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Boys Falling Behind

Young men, too, aren't getting message that education is key to success, experts say

Paul Luke, The Province

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"The greatest, most astonishing fact that I am aware of in social science right now is that women have been able to hear the labour market screaming out, 'You need more education' and have been able to respond to that, and men have not," Massachusetts Institute of Technology economics professor Michael Greenstone told the New York Times.

"It's very, very scary for economists because people should be responding to price signals. And men are not."

The issue of men falling behind women at school is sensitive given the inequality that still plagues women in the workplace, says MacLaughlin, director of research and policy at Essential Skills Ontario, a non-profit group that examines ways to get jobless and low-skilled adults back to work.

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Canadian women still earn about 80 per cent of what men do. And men continue to occupy the vast majority of top jobs at the largest Canadian companies.

"The imbalance for so long has been on the other side," MacLaughlin says.

"It's almost counter-intuitive to now be talking about male challenges when males have had it so good for so long. You could almost say, 'Heck, this gender deserves it.' " But men's academic stumbles can have an impact on women, too.

"Poorer outcomes for men lead to poorer families," MacLaughlin says. "It was wrong to ignore women's educational needs for so long. But neglecting boys' educational needs now is in no one's interest."

Charles Ungerleider, a sociologist and retired professor of educational studies at the University of B.C., says men continue to enjoy a stronger "opportunity structure," which means better access to a wide spectrum of jobs.

"For women, the opportunity structure is much more constricted than it is for males," says Ungerleider, who's also managing partner with the Vancouver-based Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group. "Men can go on and do lots of diffuse things."

Women, for instance, are under-represented in the trades.

On the other hand, Ungerleider warns, young men who leave school early to take lucrative jobs in the oil-and-gas patch may be over-estimating the longevity of those jobs - in the same manner the previous generation over-estimated the durability of lumber-sector jobs.

"You can leave school early and get a good job in the short run but it's not a good long-term career strategy," Ungerleider says.

"Eventually - I don't know how far down the road - there will be no more oil to be extracted.

"The guys that left school to drive a truck won't have those jobs."

UBC economist Nicole Fortin points to research that suggests young men and women underestimate the grades it takes to succeed at school - and are misinformed about the skills and education demanded by the labour market.

But men are more unrealistic than women, Fortin says.

"Men, many of them, think, 'If I don't study, I'll be able to catch up,' " Fortin says.

"Getting to the finish line is a little tougher than they think." Young women, for example, better understand that they need advanced math at high school to get into certain fields of study at university, Fortin says.

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