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Développement de l'éducation et inégalité de genre en Belgique au xx^e siècle

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Abstract. In this study, a quantitative reconstruction is made of developments in educational expansion and gender inequality in Belgium in the course of the twentieth century. For that purpose, individual data from the Belgian 1961, 1970, 1981 and 1991 population censuses are used. Three parameters are reconstructed: the average age of ending studies, the highest level at which studies are ended and the highest diploma obtained. Unsurprisingly, the data testify to the substantial expansion of education during the period under study. However, they also show that men benefitted earlier than women from educational expansion. As a result, gender inequality in education was particularly high between the 1930s and 1960s, but quickly declined afterwards.

Keywords. Education, Gender, Inequality, Census data, Twentieth century

Résumé. Développement de l'éducation et inégalité de genre en Belgique au xx^e siècle

Cet article propose une étude quantitative des inégalités de genre en matière d'éducation en Belgique au cours du xx^e siècle. Les données individuelles des recensements de la population belge en 1961, 1970, 1981 et 1991 ont été utilisées. Trois paramètres sont reconstruits : l'âge moyen et le niveau de fin d'études, le diplôme le plus élevé obtenu. Sans surprise, les données témoignent de l'expansion considérable de l'éducation au cours de la période. Cependant, ils montrent aussi que les hommes en ont bénéficié plus tôt que les femmes et que l'inégalité de genre dans l'éducation a été particulièrement forte entre les années 1930 et 1960, puis a diminué rapidement par la suite.

Mots-clés. Éducation, genre, inégalité, recensement, xx^e siècle

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In the course of the twentieth century, there was a sizable expansion in the educational level of the Belgian population, as more people gained access to higher levels of education¹. The question remains whether different groups within the population experienced that expansion in different ways, and whether the educational expansion has reduced or enlarged the initial inequalities in education. Inequality in education can manifest itself in different ways. Earlier studies have mainly focused on the effect of educational expansion on social or regional inequality². Gender inequality in the Belgian educational system has drawn much less attention from scholars³. Also in the international literature, the focus was mainly on social inequality in education, while gender inequality was often considered to be but a variation of that theme⁴.

In Belgium, access to education has expanded considerably for all social groups in the course of the twentieth century⁵, yet that development has not removed social inequalities in educational levels. Koen Pelleriaux and Steven Groenez agree that the social background of people still has a large influence on the level of education they obtain⁶. According to S. Groenez, higher social groups succeeded in maintaining their privileged position by seeking out ever higher levels of education: when social inequality is largely reduced at one level of education, inequality is transferred to the next level of education⁷.

The persistence of social inequality in education stands in contrast to gender inequality, which has been much reduced. In the past half century, the expansion of education proceeded more swiftly among women than among men. The outcome of that process is that women have not only made up their arrears but have even picked up a lead on men⁸. As a result, it is no longer the relative absence of girls in schools that causes concern, but rather the poorer performances of boys. Scholars now refer to *the boys' problem* rather than *the girls' problem*⁹. However, there are indications that

1. R. VANDERSTRAETEN, 1996.

2. K. PELLERIAUX, 1998; S. GROENEZ, 2010; H. G. VAN DE WERFHORST, 2005; V. VANDENBERGHE, 2004.

3. M. ELCHARDUS *et al.*, 1991; M. ELCHARDUS & M. HUYSSSEUNE, 2000; R. JANSSENS, 2003; K. ROGGMAN, 2003.

4. J. A. JACOBS, 1996.

5. P. DEBOOSERE & R. CHARAFEDDINE, 2011.

6. K. PELLERIAUX, 1998, p. 14-15; S. GROENEZ, 2010, p. 229.

7. S. GROENEZ, 2010, p. 223, 228, 230.

8. R. VANDERSTRAETEN, 1996, p. 464-465; S. GROENEZ, 2010, p. 201, 204.

9. G. DRIESSEN & A. VAN LANGEN, 2007; A. DERKS & H. VERMEERSCH, 2001.

the expansion of education did not bring a continuous reduction of gender inequalities. S. Groenez noticed earlier that the expansion started earlier for men than for women, which implies that the expansion of education started off by increasing gender inequality, rather than reducing it¹⁰.

