



## The New Gender Gap

**From kindergarten to grad school, boys are becoming the second sex**

Lawrence High is the usual fortress of manila-brick blandness and boxy 1960s architecture. At lunch, the metalheads saunter out to the smokers' park, while the AP types get pizzas at Marinara's, where they talk about -- what else? -- other people. The hallways are filled with lip-glossed divas in designer clothes and packs of girls in midriff-baring track tops. The guys run the gamut, too: skate punks, rich boys in Armani, and saggy-panted crews with their Eminem swaggers. In other words, they look pretty much as you'd expect.

But when the leaders of the Class of 2003 assemble in the Long Island high school's fluorescent-lit meeting rooms, most of these boys are nowhere to be seen. The senior class president? A girl. The vice-president? Girl. Head of student government? Girl. Captain of the math team, chief of the yearbook, and editor of the newspaper? Girls.

It's not that the girls of the Class of 2003 aren't willing to give the guys a chance. Last year, the juniors elected a boy as class president. But after taking office, he swiftly instructed his all-female slate that they were his cabinet and that he was going to be calling all the shots. The girls

looked around and realized they had the votes, says Tufts University-bound Casey Vaughn, an Intel finalist and one of the alpha femmes of the graduating class. "So they impeached him and took over."

The female lock on power at Lawrence is emblematic of a stunning gender reversal in American education. From kindergarten to graduate school, boys are fast becoming the second sex. "Girls are on a tear through the educational system," says Thomas G. Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education in Washington. "In the past 30 years, nearly every inch of educational progress has gone to them."

Just a century ago, the president of Harvard University, Charles W. Eliot, refused to admit women because he feared they would waste the precious resources of his school. Today, across the country, it seems as if girls have built a kind of scholastic Roman Empire alongside boys' languishing Greece. Although Lawrence High has its share of boy superstars -- like this year's valedictorian -- the gender takeover at some schools is nearly complete. "Every time I turn around, if something good is happening, there's a female in charge," says Terrill O. Stammler, principal of Rising Sun High School in Rising Sun, Md. Boys are missing from nearly every leadership position, academic honors slot, and student-activity post at the school. Even Rising Sun's girls' sports teams do better than the boys'.

At one exclusive private day school in the Midwest, administrators have even gone so far as to mandate that all awards and student-government positions be divvied equally between the sexes. "It's not just that boys are falling behind girls," says William S. Pollock, author of *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* and a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "It's that boys themselves are falling behind their own functioning and doing worse than they did before."

It may still be a man's world. But it is no longer, in any way, a boy's. From his first days in school, an average boy is already developmentally two years behind the girls in reading and writing. Yet he's often expected to learn the same things in the same way in the same amount of time. While every nerve in his body tells him to run, he has to sit still and listen for almost eight hours a day. Biologically, he needs about four recesses a day, but he's lucky if he gets one, since some lawsuit-leery schools have banned them altogether. Hug a girl, and he could be labeled a "toucher" and swiftly suspended -- a result of what some say is an increasingly anti-boy culture that pathologizes their behavior.

If he falls behind, he's apt to be shipped off to special ed, where he'll find that more than 70% of his classmates are also boys. Squirm, clown, or interrupt, and he is four times as likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. That often leads to being forced to take Ritalin or risk being expelled, sent to special ed, or having parents accused of negligence. One study of public schools in Fairfax County, Va., found that more than 20% of upper-middle-class white boys were taking Ritalin-like drugs by fifth grade.

Once a boy makes it to freshman year of high school, he's at greater risk of falling even further behind in grades, extracurricular activities, and advanced placement. Not even science and math remain his bastions. And while the girls are busy working on sweeping the honor roll at graduation, a boy is more likely to be bulking up in the weight room to enhance his steroid-fed Adonis complex, playing Grand Theft Auto: Vice City on his PlayStation2, or downloading rapper 50 Cent on his iPod. All the while, he's 30% more likely to drop out, 85% more likely to commit murder, and four to six times more likely to kill himself, with boy suicides tripling since 1970. "We get a bad rap," says Steven Covington, a sophomore at Ottumwa High School in Ottumwa, Iowa. "Society says we can't be trusted."

