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Sharing their lives: women, marital trends and education

by Laetitia Martin and Feng Hou



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- 0 true zero or a value rounded to zero
- 0^s value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
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- x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
- E use with caution
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Sharing their lives: women, marital trends and education

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Introduction

Society is constantly evolving. One of the major changes in the second half of the 20th century was the influx of women into the labour market, particularly in the early 1970s. At the same time as the evolving labour market was creating a heavier demand for highly skilled workers, the number of university students was growing. The increase in university attendance was more rapid among women than men, so much so that, in 2006, a larger proportion of women than men aged 25 to 29 held a university degree (33% of women and 23% of men).

Extended schooling among women affects the timing of transitions in their lives, including when they form unions.¹ The most common path is to complete one's education, find a job and then enter a relationship.² In this context, researchers have focused on the tendency among women with a higher level of education to postpone starting a family or decide not to have children.³ How has the situation changed in recent years? Are women with a university degree still, as they were 25 years ago, less likely to be married than women without a university degree? When these women are married or in a common-law relationship, are they more likely than before to be living with a man who is also a university graduate?

Using data from the 1981 to 2006 Censuses, this article examines how the propensity to form unions (marriage or common-law) has changed for women aged 25 to 49 with a university degree and those without. It also compares the likelihood of female university graduates forming unions with similarly educated males in 2006 with the likelihood in 1981 (see "What you should know about this study").

An overview of unions in 2006

According to 2006 Census data, more than one-half of Canadian women aged 25 to 29 were in a union (marriage or common-law) in that year. The proportion of people in unions increases with age, with nearly three out of four women aged 45 to 49 in a union.

In every age group, marriage is more popular than common-law unions. However, younger women were more likely to be in a common-law union (23%) than older women (11%). Conversely, women aged 45 to 49 were almost twice as likely to be married as women aged 25 to 29 (62% and 32% respectively).

Education and marriage over time

In North America, female university graduates born before the 1960s

were less likely to marry than less-educated women.⁴ That is no longer the case in Canada. In fact, by 2006, there emerged a positive relationship between having a university education and being married. Indeed, women aged 25 to 49 with a university degree are now more likely to be married than less-educated women (57% and 53% respectively) (Table 1).

This reversal is also evident in the oldest age group (Chart 1). In 1981, Canadian women aged 45 to 49 with a university degree were less likely to be married (66%) than other women in the same age group (80%). The gap narrowed over time, however, and, by 2001, the percentage of married women was about the same for university graduates as for the other women (about 65%). And, in 2006, a slightly larger proportion of women aged 45 to 49 with a university degree were married than other women (65% compared to 61%) (Chart 1).

In the group aged 25 to 29, the difference in the proportion of married women with a university degree and those without shrank over the years (Chart 1). Even so, in 2006, women with a university degree remained slightly less likely to be married than other women (31% and 32% respectively).

What you should know about this study

This study is based on data from the 1981 to 2006 Censuses of Population. The analysis focuses on women from 25 to 49 years of age, since most Canadian women have completed their education by the age of 25, and since the proportion of Canadian women in unions levels out at the age of 49. The focus is on marital status by highest level of education. Since the number of same-sex unions is small and there are no data on such unions for years prior to 2001, this study relates to opposite-sex unions only.

Definitions

University graduate: A person with a bachelor's degree, a master's degree or a doctorate. This does not include persons with a university certificate or diploma below the bachelor level.

Educational homogamy: Partners with similar levels of schooling. In this study, there is educational homogamy when a woman with a university degree forms a union (marriage or common-law) with a partner also with a university degree.

Marital status: Conjugal status of a person at the time of the census. Marriage and common-law union are combined. 'Married' includes all persons who are legally married but not separated and not living common-law with a person other than their spouse. 'Common-law' includes all persons who are living as a couple but not legally married to each other. Persons living in common-law unions can be legally unmarried, divorced or widowed. In the 1981 and 1986 Censuses, the data on common-law unions were based on responses concerning the relationship between persons. A direct variable was introduced in the 1991 Census.