The focus of this article is on gender inequality in education in Belgium throughout the twentieth century. Based on the census microdata available since 1961, the characteristics of the outflow of the Belgian educational system can be reconstructed for most of the twentieth century. In particular, the average age of ending studies and the highest level at which people ended their studies and at which they obtained a diploma will be followed, focusing on the different performances of men and women.

1. Reconstructing the outflow of the Belgian educational system, 1891-1990

Several types of statistical data document the expansion of education in Belgium. The oldest available data indicates the number of pupils or students in educational institutions¹¹. The difficulty with absolute figures such as those is that they reflect developments in the size of the population as well as the number of people following an education. For example, while education undoubtedly became more accessible in the second half of the twentieth century, it is unclear to what extent the explosion in the number of pupils in the 1960s resulted from educational expansion, rather than the baby boom that came after World War Two¹². Therefore, a better indicator of educational expansion is the gross enrollment ratio, the proportion of people from a certain age attending school¹³. Unfortunately, data on the gross enrollment ratio in Belgium is only available for the second half of the twentieth century¹⁴. Finally, another approach is to reconstruct educational expansion with contemporary surveys, by projecting observations back in time based on the respondents' year of birth or year of ending studies¹⁵.

10. S. GROENEZ, 2010, p. 204.

11. L. MINTEN *et al.*, 1991-1996; M. D'HOKER *et al.*, 2006; see also J. ART, 1986; R. SMET & A. VANNECKE, 2002, especially, p. 845-904.

12. K. PELLERIAUX, 1998, p. 2-5.

13. K. PELLERIAUX, 1998, p. 5-7; R. VANDERSTRAETEN, 1996.

14. *Statistisch Jaarboek van het Onderwijs* (1956-...); Population censuses since 1961.

15. S. GROENEZ, 2010.

Here, the latter method will be applied by using micro-data from the population censuses since 1961, to reconstruct educational expansion in Belgium in the course of the twentieth century. Digital individual census data are available for ten per cent of the population in 1961, and for the entire population in 1970, 1981, 1991 and 2001. For example, the 1961 census file contains information for each individual on the age of ending studies, the nature of education one was receiving or had received, and the diploma obtained. With those individual data, it is possible to reconstruct developments in time. Data on the age of ending studies or on the highest diploma obtained can be coupled to an individual's year of birth or year of ending studies. For instance, with the census file for 1961 it is possible to select all people, present in Belgium at that time, who ended their studies in 1935 or any other year, to establish the average age at which those people ended their studies, the highest educational level at which they did so or the highest diploma that they had obtained.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to that approach. On the one hand, people who were too young at the time of the census to have finished their studies cannot be included in the analyses. On the other hand, the older population included in the census files is no longer representative for their generation because of differentiated mortality¹⁶. Mortality is differentiated by gender and by level of education. Men and people with a lower level of education have a shorter life expectancy than women and people with a higher level of education. In other words, for the oldest people in the census files, the level of education is overestimated while the gender balance is biased. Still, the people in between those two groups, those that were not too young nor too old at the time the census was taken, can be considered to be representative of their generation.

The analysis that follows is based on the individual data from the population censuses of 1961, 1970, 1981 and 1991. These data are used to reconstruct developments in the level of education for people born in Belgium by the year of ending studies. Unfortunately, a comparable reconstruction cannot be made with the results from the 2001 census, because during the census of 2001, people were specifically asked at what age they *successfully* finished the highest level of education they attained. Previous censuses merely asked people for the age at which they ended their studies, which includes the studies they did not finish successfully. Because of that, the results of the 2001 census cannot be included in this analysis.

16. P. DEBOOSERE *et al.*, 2009.

Figure 1. *People included in the analysis and number of births in Belgium, 1891-1990*

Note. People included in the analysis: By census file and by year of ending studies; people who ended their studies more than seventy years before the census was taken are not included. Multiplied by 10 for 1961.

Source. Statistics Belgium/Interface Demography (VUB): 1961, 1970, 1981, 1991 Census microdata. Total number of births in Belgium: by year of birth. Source: *Mouvement de la population* (HISSTAT data).

Individuals in the four census files of 1961, 1970, 1981 and 1991 were selected based on two criteria. First, only people born in Belgium were included in the analysis, to exclude people who migrated to Belgium and had an educational background that does not represent the Belgian schooling system. Secondly, only people are included who were no longer studying at the time of the census and had provided a valid answer to the question at what age they ended their studies.

