

## Short Commentary

# The Evolving Landscape of Gender and Happiness: A Commentary “Does Reversal of the Educational Gender Gap Affect Men’s Happiness: Evidence from China”

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The study by Steven Zhongwu Li and Fengzhi Lu, titled “Does Reversal of the Educational Gender Gap Affect Men’s Happiness? Evidence from China,” explores an essential aspect of social dynamics within a rapidly evolving Chinese society. This research examines the relationship between a wife’s educational advantage over her husband and the resulting impact on the husband’s happiness. The study reveals a significant shift in gender attitudes and the evolving role of education in shaping personal happiness [1].

## Context and Global Trends

Globally, there has been a marked increase in the number of women surpassing men in educational attainment, a phenomenon often referred to as the “educational gender gap reversal.” China exemplifies this trend, driven by economic development and policy initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in education. Since 2009, the proportion of female undergraduates and college students in China has consistently exceeded 50%, with female graduate students surpassing their male counterparts since 2010. This shift aligns with patterns observed in many developed countries, challenging traditional gender norms that have historically privileged men’s education and professional development over women’s [2].

## Theoretical Framework

Li and Lu’s analysis is grounded in the role-action theory, which posits that societal expectations and norms significantly influence individual behavior and happiness. As gender norms evolve towards greater equality, men’s acceptance of and adaptation to these changes can enhance their happiness. Conversely, adherence to traditional norms that privilege male educational and professional dominance may lead to feelings of insecurity and decreased well-being when confronted with a spouse’s higher educational attainment [3].

## Methodology and Key Findings

Li and Lu leverage the nationally representative China Family Panel Studies dataset to analyze the impact of this educational shift on men’s

happiness. By meticulously controlling for various individual, familial, and community-level factors, the authors provide robust evidence suggesting that husbands are indeed happier when their wives are more educated than they are. So, the research challenges traditional gender stereotypes that associate a man’s masculinity and status with being the primary breadwinner or the more educated partner in a relationship. Instead, it underscores the growing appreciation among men for the benefits of having a spouse with educational advantages.

This statistical rigor is further enhanced by the application of instrumental variable regression, a technique designed to address potential endogeneity issues. The authors contend with the possibility that men embracing egalitarian gender norms may be predisposed to enter into unions with women who have educational advantages, whereas those with more traditional views might shy away from such arrangements. To counterbalance this, the researchers introduce an instrument that correlates with the wife’s educational edge while being exogenous to the husband’s current state of happiness. Conscious of the limitations inherent in their chosen instrument, the researchers further employ Lewbel’s method to construct an alternative instrument [4,5].

## Nuanced Heterogeneity

A key aspect highlighted in the research is the nuanced heterogeneity in this relationship. Specifically, the positive association between a wife’s educational advantages and her husband’s happiness is found to be particularly strong among men who are highly educated themselves, younger in age, and residents of China’s eastern region. This subset of men is more likely to embrace egalitarian gender ideologies, underscoring a generational and geographical shift in attitudes towards gender equality [6,7].

However, the researchers do not rest on this general observation. They explore deeper into the issue of potential clustering effects, suggesting that the educational advantage of wives is exclusively confined to specific demographic subsets. Contrary to this assumption,

their calculations reveal that wives with educational advantages are dispersed across all education levels, age groups, and regions, albeit with varying prevalence.

The study attributes this trend to the influence of the country's opening-up policy since 1978, which has facilitated the adoption of progressive gender norms and encouraged men to support their partners' educational and professional aspirations. These men are at the forefront of embracing a new social norm where female education and career success are seen as complementary to, rather than competing with, their own.

### Considerations of Sample Selection and Women's Well-being

The study focused specifically on married couples, excluding those who divorced as a result of the reversal of the gender gap in education. This exclusion raises concerns about sample selection bias. Nevertheless, it had minimal influence on the main findings, underscoring the significant emphasis Chinese society places on family and marital stability. The study also highlighted that China's divorce rate is considerably lower compared to Western countries, with various measures implemented to prevent divorces. In the future, researchers should address the sample selection problem rather than emphasizing the small number of divorced samples.

While the primary focus of the research is on men's happiness, the researchers also incorporate women's well-being into their study. Interestingly, in the context of a reversed education gender gap, they discovered a potential inverse relationship between a wife's educational advantage and her subjective well-being. This finding suggests that traditional gender ideologies persist among many women, who prioritize male dominance in education and career pursuits while believing that women should devote more attention to familial roles. Consequently, when gender roles are reversed, such as when women surpass men in educational attainment, it challenges deeply ingrained traditional notions of gender and negatively impacts women's overall happiness.

### Conclusion and Policy Implications

The impact of educational gender reversal on male happiness is profoundly relevant, reflecting the evolving dynamics of education and gender roles while challenging traditional norms and expectations. This understanding is crucial for policymakers, educators, and sociologists striving to cultivate inclusive and equitable educational environments. It underscores how socioeconomic progress has significantly shaped men's perspectives, particularly among younger individuals, highly educated individuals, and those from improved socioeconomic backgrounds.

There is a growing recognition among men of women's educational advantages and their positive impacts on male well-being. The findings have profound implications for societal structures and cultural narratives. They indicate that as women gain greater educational parity or surpass men, the conventional gender hierarchy is being reconfigured. Men who embrace this shift may experience increased happiness, challenging the notion that traditional gender roles are

essential for male well-being. Furthermore, the study suggests that the normalization of marriages where women are the more educated partner could accelerate the transformation towards more equitable gender dynamics.

Li and Lu's study provides a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between education, gender, and happiness in contemporary China. It not only confirms the positive association between a wife's educational advantage and her husband's happiness but also elucidates the underlying factors that drive this correlation. The findings challenge conventional wisdom, highlight the importance of progressive gender attitudes, and underscore the transformative power of education in fostering a more equitable society. As China continues its trajectory of modernization, this research serves as a valuable compass guiding policymakers and society at large towards fostering environments where educational achievements are celebrated regardless of gender, contributing to enhanced happiness and well-being for all.

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