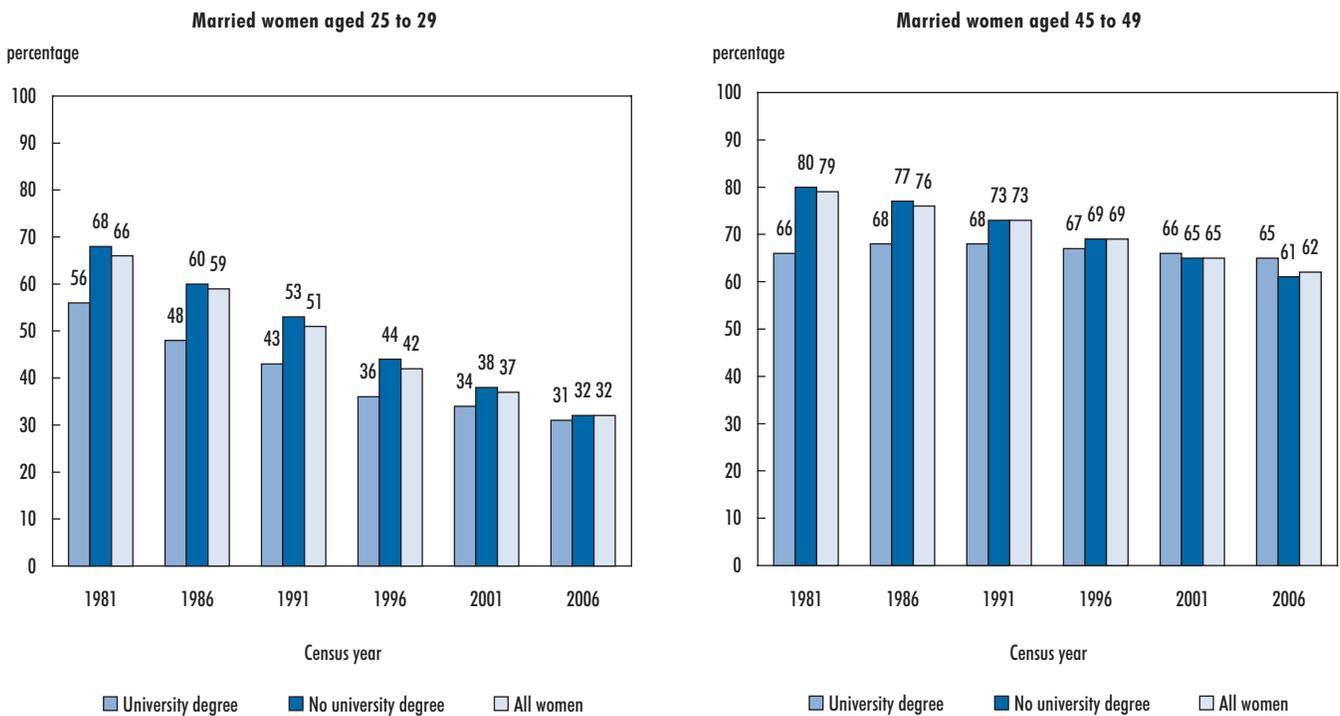
Measurement of unions in the census: The census captures marital status on Census Day. The data do not distinguish whether it is the first union or a subsequent union. Accordingly, any unions prior to the Census Day union are out of scope.

Table 1 Women aged 25 to 49 by marital status, level of education and region of residence

| | Canada | | Quebec | | Canada excluding Quebec | |
|--|--------|------|--------|------|-------------------------|------|
| | 1981 | 2006 | 1981 | 2006 | 1981 | 2006 |
| percentage | | | | | | |
| In a marriage | | | | | | |
| All women | 75 | 54 | 72 | 37 | 76 | 60 |
| University degree | 65 | 57 | 58 | 38 | 67 | 62 |
| No university degree | 76 | 53 | 73 | 37 | 77 | 59 |
| In a common-law union | | | | | | |
| All women | 4 | 16 | 5 | 31 | 4 | 11 |
| University degree | 5 | 13 | 8 | 30 | 4 | 8 |
| No university degree | 4 | 16 | 5 | 32 | 4 | 12 |
| Not married and not in a common-law union | | | | | | |
| All women | 21 | 30 | 23 | 31 | 20 | 30 |
| University degree | 30 | 30 | 34 | 31 | 29 | 29 |
| No university degree | 20 | 30 | 22 | 31 | 19 | 30 |

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1981 and 2006.

Chart 1 Regardless of age, women with a university degree were just as likely to be married as less educated women in 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1981 to 2006.

Common-law unions are less frequent among women with a university degree

Common-law unions have become more popular since 1981. The proportion of people aged 25 to 49 in a common-law union quadrupled in Canada, increasing from 4% in 1981 to 16% in 2006. In most cases, common-law unions appear to mark the starting point of conjugal life rather than a long-term situation.⁵ However, according to recent studies, in some instances common-law unions have become an alternative to marriage, particularly in Quebec.⁶ In 2006, 31% of women aged 25 to 49 who were living in Quebec were in a common-law union, while this was the case for 11% of women in the rest of Canada (Table 1).

In 2006, women with a university education were less likely to be in a common-law relationship than less-educated women. In Quebec, 30% of women with a university degree

were in a common-law union, a slightly smaller proportion than for less-educated women (32%). In the rest of Canada, the difference was more pronounced, with 12% of less-educated women and 8% of university graduates in common-law unions.