The number of people by the year of ending studies in the four census files selected for the analysis is shown in figure 1, and compared with the number of births in Belgium by year of birth. Clearly, in the number of people selected for the analysis, the war years 1914 and 1918, and later 1940 and 1944 stand out. That was either because the exceptional circumstances of those years forced or enabled many people to end their studies, or because for the people who lived in those times, those years are the landmarks around which their memories are organised. In the long run, however, the number of people selected for the analysis is determined by developments

in natality. The gradual decline in the number of births after 1900, as well as the dramatic collapse during World War One and to a lesser extent World War Two, is visible about fifteen years later in the number of people who ended their studies. World War Two was followed by a baby boom, until the number of births declined in the 1960s. With some delay, the number of people who ended their studies followed the same trends.

Developments are reconstructed by year of ending studies, which shows us the characteristics of the annual outflow of the Belgian schooling system. The successive censuses inform about the same years of ending studies, yet results often differ somewhat between censuses, for several reasons. First, the composition of the population changes from one census to the next. People who migrated to Belgium can be excluded based on their place of birth, but people who left Belgium, by death or by emigration, can no longer be included. Cohorts of people joined together by the same year of ending studies are composed of both people who ended their studies early and late, in other words people who ended their studies at a young and at a not-so-young age. The latter had a higher chance than the former to have passed away when the censuses were carried out. Consequently, people who ended their studies early and had a lower level of education are overrepresented in the earliest cohorts. Secondly, response rates are different between censuses. Especially the more recent censuses were plagued by a high degree of non-response, particularly among people with a lower level of education, leading to an overestimation of educational levels¹⁷. In the 1991 census, between one or two percent of the people selected for the analysis provided no, incomplete or inconsistent information on the diploma they obtained. Finally, results on the level of education can differ between censuses due to the way different types of education were clustered in levels of education. Not only did the organisation of education in Belgium change in the course of the twentieth century, each of the different census files also used different categories to cluster educational levels, making it difficult to reconstruct developments in the long run.

Since the results of the analysis are presented by year of ending studies, people who never received any schooling cannot be included, because they do not have a year when they ended their studies. Still, people who never received any schooling only made up a very small fraction of the population already since the beginning of the twentieth century. Figure 2 shows, by year of birth, based on the 1961 census, which proportion of men and women born in Belgium never received any schooling. According to these

17. R. STOOP & J. SURKIJN, 1997, p. 47-50.

Figure 2. *Proportion of men and women who never received any schooling, by year of birth, 1871-1950*

Note. Percentage of total population born in Belgium, by year of birth.

Source. Statistics Belgium/Interface Demography (VUB): 1961 Census microdata.

data, about ninety nine per cent of all people born since 1900 received some form of schooling, with no meaningful difference between men and women. That seems to have been the result, not only of the law of 1914 which made education until the age of fourteen obligatory, but also of an evolution that had been going on for some years. A rising proportion of people born in the decades leading up to 1900 received schooling. The data suggest that among the people born before 1900, the proportion of women who never received any schooling was larger than that of men, but also declining at a faster rate.

2. Average age of ending studies

Developments in the average age of ending studies can be reconstructed with the census data, but first it is necessary to obtain an idea of a possible bias. To that end, differences between the results obtained from the 1961 census on the one hand and subsequent censuses on the other hand, for the same years of ending studies, are shown in figure 3. That figure shows that results from the 1991 census are slightly higher than those from the 1961 census for people who ended their studies in the 1950s (by 0.2-0.4 years), which would be in accordance with the underrepresentation of

Figure 3. Annual outflow 1891-1990: Differences between censuses in average age of ending studies

Note. Difference between the results obtained from the 1961 census on the one hand and subsequent censuses on the other hand. Negative values when later censuses give lower average ages, positive values in the opposite case.