As for college -- well, let's just say this: At least it's easier for the guys who get there to find a date. For 350 years, men outnumbered women on college campuses. Now, in every state, every income bracket, every racial and ethnic group, and most industrialized Western nations, women reign, earning an average 57% of all BAs and 58% of all master's degrees in the U.S. alone. There are 133 girls getting BAs for every 100 guys -- a number that's projected to grow to 142 women per 100 men by 2010, according to the U.S. Education Dept. If current trends continue, demographers say, there will be 156 women per 100 men earning degrees by 2020.

Overall, more boys and girls are in college than a generation ago. But when adjusted for population growth, the percentage of boys entering college, master's programs, and most doctoral programs -- except for PhDs in fields like engineering and computer science -- has mostly stalled out, whereas for women it has continued to rise across the board. The trend is most pronounced among Hispanics, African Americans, and those from low-income families.

The female-to-male ratio is already 60-40 at the University of North Carolina, Boston University, and New York University. To keep their gender ratios 50-50, many Ivy League and other elite schools are secretly employing a kind of stealth affirmative action for boys. "Girls present better qualifications in the application process -- better grades, tougher classes, and more thought in their essays," says Michael S. McPherson, president of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., where 57% of enrollees are women. "Boys get off to a slower start."

The trouble isn't limited to school. Once a young man is out of the house, he's more likely than his sister to boomerang back home and sponge off his mom and dad. It all adds up to the fact that before he reaches adulthood, a young man is more likely than he was 30 years ago to end up in the new and growing class of underachiever -- what the British call the "sink group."

For a decade, British educators have waged successful classroom programs to ameliorate "laddism" (boys turning off to school) by focusing on teaching techniques that re-engage them. But in the U.S., boys' fall from alpha to omega status doesn't even have a name, let alone the public's attention. "No one wants to speak out on behalf of boys," says Andrew Sum, director of the Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies. As a social-policy or educational issue, "it's near nonexistent."

On the one hand, the education grab by girls is amazing news, which could make the 21st the first female century. Already, women are rapidly closing the M.D. and PhD gap and are on the verge of making up the majority of law students, according to the American Bar Assn. MBA programs, with just 29% females, remain among the few old-boy domains.

Still, it's hardly as if the world has been equalized: Ninety percent of the world's billionaires are men. Among the super rich, only one woman, Gap Inc. co-founder Doris F. Fisher, made, rather than inherited, her wealth. Men continue to dominate in the highest-paying jobs in such leading-edge industries as engineering, investment banking, and high tech -- the sectors that still power the economy and build the biggest fortunes. And women still face sizable obstacles in the pay gap, the glass ceiling, and the still-Sisyphean struggle to juggle work and child-rearing.

But attaining a decisive educational edge may finally enable females to narrow the earnings gap, punch through more of the glass ceiling, and gain an equal hand in rewriting the rules of corporations, government, and society. "Girls are better able to deliver in terms of what modern society requires of people -- paying attention, abiding by rules, being verbally competent, and dealing with interpersonal relationships in offices," says James Garbarino, a professor of human development at Cornell University and author of *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and*

## *How We Can Save Them.*

Righting boys' problems needn't end up leading to reversals for girls. But some feminists say the danger in exploring what's happening to boys would be to mistakenly see any expansion of opportunities for women as inherently disadvantageous to boys. "It isn't a zero-sum game," says Susan M. Bailey, executive director of the Wellesley Centers for Women. Adds Macalester's McPherson: "It would be dangerous to even out the gender ratio by treating women worse. I don't think we've reached a point in this country where we are fully providing equal opportunities to women."

Still, if the creeping pattern of male disengagement and economic dependency continues, more men could end up becoming losers in a global economy that values mental powers over might -- not to mention the loss of their talent and potential. The growing educational and economic imbalances could also create societal upheavals, altering family finances, social policies, and work-family practices. Men are already dropping out of the labor force, walking out on fatherhood, and disconnecting from civic life in greater numbers. Since 1964, for example, the voting rate in Presidential elections among men has fallen from 72% to 53% -- twice the rate of decline among women, according to Pell's Mortenson. In a turnaround from the 1960s, more women now vote than men.

