

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH SEMINAR



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Gender Segregation in Childhood Friendships and the Gender-Equality Paradox

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Abstract

Men and women continue to cluster in different academic fields in higher education. Counterintuitively, this educational segregation is stronger in wealthier, more gender-equal societies. Using data from 500,000 children across 37 Western countries, we show that this segregation pattern originates earlier than previously thought. Already at age 11, children tend to have fewer opposite-sex friends in countries that are richer and more gender equal. Longitudinal data from 7,000 British individuals also show that those lacking opposite-sex friends in childhood are significantly more likely to select gender-segregated educational choices at age 17. These patterns seem to reflect the effect of economic prosperity rather than a backlash against gender equality. While children from wealthier households report fewer cross-gender friendships, children whose parents hold more gender-egalitarian views tend to have more opposite-sex friends. We identify two mechanisms through which prosperity inadvertently increases segregation: structured activities that enable gender-typical choices and delayed transition into adolescence.