Source. Statistics Belgium/Interface Demography (VUB): 1961, 1970, 1981, 1991 Census microdata.

people with a lower level of education in the 1991 census. The figure 3 also shows that results from the 1981 census are almost the same as those from the 1961 census for people who ended their studies after about 1940, but underestimated for those who ended their studies before that year. In other words, there is little bias for about forty years preceding the census, but about sixty years preceding the census, results are underestimated by about 0.4 years for women and 0.6 years for men. Similarly, a comparison between the 1961 and 1970 census shows again that results are fairly similar up to about forty years preceding the census, but are underestimated beyond that, although the difference is less outspoken here. Applying that conclusion to

Figure 4. Annual outflow 1891-1990: Average age of ending studies

Note. Average age of ending studies on the left axis; difference in average age between men and women on the right axis (positive values when men are studying longer than women, negative values in the opposite case).

Source. Statistics Belgium/Interface Demography (VUB): 1961, 1970, 1981, 1991 Census microdata (data for year of ending studies in 1891-1960 based on 1961 census; in 1961-1969 on 1970 census; in 1970-1979 on 1981 census; in 1980-1990 on 1991 census).

the results derived from the 1961 census would mean that the average ages of ending studies for people who ended their studies after about 1920 are fairly accurate, but underestimated for the people who ended their studies earlier, more so for men than for women.

Developments in the average age of ending studies between 1891 and 1990, by gender and year of ending studies, are shown in figure 4 and table 1. For each year of ending studies, the averages are based on the oldest census data available. The results show a remarkable rise in the age of ending studies in the course of the twentieth century. People who left school around 1900 were on average between twelve or thirteen years old, whereas people who did so ninety years later were on average between twenty and twenty one years old. In other words, in less than a century the average age of ending studies rose by more than half.

In the course of the twentieth century, the growth in the age of ending studies accelerated and slowed down on several occasions. A first acceleration took place around the First World War. That may have been the result of the law of May 19th, 1914, which made education until the age

Table 1. Annual outflow 1891-1990: Average age of ending studies

Year	Men	Women	Difference	Year	Men	Women	Difference
1891	11.91	12.06	-0.15	1946	15.83	15.44	0.39
1896	12.36	12.41	-0.05	1951	16.43	15.82	0.61
1901	12.66	12.66	0.00	1956	16.92	16.44	0.48
1906	12.87	12.90	-0.03	1961	17.00	16.31	0.69
1911	13.33	13.24	0.09	1966	17.74	17.15	0.59
1916	13.91	13.82	0.09	1971	18.06	17.49	0.57
1921	14.82	14.52	0.30	1976	18.48	18.23	0.25
1926	15.03	14.74	0.28	1981	19.23	19.04	0.19
1931	15.68	15.06	0.61	1986	20.07	19.88	0.19
1936	15.30	14.82	0.48	1990	20.77	20.59	0.18
1941	15.49	15.22	0.27				

Note. Age in years. Difference between men and women: Positive values when men are studying longer than women, negative values in the opposite case.

Source. Statistics Belgium/Interface Demography (VUB): 1961, 1970, 1981, 1991 Census microdata (data for year of ending studies in 1891-1960 based on 1961 census; in 1961-1969 on 1970 census; in 1970-1979 on 1981 census; in 1980-1990 on 1991 census).

of twelve (to be extended gradually until the age of fourteen) compulsory, although the war caused that law to be applied in practice only from 1919 onwards. In addition, joined to that law was the one of May 26th, 1914, by which employment before the age of 14 was outlawed, a law which in turn extended that of December 13th, 1889, which restricted the employment of children in industrial enterprises and which already had a limited beneficial effect on school attendance. Finally, lack of employment opportunities during the war, and the possibility education presented to escape from forced labour in Germany, may also provide part of the explanation for the rise in the average age of ending studies during the war period¹⁸.

After the First World War, growth slowed down, except for the sudden rise and later decline around 1930, which was a delayed effect of the demographic impact of the First World War. Growth accelerated again since the 1950s and continued until at least the late 1980s. Rather than a delayed effect of the demographic impact of the Second World War, the growth acceleration in the average age of ending studies of the 1950s seems to have been the result of improved access to schooling (cf. *infra*). The acceleration was interrupted around 1960 and again around 1970, but resumed in the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. When compulsory education, starting at the age of six, was extended by law of June 29th, 1983 from 14 to 18 years of age, the actual age of ending studies was on average already more than nineteen years¹⁹.

