The attraction of the city: Female rural-urban migration as an investment in a prosperous family

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Introduction

In the Netherlands, as in many other European countries, young women have surpassed young men in educational success. This development is linked with internal migration tendencies. Nowadays, in the main Dutch cities young women often outnumber young men, whereas young men are overrepresented in some of the rural areas (Latten and Kooiman 2011). Migration of young women is often triggered by opportunities for education and work. We hypothesise that in addition, migration could be driven by the search for a suitable partner, since there is a growing shortage of higher educated men in rural areas. For women, both their own education and their partner choice may be investments to optimise their future family's economic prosperity, and thus investments in their children's societal chances.
In the long run, continued migration of well educated women to urban areas may cause societal problems on a macro level. Regional polarisation may increase, and in rural areas populations could shrink even further, with an increased risk of socially isolated men as can be seen in Germany (Kröhnert and Klingholz 2007).
Our study addresses the following research questions: Do rural women who relocated to cities and started a family there have a better economic position in midlife than women who started a family in the more rural areas? What is the contribution of women's education and labour participation to these differences in prosperity? Is there an additional independent contribution of the education and income of their partners? And what could be attributed to the urban context in which migrated women lead their lives?

Theoretical background

According to evolutionary theory, women strive to create optimal conditions for starting a family and raising their children, since this increases their evolutionary fitness. Such optimal conditions are still very much dependent on the level of material resources of the family, even in the relatively wealthy Western countries. Only some decades ago, in Western countries economical resources depended mainly on the breadwinning role of the male partner. Male partners who are higher educated acquire better-paid jobs and are able to gain more wealth over their lifetime. Nowadays, women participate in higher education and on the labour market, and households increasingly are dual income households. Therefore, two of the main ways in which modern women can invest in optimal conditions for future offspring are investment in their own resources and choosing a partner with a high level of resources (Geary et al. 2004).

Investment in one's own resources starts with investing in education, which Western women have increasingly been doing in the last decades. For the first time in history, young women are even surpassing men in educational level in most Western European countries (Statistics Netherlands 2011). Around 2010, the Netherlands was among the few OECD countries in which childless women aged 25-44 had higher average earnings than childless men of the same age (OECD 2012).

However, the female success could create a shortage of suitable partners if highly educated women prefer equally educated men. Across a variety of Western en non-Western cultures,

women consistently prefer 'culturally successful' mates: males with a high social status and a high level of (material) resources (Geary et al. 2004). Partnering high-status men benefits the future prosperity of a woman's children since fathers invest resources in their children (Marlowe 2000; Fischer 2004; Shenk and Scelza 2012). For highly educated women this should lead to assortative mating –partnering with someone that resembles them in education. Assortative mating is a widespread phenomenon in modern societies (Blossfeld and Timm 2003) and is the result of, among other things, partner preferences and marriage markets constraints (Kalmijn 1998; see also Schaefer 2012). Assortative mating is especially advantageous for highly educated and their children, since it doubles the economic advantages they already have due to their own education. In contrast, hypogamy -partnering with someone with a lower education- could be economically unfavourable for women and their future children as lower-educated men are generally less able to (economically) invest in their offspring. Additionally, in Sweden it has been shown that hypogamy may even lower highly educated women's personal earnings (Dribe and Nystedt 2013).

For highly educated women in the Netherlands, assortative mating might become more difficult due to the increasing surplus of well educated women and scarcity of well educated men. By 2005, Dutch women in their thirties surpassed men in education level for the first time in history. By 2010, 43 percent of women compared to 37 percent of men aged 25-43 had completed higher education. Men now dominate the lower end of the education distribution. In all EU countries the share of young women expected to complete a higher education surpasses the share of men (Statistics Netherlands 2011). On a regional level, the scarcity of well educated men can be even stronger than national figures indicate. Well educated men in their twenties are overrepresented in the urban areas where colleges, universities, and potential high-status jobs are based.

Young women often migrate to cities for reasons of education and work. Migration is costly, but is probably an investment to optimise economic societal chances later on (Etzo 2008). In the Netherlands and Germany young women are even more concentrated in urban areas than men. The question is whether migration of young single women towards strongly urbanised areas functions as an extra investment of women who already invested in education, in order to have more chance to meet the best partner (Gautier 2009).

On a macro level, such individual strategies could lead to an increasing regional polarisation between types of households. Households of highly educated couples with high earnings, high prosperity and, possibly, talented children could become increasingly concentrated in the highly urbanised areas, whereas the more traditional couples with one breadwinner, less economic prosperity could concentrate elsewhere. Furthermore, as a result of 'female migration rural populations could shrink even further, with an increasing risk of socially isolated men. For example, young women leaving the new German states after the reunification caused these regions to become poorer – socially, economically and demographically. A subset consisting of the men who stayed behind has formed a new underclass (Kröhnert and Klingholz 2007).

In this paper, we question whether the phenomenon of female migration towards and residing in booming urban areas is a female strategy with two goals: investments in education and in educational assortative mating. We focus on women in midlife, with a family, who were born in the more rural areas. We compare the household incomes and wealth of women who migrated to cities with that of women who stayed behind, and identify to what extent their

own educational level, labour market participation, and characteristics of their partner influence their economic prosperity.

Data

We use the Social Statistical Database (SSD) from Statistics Netherlands (Bakker 2002). This unique dataset combines longitudinal data from a vast number of administrative registers, among which are the population register and tax registers. The data comprise the whole Dutch population and cover the years 1995-2012. Registers are linked at the individual level, which makes the SSD exceptionally well suited for life course research and socio-geographical research. Furthermore, since the data are integral, they do not suffer from selective non-response.

Our study population consists of five birth cohorts of Dutch women who were 1) born in less urbanised areas, 2) born between 1970 and 1977, 3) partnered, and have at least one child with their partner in 2012. This study makes use of demographic, regional and socio-economic data as well as information on educational level. Geographical location, mobility and family transitions (partnering, separation and motherhood) of these women is known from 1995 up to 2012. Both married and unmarried cohabiting women will be included in the analysis since levels of unmarried cohabitation are high in the Netherlands, and have become a socially accepted union type for stable, long-lasting relationships and for having children. Education, income and wealth of both partners in 2012 (at age 35-42) will be used as the dependent variables in lineair regression models comparing rural women with their urbanised counterparts.

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