Boys' slide also threatens to erode male earnings, spark labor shortages for skilled workers, and create the same kind of marriage squeeze among white women that already exists for blacks. Among African Americans, 30% of 40- to 44-year-old women have never married, owing in part to the lack of men with the same academic credentials and earning potential. Currently, the never-married rate is 9% for white women of the same age. "Women are going to pull further and further ahead of men, and at some point, when they want to form families, they are going to look around and say, 'Where are the guys?'" says Mortenson.

Corporations should worry, too. During the boom, the most acute labor shortages occurred among educated workers -- a problem companies often solved by hiring immigrants. When the economy reenergizes, a skills shortage in the U.S. could undermine employers' productivity and growth.

Better-educated men are also, on average, a much happier lot. They are more likely to marry, stick by their children, and pay more in taxes. From the ages of 18 to 65, the average male college grad earns \$2.5 million over his lifetime, 90% more than his high school counterpart. That's up from 40% more in 1979, the peak year for U.S. manufacturing. The average college diploma holder also contributes four times more in net taxes over his career than a high school grad, according to Northeastern's Sum. Meanwhile, the typical high school dropout will usually get \$40,000 more from the government than he pays in, a net drain on society.

Certainly, many boys continue to conquer scholastic summits, especially boys from high-income families with educated parents. Overall, boys continue to do better on standardized tests such as the scholastic aptitude test, though more low-income girls than low-income boys take it, thus depressing girls' scores. Many educators also believe that standardized testing's multiple-choice format favors boys because girls tend to think in broader, more complex terms. But that advantage is eroding as many colleges now weigh grades -- where girls excel -- more heavily than test scores.

Still, it's not as if girls don't face a slew of vexing issues, which are often harder to detect because girls are likelier to internalize low self-esteem through depression or the desire to starve themselves into perfection. And while boys may act out with their fists, girls, given their superior

verbal skills, often do so with their mouths in the form of vicious gossip and female bullying. "They yell and cuss," says 15-year-old Keith Gates, an Ottumwa student. "But we always get in trouble. They never do."

Before educators, corporations, and policymakers can narrow the new gender gap, they will have to understand its myriad causes. Everything from absentee parenting to the lack of male teachers to corporate takeovers of lunch rooms with sugar-and-fat-filled food, which can make kids hyperactive and distractable, plays a role. So can TV violence, which hundreds of studies -- including recent ones by Stanford University and the University of Michigan -- have linked to aggressive behavior in kids. Some believe boys are responding to cultural signals -- downsized dads cast adrift in the New Economy, a dumb-and-dumber dude culture that demeans academic achievement, and the glamorization of all things gangster that makes school seem so uncool. What can compare with the allure of a gun-wielding, model-dating hip hopper? Boys, who mature more slowly than girls, are also often less able to delay gratification or take a long-range view.

Schools have inadvertently played a big role, too, losing sight of boys -- taking for granted that they were doing well, even though data began to show the opposite. Some educators believed it was a blip that would change or feared takebacks on girls' gains. Others were just in denial. Indeed, many administrators saw boys, rather than the way schools were treating them, as the problem.

Thirty years ago, educational experts launched what's known as the "Girl Project." The movement's noble objective was to help girls wipe out their weaknesses in math and science, build self-esteem, and give them the undisputed message: The opportunities are yours; take them. Schools focused on making the classroom more girl-friendly by including teaching styles that catered to them. Girls were also powerfully influenced by the women's movement, as well as by Title IX and the Gender & Equity Act, all of which created a legal environment in which discrimination against girls -- from classrooms to the sports field -- carried heavy penalties. Once the chains were off, girls soared.