While the average age of ending studies rose considerably in the course of the twentieth century, it did not rise at the same speed for men and women. Figure 4 also shows how the difference between men and women in the average age of ending studies evolved. The figure suggests that the difference between men and women was virtually non-existent at the beginning of the twentieth century, with an impressive rise in that difference, to the benefit of men, until about 1930. However, there may in reality still have been a difference between men and women before 1930, which is obscured as a result of bias in the data. Still, the difference clearly reached a peak of about 0.6 years around 1930. After 1930, that difference declined rapidly until the eve of the Second World War, after which it rose again to a similar level around 1960. From that point onwards, the difference between men and women in the age of ending studies would drop at a fast rate. That happened in two waves, coinciding with the general acceleration in the growth of the age of ending studies, in the mid-1960s

18. J. BECKERS, 1998, p. 37-39; B.-S. CHLEPNER, 1972, p. 215-216; D. DE CEULAER, 1990; M. DE VROEDE, 1970; R. SMET & A. VANNECKE, 2002, p. 141.

19. R. SMET & A. VANNECKE, 2002, p. 287-289.

and in the 1970s. The latter wave was particularly impressive. In only a few years, the difference between men and women in the average age of ending studies dropped from about 0.6 years to less than 0.2 years.

3. Highest level of education and highest diploma

Quantitative data on the level at which people ended their education is more difficult to interpret than the more abstract notion of the average age at which they did so, because of the multiple changes in the schooling system in the course of the twentieth century. Here, census data were clustered using a consistent categorisation, in lower, secondary and university, and non-university, higher education. Data were clustered first by the respondents of the census themselves, when filling in the census forms, and again for the purpose of this study by putting the results from different censuses together. Figure 5 and 6 show developments in the highest educational level and the highest diploma obtained, of the annual outflow of the Belgian educational system in the course of the twentieth century. Figures 7 and 8 show the same data, comparing the performances of men and women. Figures on the highest diploma obtained are also shown in table 2.

These clusters give the wrong impression of an organisational stability in the Belgian educational system, whereas the twentieth century was rather characterised by a recurrent reorganisation of education. According to Bregt Henkens, it would even be impossible to speak of “secondary education” at the beginning of the twentieth century, given the diversity of options available at that time to pupils of twelve years or older²⁰. At the beginning of the twentieth century, pupils of twelve years age could pursue secondary education (e.g. humanities), but after 1914 they could also choose for the “fourth grade”, which was still reckoned as lower education, until the age of fourteen. After the fourth grade, they could learn a profession at a technical school at secondary level, but also follow a teacher training in a “normal school” – counted here as higher education, in consistency with the situation at the end of the twentieth century²¹. The educational system was reformed after the School Pact of 1958, a landmark agreement on the organisation and financing of governmental and non-governmental education in Belgium. Particularly access to secondary education was expanded after the Pact

20. B. HENKENS, 2007.

21. In the annual data by Statistics Belgium on school attendance, available since the 1950s, the normal school for lower education teachers was included in the statistics for higher education since 1972-1973, and the normal school for kindergarten teachers since 1974-1975 (K. PELLERIAUX, 1998, p. 18).

while there was also more coordination among the different levels of secondary education. Technical school was made accessible from the age of twelve instead of fourteen, although the fourth grade of lower education was not abolished until 1975²².

All these data testify to the impressive rise in the educational level at which people left the schooling system, which is evidently the main explanation for the rise in the average age of ending studies in the course of the twentieth century. During that period, for both men and women, the proportion of those who received only lower education dropped, to the benefit of secondary and higher education. Similarly, for both men and women, the proportion of those who ended up with no diploma or only a diploma of lower education dropped, while the proportion of those with a diploma of secondary or higher education rose.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, only a small fraction of the population had received more than lower education when they left school. Among them, an important part reportedly obtained no diploma, although many of them may actually obtained a diploma of lower education, which they did not indicate as such in the census. Around 1930, between two thirds and three quarters of the youngsters who left the educational system, reportedly did so without a diploma or with only a diploma of lower education. The situation completely reversed in the course of the half-a-century that followed. Secondary education expanded particularly between the 1930s and 1960s, while its expansion slowed down afterwards. The latter was the result of the expansion of higher education, which began to speed up around 1940, and accelerated in the 1960s. By 1980, more than four fifths of the young men and women, who finished their education, did so at least with a diploma of secondary education, and about a quarter of them even with a diploma of higher education.

