorting trends. Our decomposition analysis systematically compares observed marriage tables with hypothetical ones. Hypothetical marital sorting outcomes, derived through iterative proportional fitting (Deming & Stephan, 1940), indicate, for example, the expected sorting outcomes if only the gender-education association had changed.

### **Main findings**

Over the past five decades, France and the United States have experienced profound changes in marital sorting outcomes. In France, homogamy dropped from 78.1% in 1962 to 57.5% in 1990 and slightly increased afterward. Hypogamy has consistently risen, while hypergamy has declined over the past 50 years in France. In the United States, homogamy increased from 62.5% in 1960 to 70.7% in 2000 and has remained relatively stable since then. Hypogamy rates in the United States fell until the 1980s and increased until 2015. Hypergamy declined from the 1970s onward. Two structural changes could explain these trends in marital sorting outcomes. First, over the past five decades, France and the United States experienced a strong reduction in the percentage of young adults completing lower secondary education or less, coupled with a profound rise in tertiary education. Second, in both countries, the gender imbalance in education shifted from a male to a female advantage.

Figure 1 shows the extent to which educational expansion (white bars) and changes in the education-gender association (light gray bars) influenced trends in marital sorting outcomes. If only the overall educational attainment had changed in France, *homogamy* outcomes would have markedly declined from 1962 to 1990, followed by a moderate increase. In the United States, educational expansion did not affect homogamy trends. More detailed analyses reveal that educational expansion is linked to a decline in low-educated homogamous unions and an increase in highly educated homogamous unions. However, these two changes offset each other entirely. Moreover, the changing gender imbalance in education had only a small impact on homogamy trends.

In France, educational expansion and changes in the gender imbalance in education contributed to the rise in *hypogamy*. In contrast, in the United States, these two trends act as opposing forces. The proportion of hypogamous unions would have declined if only the overall educational attainment had changed, while we would have observed an increase in hypogamy if only the gender imbalance in education had changed. Further analyses suggest that unions between medium-educated women and low-educated men were comparatively common in the 1960s in the United States. Educational expansion led to a decline in this union type, explaining the negative ‘educational expansion effect’.