Yet even as boys' educational development was flat-lining in the 1990s -- with boys dropping out in greater numbers and failing to bridge the gap in reading and writing -- the spotlight remained firmly fixed on girls. Part of the reason was that the issue had become politically charged and girls had powerful advocates. The American Association of University Women, for example, published research cementing into pedagogy the idea that girls had deep problems with self-esteem in school as a result of teachers' patterns, which included calling on girls less and lavishing attention on boys. Newspapers and TV newsmagazines lapped up the news, decrying a new confidence crisis among American girls. Universities and research centers sponsored scores of teacher symposiums centered on girls. "All the focus was on girls, all the grant monies, all the university programs -- to get girls interested in science and math," says Steve Hanson, principal of Ottumwa High School in Iowa. "There wasn't a similar thing for reading and writing for boys."

Some boy champions go so far as to contend that schools have become boy-bashing laboratories. Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *The War Against Boys*, says the AAUW report, coupled with zero-tolerance sexual harassment laws, have hijacked schools by overly feminizing classrooms and attempting to engineer androgyny.

The "earliness" push, in which schools are pressured to show kids achieving the same standards by the same age or risk losing funding, is also far more damaging to boys, according to Lilian G. Katz, co-director of ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. Even

the nerves on boys' fingers develop later than girls', making it difficult to hold a pencil and push out perfect cursive. These developmental differences often unfairly sideline boys as slow or dumb, planting a distaste for school as early as the first grade.

Instead of catering to boys' learning styles, Pollock and others argue, many schools are force-fitting them into an unnatural mold. The reigning sit-still-and-listen paradigm isn't ideal for either sex. But it's one girls often tolerate better than boys. Girls have more intricate sensory capacities and biosocial aptitudes to decipher exactly what the teacher wants, whereas boys tend to be more anti-authoritarian, competitive, and risk-taking. They often don't bother with such details as writing their names in the exact place instructed by the teacher.

Experts say educators also haven't done nearly enough to keep up with the recent findings in brain research about developmental differences. "Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of teachers are not trained in this," says Michael Gurian, author of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*. "They were taught 20 years ago that gender is just a social function."

In fact, brain research over the past decade has revealed how differently boys' and girls' brains can function. Early on, boys are usually superior spatial thinkers and possess the ability to see things in three dimensions. They are often drawn to play that involves intense movement and an element of make-believe violence. Instead of straitjacketing boys by attempting to restructure this behavior out of them, it would be better to teach them how to harness this energy effectively and healthily, Pollock says.

As it stands, the result is that too many boys are diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder or its companion, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. The U.S. -- mostly its boys -- now consumes 80% of the world's supply of methylphenidate (the generic name for Ritalin). That use has increased 500% over the past decade, leading some to call it the new K-12 management tool. There are school districts where 20% to 25% of the boys are on the drug, says Paul R. Wolpe, a psychiatry professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the senior fellow at the school's Center for Bioethics: "Ritalin is a response to an artificial social context that we've created for children."

Instead of recommending medication -- something four states have recently banned school administrators from doing -- experts say educators should focus on helping boys feel less like misfits. Experts are designing new developmentally appropriate, child-initiated learning that concentrates on problem-solving, not just test-taking. This approach benefits both sexes but especially boys, given that they tend to learn best through action, not just talk. Activities are geared toward the child's interest level and temperament. Boys, for example, can learn math through counting pinecones, biology through mucking around in a pond. They can read Harry Potter instead of *Little House on the Prairie*, and write about aliens attacking a hospital rather than about how to care for people in the hospital. If they get antsy, they can leave a teacher's lecture and go to an activity center replete with computers and manipulable objects that support the lesson plan.

Paying attention to boys' emotional lives also delivers dividends. Over the course of her longitudinal research project in Washington (D.C.) schools, University of Northern Florida researcher Rebecca Marcon found that boys who attend kindergartens that focus on social and emotional skills -- as opposed to only academic learning -- perform better, across the board, by the time they reach junior high.

Indeed, brain research shows that boys are actually more empathic, expressive, and emotive at birth than girls. But Pollock says the boy code, which bathes them in a culture of stoicism and

reticence, often socializes those aptitudes out of them by the second grade. "We now have executives paying \$10,000 a week to learn emotional intelligence," says Pollock. "These are actually the skills boys are born with."

