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Ladies First: female and male adult height in Switzerland, 1770-1930

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ABSTRACT

When investigating the well-being of a society, the living conditions of females are of special importance, not only due to the immediate impact for those directly involved, but also because of the potential intergenerational effects. Studying the dimorphism in the mean height helps to depict variation in the basic biological sex difference due to gender-related factors that potentially determine net nutrition.

To expand knowledge of diachronic development in Swiss well-being conditions we investigate changes in the height of adult females born 1770-1930, and compare the series with data on contemporary males from the same sources: We employ a sample of $N = 21'028$ women and $N = 21'329$ men from passport-, convict-, maternity hospital-, and voluntary World War II army auxiliary records.

The secular height trend is found both in males, from the 1870s/1880s, and in females starting with the 1850s birth cohorts. During the decades under study, mean height increased from 157 cm to 164 cm in female and 167 cm to 172 cm in male passport applicants, 154 cm to 159 cm in female and 167 cm to 169 cm in male convicts, 159 cm to 163 cm in female auxiliaries, and 155 cm to 159 cm in females giving birth in the maternity hospital of Basel. Because females seem to have started the secular trend in height earlier than their male contemporaries, the height dimorphism decreased during the second half of the 19th century.

Differences between socio-economic status (SES) and data sources are found in both females and males: Women with low SES were significantly shorter than those of the other SES groups in all sources (on average 1.40 cm, p-values between 0.00 and 0.03). In men we found individuals of upper SES to be significantly taller (on average 1.96 cm, p-value = 0.00 to 0.10). Concerning differences between the sources, overall, passport applicants were the tallest for men as well as women; in

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