There are indications that men benefited from the educational expansion earlier than women did. Figures 7 and 8 show that educational inequality between men and women was at a maximum around 1930. That was a delayed effect of the First World War: The proportion of people who ended their studies at a young age (e.g. twelve or fourteen) dropped relative to those who did so at a later age, primarily because there were less children of that age, a consequence of the decline in births during the war. Among the people who ended their studies at a later age, there were, as before the 1930s, more men. However, in the following years, even as the demographic effects

22. R. SMET & A. VANNECKE, 2002, p. 968; M. D'HOKER & B. HENKENS, 2005.

Figure 5. Annual outflow 1891-1970: Level of ending studies, by year of ending studies

Note. Composition of annual outflow.
Source. 1961 census file (1891-1960), 1970 census file (1961-1970).

Figure 6. Annual outflow 1911-1980: Highest diploma obtained, by year of ending studies

Note. Composition of annual outflow.

Source. 1981 census file.

Figure 7. Annual outflow 1891-1970: Level of ending studies, by year of ending studies

Note. Proportion of total annual outflow.

Source. 1961 census file (1891-1960), 1970 census file (1961-1970).

Figure 8. Annual outflow 1911-1980: Highest diploma obtained, by year of ending studies

Note. Proportion of total annual outflow.

Source. 1981 census file.

Table 2. Annual outflow 1911-1980: highest diploma obtained, by year of ending studies

Year of ending studies	Men					Women				
	Lower education	Secondary education	Higher education (non-university)	Higher education (university)	No diploma	Lower education	Secondary education	Higher education (non-university)	Higher education (university)	No diploma
1911	26.8	5.6	0.4	0.1	67.1	27.8	5.1	0.5	0.0	66.5
1916	31.5	7.8	0.8	0.2	59.7	32.0	6.9	1.1	0.0	60.0
1921	33.9	12.8	1.1	0.9	51.2	34.5	10.5	1.7	0.0	53.2
1926	35.2	16.3	1.8	1.4	45.2	36.0	13.6	2.5	0.1	47.8
1931	30.7	25.7	2.8	2.8	38.0	33.5	20.3	3.4	0.3	42.5
1936	33.8	25.0	2.4	2.3	36.5	36.7	19.1	2.7	0.3	41.2
1941	30.3	32.4	3.1	2.0	32.2	32.8	25.9	4.8	0.3	36.2
1946	28.0	36.0	3.1	3.6	29.1	30.0	32.6	4.8	0.5	32.1
1951	24.8	42.4	4.1	4.8	23.9	27.4	39.0	5.7	0.8	27.1
1956	21.1	47.1	6.3	6.1	19.4	23.0	43.2	10.1	1.3	22.4
1961	19.9	47.6	7.6	6.4	18.4	23.0	43.3	9.3	1.5	22.9
1966	13.8	55.9	9.8	7.0	13.5	16.2	50.8	14.4	2.1	16.5
1971	12.1	58.3	9.1	9.0	11.5	13.4	55.9	13.3	3.9	13.4
1976	9.9	62.1	10.7	9.4	7.9	9.6	59.1	17.4	5.4	8.4
1980	9.0	60.1	11.4	13.3	6.1	7.3	57.9	21.6	7.2	6.0

Note. Proportion (in per cent) of total annual outflow.
Source. 1981 census file.

caused by World War One faded away, the gender imbalance lingered on at the level of secondary education. In the 1930s, among the people that left the educational system, the proportion of men who left with a diploma of secondary education was larger than that of women, while the reverse was true for those who left with a diploma of lower education. However, at the level of higher education, the gender difference declined, with a more or less equal proportion of men and women succeeding at that level by 1940, though a substantial difference remained between university and non-university higher education.

The gender imbalance at the level of secondary education started to change around 1940. In that decade, the proportion of women who ended their studies at the level of secondary education rose faster than that of men. Apparently, secondary education became more accessible for women, as a result of which an equal proportion of men and women left school at the level of secondary education by about 1950. However, the balanced gender proportions at the level of secondary education were also the result of the fact that more men gained access to higher education, again creating inequality at that level. Around 1940, the proportion of men who finished their studies at the level of higher education started to rise as well. Still, not all of them effectively obtained a diploma of higher education, which explains why, by 1950, there was still a clear gender imbalance in the proportion of men and women who ended up with a diploma of secondary education, although that imbalance had declined as well in the 1940s.