The gender gap also has roots in the expectation gap. In the 1970s, boys were far more likely to anticipate getting a college degree -- with girls firmly entrenched in the cheerleader role. Today, girls' expectations are ballooning, while boys' are plummeting. There's even a sense, including among the most privileged families, that today's boys are a sort of payback generation -- the one that has to compensate for the advantages given to males in the past. In fact, the new equality is often perceived as a loss by many boys who expected to be on top. "My friends in high school, they just didn't see the value of college, they just didn't care enough," says New York University sophomore Joe Clabby. Only half his friends from his high school group in New Jersey went on to college.

They will face a far different world than their dads did. Without college diplomas, it will be harder for them to find good-paying jobs. And more and more, the positions available to them will be in industries long thought of as female. The services sector, where women make up 60% of employees, has ballooned by 260% since the 1970s. During the same period, manufacturing, where men hold 70% of jobs, has shrunk by 14%.

These men will also be more likely to marry women who outearn them. Even in this jobless recovery, women's wages have continued to grow, with the pay gap the smallest on record, while men's earnings haven't managed to keep up with the low rate of inflation. Given that the recession hit male-centric industries such as technology and manufacturing the hardest, native-born men experienced more than twice as much job loss as native-born women between 2000 and 2002.

Some feminists who fought hard for girl equality in schools in the early 1980s and '90s say this: So what if girls have gotten 10, 20 years of attention -- does that make up for centuries of subjugation? Moreover, what's wrong with women gliding into first place, especially if they deserve it? "Just because girls aren't shooting 7-Eleven clerks doesn't mean they should be ignored," says Cornell's Garbarino. "Once you stop oppressing girls, it stands to reason they will thrive up to their potential."

Moreover, girls say much of their drive stems from parents and teachers pushing them to get a college degree because they have to be better to be equal -- to make the same money and get the same respect as a guy. "Girls are more willing to take the initiative...they're not afraid to do the work," says Tara Prout, the Georgetown-bound senior class president at Lawrence High. "A lot of boys in my school are looking for credit to get into college to look good, but they don't really want to do the grunt work."

A new world has opened up for girls, but unless a symmetrical effort is made to help boys find their footing, it may turn out that it's a lonely place to be. After all, it takes more than one gender to have a gender revolution.

By Michelle Conlin

# A WIDENING GULF IN SCHOOL...

**girls boys**

**Girls Trounce Boys  
in Reading...**

National Reading scores,  
4th-graders, 2000

**222 212**

Average reading scores;  
on a scale of 0 to 500

**...And Are Catching  
Up in Math**

National Math Scores,  
12th-graders, 2000

**299 303**

Average math scores;  
on a scale of 0 to 500

Data: National Center for Education Statistics

**Girls Also Dominate  
in Extracurricular  
Activities...**

Percent of high school seniors  
involved in:

**Student Government**

**27% 19%**

**Music/Performing Arts**

**46% 35%**

**Yearbook/Newspaper**

**29% 21%**

**Academic Clubs**

**36% 28%**

**Athletic Teams**

**49% 63%**

Data: Education Dept.;  
National Center for Education Statistics

**...While Boys  
Make Up the Bulk of  
Special Ed Students...**

Kids diagnosed with  
learning disabilities

**27% 73%**

Kids diagnosed as  
emotionally disturbed

**24% 76%**

Secondary students in  
special ed, K-12

Data: U.S. Education Dept.

**...Account for  
Most Stimulant  
Prescriptions...**

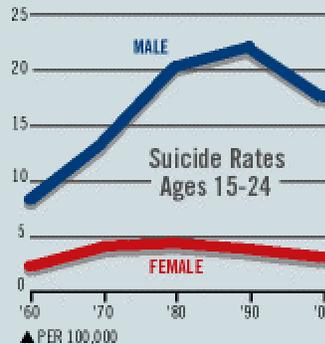
Kids under 20 in an HMO\* on  
Ritalin and other stimulant drugs

**1% 4%**

\*NORTHWEST REGION HMO WITH 131,000 YOUTHS

Data: Dr. Julie Magno Zito, University of Maryland,  
*Psychotropic Practice Patterns for Youth*