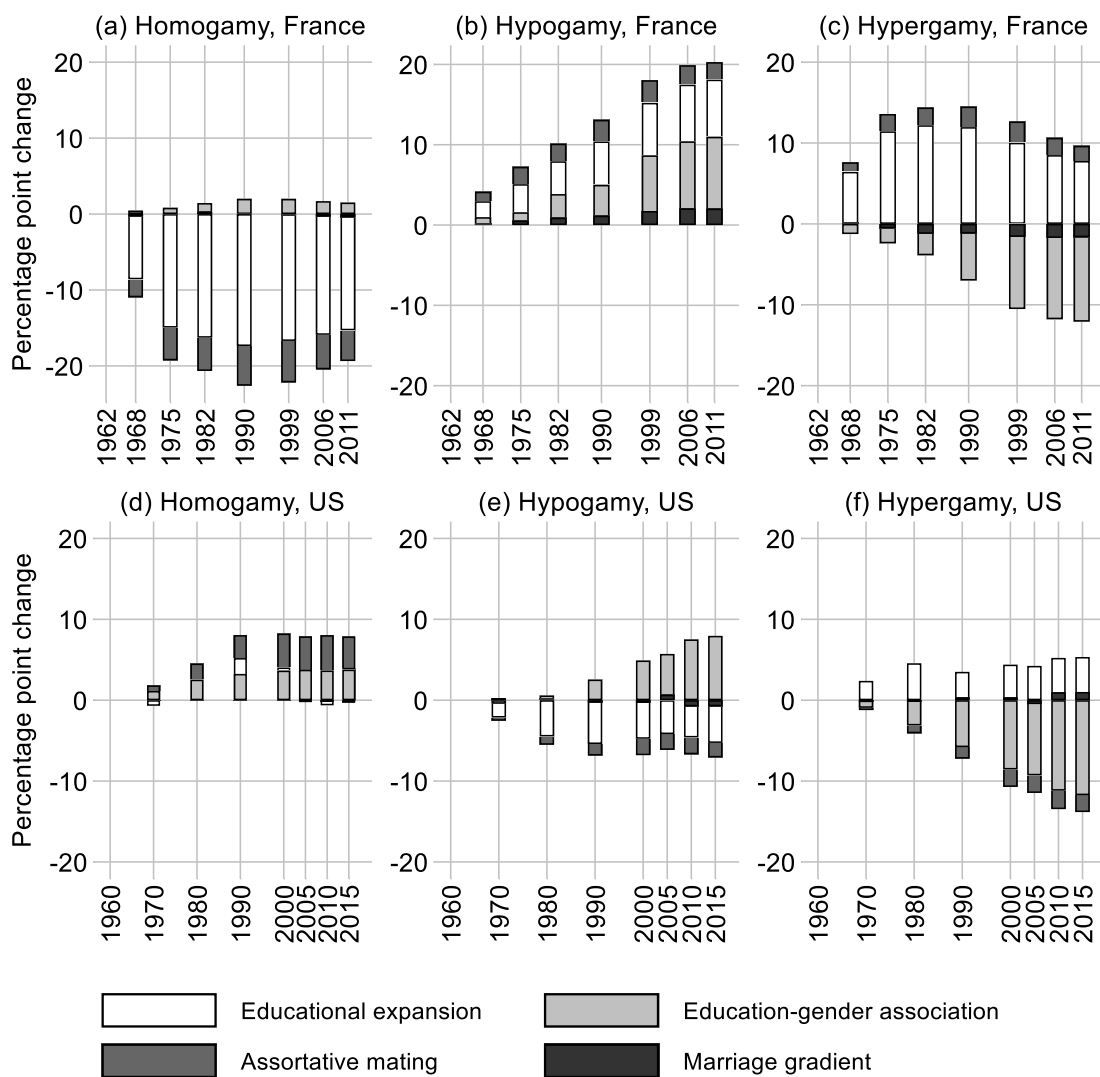
In both countries, the influences of educational expansion and the education-gender association on trends in *hypergamy* tend to counterbalance each other. Educational expansion is associated with a rise in hypergamy, but hypergamy would have declined if only the education-gender association had shifted. This pattern is primarily driven by the changing proportions of unions between medium-educated women and highly educated men.

Furthermore, the dark gray and black bars in Figure 1 indicate the associations between assortative mating (non-random matching), the educational gradient in marriage and trends in marital sorting outcomes. This demonstrates that trends in marital sorting are not solely the result of changes in women’s and men’s educational attainment.

## **Conclusion**

Our study investigates the roles of educational expansion and changes in the education-gender association in shaping trends in marital sorting outcomes in France and the United States over a period spanning from the 1960s to the 2010s. We find that changes in the education-gender association are linked to increased hypogamy and a decline in hypergamy. In contrast, the influence of educational expansion on trends in marital sorting outcomes differs considerably between France and the United States.

We draw two main conclusions from our results. First, previous research suggests that the reversal of the gender gap in education is the driving force behind trends in hypogamy and hypergamy outcomes (Corti & Scherer, 2021; De Hauw et al., 2017; Esteve et al., 2016). However, our findings indicate that hypogamy and hypergamy rates would have changed even if the expansion in higher education had been gender-neutral. Second, our results underscore the importance of investigating disaggregated trends in marital sorting outcomes, meaning all cells in a marriage table. For example, for the United States, our results show that the decline in low-educated homogamous unions and the increase in highly educated homogamous unions counterbalanced each other entirely.



**Fig. 1.** Decomposition of trends in marital sorting outcomes

Notes: Decomposition results show changes in homogamy, hypogamy, and hypergamy outcomes compared to the reference years of 1962 in France and 1960 in the United States. Differently shaded bars represent the contributions of educational expansion, changes in the education-gender association, assortative mating, and the marriage gradient to the observed trends in homogamy, hypogamy, and hypergamy. The data are weighted.

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