

How do mothers matter for intergenerational mobility globally?

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With the world expansion of education, mothers are playing an increasingly important role in shaping their children's educational status, particularly for daughters and in contexts with a high prevalence of mothers paired with a less-educated father.

The question

Intergenerational educational mobility refers to the extent to which people can achieve educational success irrespective of their parents' educational status. Higher intergenerational educational mobility reflects greater equality of educational opportunity and openness of society¹. Existing research on intergenerational mobility has focused primarily on father-child associations in education¹, overlooking the mother's contribution to the transmission of educational (dis)advantage to the child. With the world expansion of education and the rise of mothers (vis-à-vis fathers) in education in many societies², mothers may have become increasingly important in helping children get ahead in education. Bringing the mother to the fore on a global stage, our study aims to address two questions. First, how have mother-child (versus father-child) associations in educational status changed around the world across cohorts of men and women? Second, what are the implications of education expansion and changes in parents' educational pairing patterns for intergenerational educational mobility?

The discovery

To answer these questions, we assembled a large-scale global dataset of 1.79 million individuals born between 1956 and 1990 from 106 societies worldwide. The societies examined in our study host nearly 90% of the world's population. We made several key findings. In most world regions, the importance of mothers' educational status for their children's educational mobility has caught up with or overtaken that of fathers' status in more recent cohorts. The rising importance of mothers' educational status in intergenerational mobility is particularly prominent in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe. The rising role of the mother in shaping educational mobility is more pronounced for daughters than for sons. With education expansion, father-child associations in educational status have become weaker, whereas mother-child associations have grown stronger (Fig. 1). As the proportion of hypogamy (mothers paired with a less-educated father) in society and cohort increases, mother-child associations in educational status

become stronger and father–child associations become weaker. Conversely, as the proportion of hypergamy (mothers paired with a more-educated father) increases, mother–daughter associations in educational status become weaker.

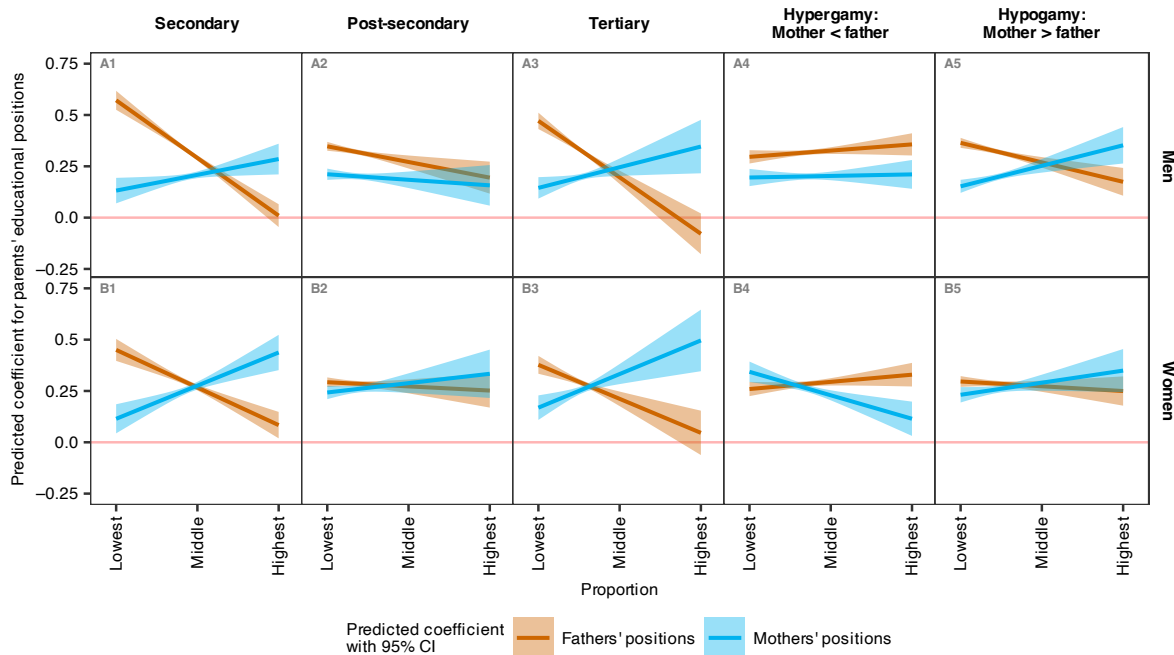


Fig.1 | Predicted parent–child associations in educational status vary with education expansion and parents’ educational pairing patterns across societies and cohorts. Colour bands indicate 95% confidence intervals. Lowest refers to minimum values and highest refers to maximum values: the ranges are 0.018–0.874 for secondary education, 0–0.459 for post-secondary education, 0.003–0.923 for tertiary education, 0–0.504 for hypergamy, and 0–0.385 for hypogamy. $N = 3,693$ and $3,688$ society-cohort units for men and women.

The implications

Following classic modernization theories³, many expected the expansion of education to facilitate intergenerational mobility by equalizing educational opportunities. This idea would have seemed to be the case if we had only looked at fathers’ education. Nevertheless, this expectation is challenged by our research, as we also considered mothers’ education on a global scale. Our findings show that with the global expansion of education, the rising importance of mothers’ education has effectively maintained, if not increased, intergenerational persistence in educational status across many regions of the world. When both parents’ education is taken into account, therefore, equality of educational opportunity has not necessarily increased with education expansion.

Prior research suggests that education expansion paves the way for a decline in mothers paired with a more-educated father and an increase in mothers paired with a less-educated father². Yet, the extent to which education expansion changes couples’ educational pairing patterns also hinges on contextual norms and broader gender empowerment — factors that determine whether educational opportunities are equally accessible and rewarding for girls and boys⁴. Our findings on parents’ changing educational pairing patterns underline the importance of considering the gendered context in which education expansion takes place.

Taken together, our findings call for a gender-sensitive approach to investigating educational mobility. Such an approach is crucial for academics, governments, and international organizations to accurately capture, audit, and monitor intergenerational mobility and better understand the implications of education

expansion. Whereas social mobility research tends to focus on advanced economies¹, our study also showcases the value of large-scale global evidence. As the number of single-parent — particularly single-mother — families increases globally⁵, this change in family structure has the potential to further bolster the importance of the mother in children’s social mobility. To test this possibility, researchers could collect, curate and analyse comprehensive global data on ongoing changes in family forms. Future work could also extend our approach and examine intergenerational mobility along other dimensions such as income and wealth.

Behind the paper

As long-term collaborators, we both have research interests in gender, family, and social inequality. Given the persistent gendered division of labour in the family, mothers still bear the brunt of childrearing responsibilities across many parts of the world. Surprisingly, 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 the complex relationships between education expansion, gender dynamics, and intergenerational mobility. Our findings challenge the often-default patriarchal approach to studying educational mobility. We hope our study helps catalyse new, gender-sensitive approaches to data collection and measurement development, to inform educational and social policies going forwards.

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