The difference in the tendency to be in a common-law union between university graduates and other women appears to have grown over time. This trend was observed for women aged 25 to 29 as well as for those aged 45 to 49 (Chart 2).

Educational homogeneity

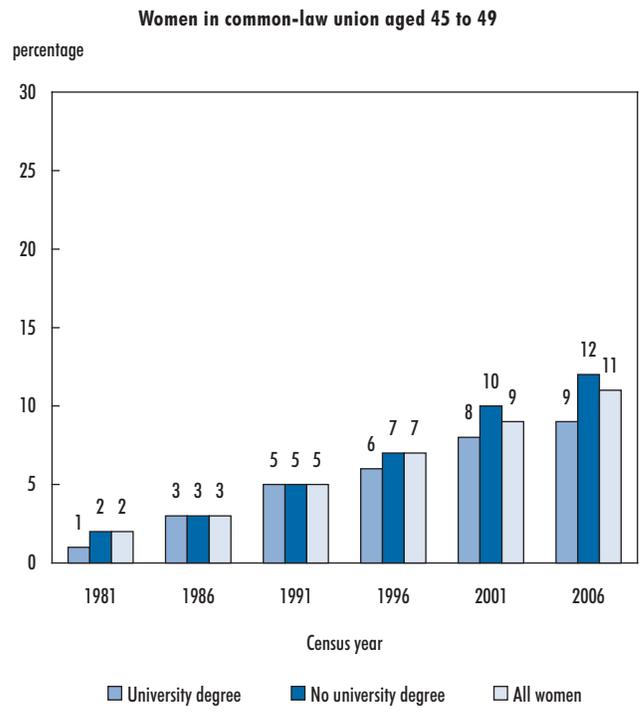
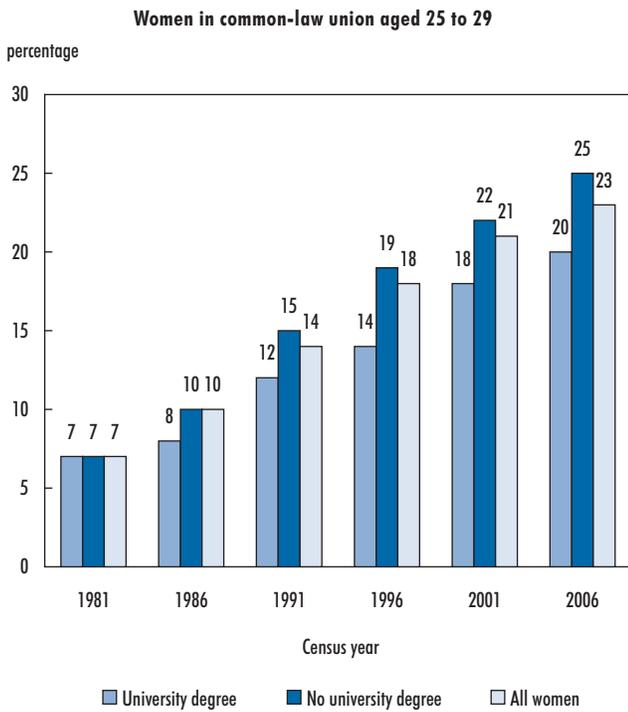
Education has always affected the choice of partners in modern Western societies.⁷ Schools and universities provide young people with a place where they can meet and discuss what they expect from life, their values and their cultural preferences. The workplace is another location for meeting potential spouses. Individuals who work together may have similar levels of education,

which can make it easier to find a partner with a similar level of education (educational homogeneity).⁸

In 2006, women aged 25 to 49 were more likely to be highly educated than men in the same age category—about 1,543,000 women, or 27%, had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 23% of men.⁹ For every 100 women in this age group, 84 men in the same age group had a similar level of schooling. The opposite was true 25 years earlier. For every 100 women with a bachelor's degree or higher, 157 men had an equal amount of education.