The gender imbalance at the level of higher education started to change after about 1950. For men, the expansion of access to higher education had started about a decade earlier, around 1940. Around that year, the gender imbalance at the level of higher education was very small or even non-existent, but started to grow to reach a maximum around 1950. After 1950, however, women caught up, and as a result by the late 1950s a more or less equal proportion of men and women ended their studies at the level of higher education, although men maintained their lead when it came to obtaining a diploma. However, at the level of higher education, women advanced most in non-university education, while university education apparently remained much less accessible to women. By the late 1950s, the proportion of women that ended their studies at the level of non-university higher education was larger than that of men, while the reverse was the case for university higher education. Furthermore, included in non-university higher education was normal school education – teacher training school –, certain departments of which could be entered before the age of eighteen. The 1961 and 1970 census data on school attendance show that the normal schools

where kindergarten teachers were educated, welcomed students at the age of about fourteen, predominantly women. That explains why there was still a considerable difference in the average age of ending studies around 1960.

The data also show a temporary reversal of the trend, by a considerable decline in the proportion of women ending their studies at the level of higher education around 1960. According to Raf Vanderstraeten, the establishment of general secondary education schools for girls accelerated in Belgium after the School Pact of 1958²³. As more women attended these schools, more of them remained at the level of secondary education, instead of going on directly to higher education, in particular to normal schools, after the fourth grade of lower education. Still, the decline in the proportion of women ending their studies at the level of higher education of around 1960 was followed by a speedy recovery. By the late 1960s, the proportion of women who left the educational system with a diploma of higher education was equal to that of men, and in the 1970s women even surpassed men. Since the mid-1960s, women also increasingly graduated from the universities. Research showed that the expansion of university education since the 1960s mainly resulted in a higher participation of higher and middle classes, and particularly the girls from those classes²⁴. Nonetheless, until at least the late 1970s the success of women in higher education still mainly took place outside the universities, while men still dominated university studies.

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Data on the average age of ending studies and the level at which people did so, based on census micro-data, document the expansion of education in Belgium in the course of the twentieth century. They also distinctly reveal differences between men and women in the level of education and the timing of expansion. As men benefited from educational expansion earlier than women, gender inequality in education was particularly high between the 1930s and 1960s.

Acceleration in educational expansion first took place around the First World War. The average age of ending studies, close to fourteen years around that time, was different for men and women, and this difference reached a maximum in the 1930s. Lower education being obligatory for all, between the 1930s and the 1950s, particularly access to secondary

23. R. VANDERSTRAETEN, 1996, p. 472.

24. R. JANSSENS, 2003, p. 68.

education improved. Men benefited from the latter earlier than women. In the 1930s, men had the lead in secondary and higher education, and maintained it for secondary education, although the difference between men and women in the age of ending studies dropped. In the 1940s, access to secondary education improved for women, and the gender imbalance was reduced at that level, yet only because at the same time men gained better access to higher education, by which the gender imbalance shifted to the next level. The average age of ending studies had risen to between sixteen and seventeen years in the 1950s, though the difference between men and women for most of that decade was not far below that of the 1930s.

Educational expansion accelerated again from the 1950s onwards. Gender disparities at the level of secondary education had been greatly reduced by 1950. Afterwards, women also started to catch up at the level of higher education. The difference between men and women in the age of ending studies declined from the 1960s onwards, and very rapidly in the 1970s. In the course of the 1970s, women even surpassed men at the level of higher education. Still, most women, who succeeded at the level of higher education, did so outside the universities. University education remained predominantly male until at least the late 1970s, although there too, women made progress. By the late 1980s, the average age of ending studies had risen to between twenty and twenty one years, while the difference between men and women in that respect had become very small.

This study also indicates a few of the factors that gave shape to the developments in educational expansion and gender inequality. Among those, we find the introduction in 1914 of compulsory education until the age of fourteen, and the School Pact of 1958, which expanded access to secondary education. However, a more elaborate study is still needed, in which the results from this quantitative reconstruction would be confronted with developments in the institutional and socio-economic environment.

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