**...And Are More  
Likely to Commit  
Suicide than Girls**

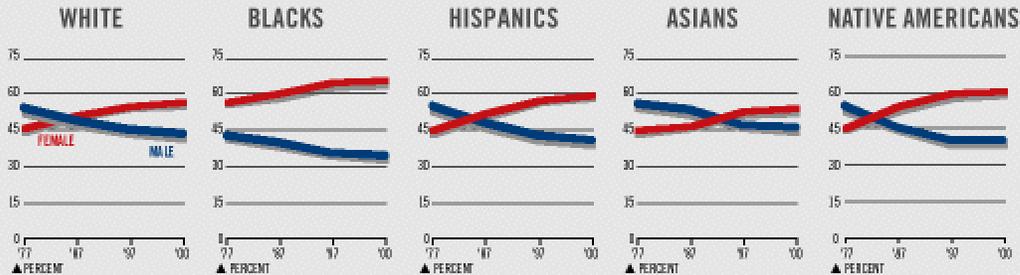


Data: Centers for Disease Control and  
Prevention; Thomas G. Mortenson, Pell Center  
for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

# ...LEADS MORE AND MORE TO A GIRLS' CLUB IN COLLEGE

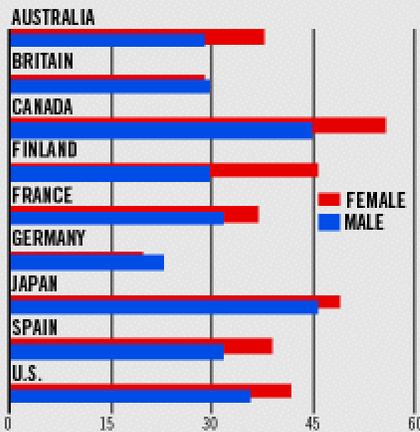
## The Gender Gap Spans Every Racial and Ethnic Group...

BACHELOR'S DEGREES AWARDED TO STUDENTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY, AS A PERCENT OF TOTAL



## ...And Most of the Industrialized World...

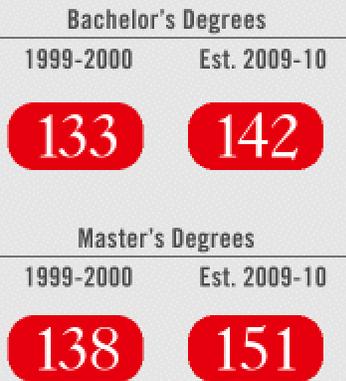
Ages 25 to 34, with at least a college education, plus advanced degrees



PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION  
Data: Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development

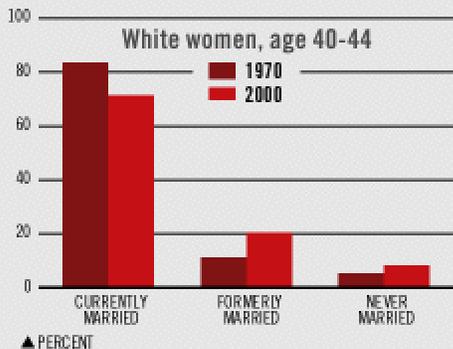
## ...And Is Projected To Get Worse...

Number of U.S. women awarded degrees per 100 men

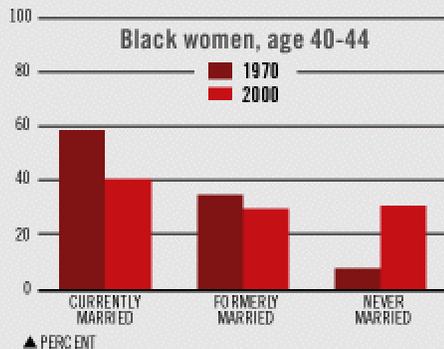


Data: Andrew Sum, Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies

## ...Threatening the Marriage Squeeze Among Whites That Blacks Already Face



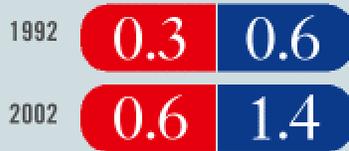
Data: Miswataq; by Andrew Hacker, National Center for Education Statistics; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Census Bureau