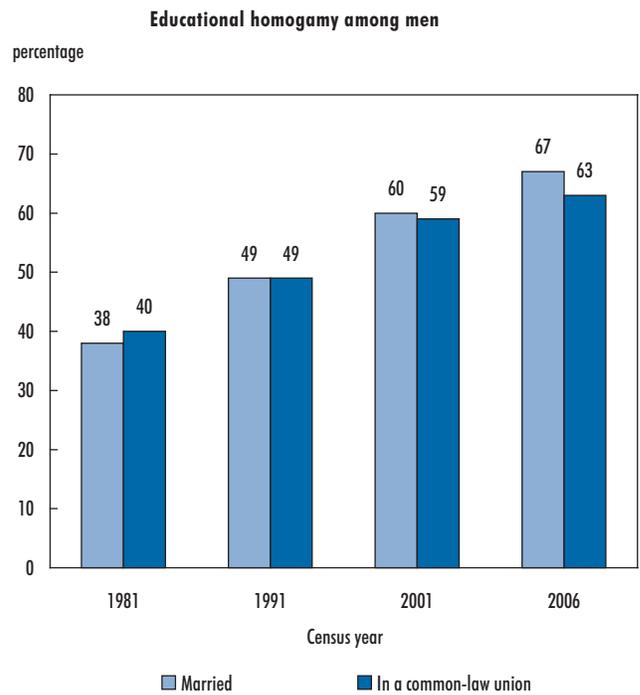
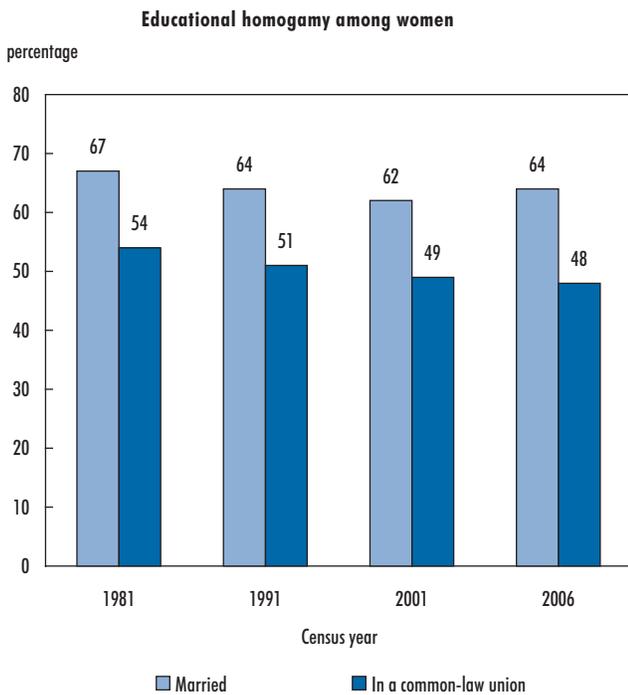
Because of the increase in the number of female university graduates, men with a university degree had a better chance of having a partner with a degree in 2006 than in 1981. In 2006, 67% of men with a university degree were married to women with the same level of education, compared with 38% in 1981 (Chart 3).

Chart 2 Common-law unions are less popular among women with a university degree, particularly those aged 25 to 29



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1981 to 2006.

Chart 3 Educational homogamy more common among married women than among women in a common-law union



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1981 to 2006.

Interestingly, in 2006, married women with a university degree between the ages of 25 and 49 had a slightly lower tendency toward educational homogamy than 25 years earlier. For example, the proportion of women with degrees who had married men with the same level of education was 64% in 2006, compared with 67% 25 years earlier.

This slight dip in women's educational homogamy and the sharp increase in men's educational homogamy may be due to the more rapid growth in the rate of women's university graduation. Women with a university education would find fewer partners with comparable schooling to marry, whereas the reverse would be true for men.

Such changes could raise the proportion of women university graduates marrying men with less education than they have (similar to the situation of male university graduates in 1981). The observations made here suggest, however, that the decrease in the relative supply of university-educated men has so far had only a slight impact on the educational homogamy rate for these women.

For women with a university degree, the likelihood of having a partner with the same level of education was lower among those in common-law unions (48% in 2006) than among those who were married (64%). This difference may reflect less concern about their partners' earnings among women in common-law unions than among women in married couples¹⁰ as partners in common-law relationships often have less legal and economic commitment to each other.¹¹ Some researchers point out that, despite the increasing popularity of common-law unions, marriage is still very highly regarded, and a great deal is expected of marriage in providing economic security.¹² While common-law couples are more likely to choose non-traditional models for the roles of the two partners, marriage is characterized by a higher level of

economic interdependence between the spouses.¹³

Summary

Women have made substantial gains in education over the last few decades and are now more likely to have a university degree than men. In 2006, for every 100 women aged 25 to 49 with a university degree, there were 84 men with the same level of education. The corresponding ratio in 1981 was 157 men for every 100 women.

Over the last quarter-century, the conjugal situation of female university graduates has changed considerably. In 2006, women aged 25 to 49 with a university degree were more likely to be married than other women (57% and 53% respectively). In 1981, the opposite was true: 65% of women with a university degree were married, compared with 76% of less-educated women.

The majority of women with a university education marry men who also have a university education. This tendency has decreased slightly over the last quarter-century. The pattern is similar for women in common-law unions. In contrast, men with a university degree are increasingly likely to be married to or in a common-law union with a woman who also has a university degree.



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