

Aubervilliers, February 18, 2022

Internal post-secondary “student emigration” in France: more young women than men go to study in major cities but more also return to their original area of residence

In just a few decades, higher education became general in France, and now nearly half of women and slightly over a third of men aged 25 to 29 have a higher education degree. A considerable proportion of young people living in rural areas and small or mid-sized towns “emigrate” to study at universities in large French cities. The sociologists Élie Guéraud and Fanny Jedlicki have shown that young women are more likely than their male counterparts to leave their home towns to pursue their education after high school, but also to return there after completing their studies. This is particularly the case for young women of working-class background from rural areas or small or mid-sized cities.

Feminization of post-secondary “student emigration”

It is between the ages of 15 and 19 that the greatest number of young people leave their home area to pursue their education, resulting in an influx of high school graduates from rural environments and small and mid-sized cities into France’s major conurbations. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that higher education institutions are not evenly distributed across France and are particularly lacking in rural communities and small and mid-sized towns. According to the 2013 census, 26% of female and 22% of male high school graduates aged 15 to 19 moved, 52% of them to a major conurbation.

But more women also move back to their home *départements*

More girls than boys graduate from high school in France, and girls are more likely to move to a large urban area to study. But they are also slightly more likely to leave that area after completing their studies: 16% of female higher education graduates leave urban units of over 200,000 inhabitants, as against 11% of their male counterparts. Six percent (6%) of women but only 3% of men of the same age group leave Paris, and nearly 40% of women who leave return to the *département* they were born in.

Education choices that often do not lead to labor market integration

Women returning to their original communities both before or after they graduate do so either because they have experienced or are anticipating difficulties (no job search assistance network, fear of not “making it”) when it comes to integrating the skilled employment markets of the metropolises where they have been living as students. Analysis of data from the APB post-secondary admissions platform (replaced by the Parcoursup in 2020) shows that daughters of employees or manual workers tend more than others to choose non-selective and/or non-distinctive education or training programs. For example, manual workers’ daughters are more likely than others to say they want to earn a degree as a “*technicien supérieur*”. Employees’ daughters tend to take

non-selective post-bachelor degrees at public universities where they are overrepresented in language, literature, and social science and humanities departments.

Female students of working-class background have particular difficulty settling in major cities

“Emigrating” for education is perceived as a vector of social emancipation by many young women of working-class background. Big cities seem like spaces of freedom that will open up greater possibilities. But experiences of economic and/or relational difficulties may soon dampen or thwart these aspirations. Modest-income families often operate under economic constraints, a situation that may result in parents not understanding a daughter’s desire to remain in the big city and their refusal to continue supporting her after her studies. Moreover, young female graduates of modest origins may lack cultural and relational resources and end up “eliminated” from large cities because they don’t have the financial means to stay there. Parents with greater resources assist their children more. Last, these young women often have to grapple with contradictory injunctions: while their families are very proud to see them leave home to study, they also expect them to invest in relations in their home area—primarily, to find a life partner and found a family there.

Studying the gender and regional specificities of this phenomenon may help decision makers develop more effective policies, policies that would work to respond to all situations by including such levers as student guidance, direct or indirect financial aid (housing, transportation) to young people leaving home to pursue higher education, job placement assistance, etc.

DATA USED

This study used data from the 2013 French census (INSEE), the APB post-secondary admissions platform (2015), and the academic education authorities of Dijon and Normandy (2014-2015). It also draws on two sociological and ethnographic studies involving interviews of female students from stable segments of the working class and rural areas or small and mid-sized towns in the former French administrative units of Haute-Normandie and Bourgogne.

For more information, see:

Élie Guéraud, Fanny Jedlicki and Camille Noûs, 2021, “[L’émigration étudiante des « filles du coin » : Entre émancipation sociale et réassignation spatiale](#)” Travail, genre et sociétés 46 (2): 135-55.

Published in a scientific journal referenced by French national evaluation authorities.

About INED:

The French Institute for Demographic Studies (Ined) is a public research institute specialized in population studies that works in partnership with the academic and research communities at national and international levels. Ined’s approach to demography is resolutely open and interdisciplinary, implicating a wide range of disciplines including economics, history, geography, sociology, anthropology, biology and epidemiology. With its 10 research units and 2 research units in partnership, Ined promotes communication and exchange within the scientific community and the general public while conducting numerous European and international research projects.

Press contacts:

Email : service-presse@ined.fr

Gilles GARROUSTE, Institutional Communication - Tel: +33 (0)1 56 06 57 04

Mathilde CHARPENTIER, Head of Communication - Tel: +33 (0)1 56 06 57 28

Follow us on:  