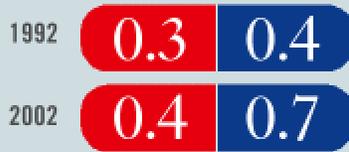
# THE NEW SHAPE OF THE WORKFORCE

## Men Dominate Leading-Edge Industries...

Computer and data services in millions



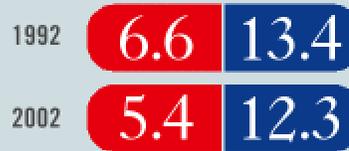
Security, Brokerage, and Investment Co's



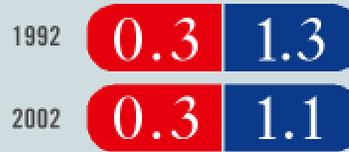
■ WOMEN ■ MEN

## ...But Many Also Are Stuck in Declining Sectors

Manufacturing in millions

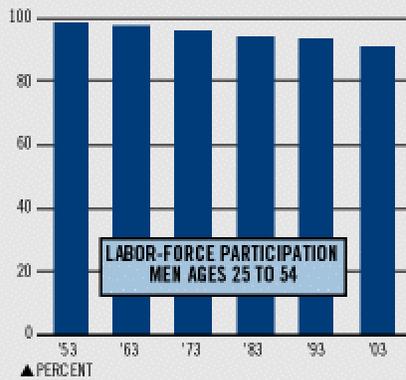


Utilities



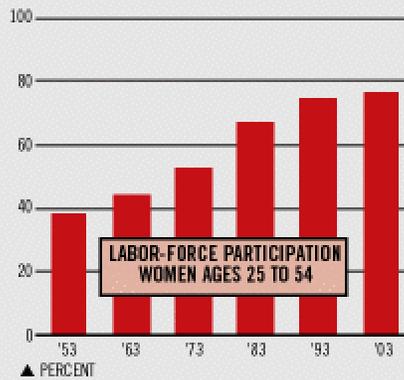
Data: U.S. Dept. of Labor

## Meanwhile, Men Are Dropping Out...



Data: Sharon Cohany, Bureau of Labor Statistics

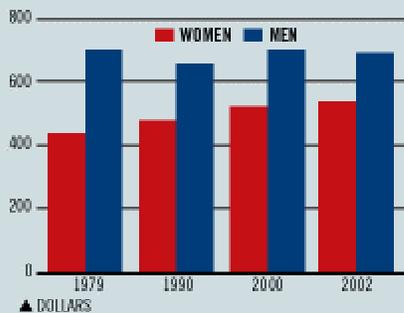
## ...And Women's Ranks Are Growing...



Data: Sharon Cohany, Bureau of Labor Statistics

## ...As Are Their Earnings, Even as Men's Have Stalled...

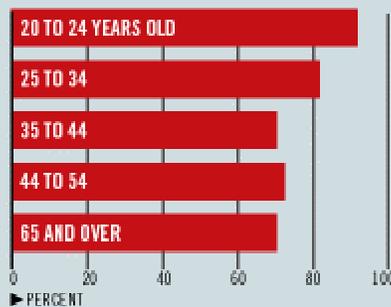
MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS OF FULL-TIME WAGE AND SALARY WORKERS, 16 YEARS AND OVER



Data: Labor Dept.

## ...Though There's Still A Disparity in Paychecks

WOMEN'S EARNINGS AS A PERCENT OF MEN'S\*



\*BASED ON MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS OF FULL-TIME WAGE AND SALARY WORKERS IN 2000 DOLLARS  
Data: Bureau of Labor Statistics

MAY 26, 2003

COVER STORY

By Marcia Vickers

## Commentary: Why Can't We Let Boys Be Boys?

In the fall of 2001, my husband and I were bursting with enthusiasm, anticipating our first-ever parent-teacher conference. We couldn't wait to hear glowing remarks about Christopher, our 3-year-old genius. How he could sing the words from almost every Wiggles song and had been reciting the alphabet since he was a year and a half -- only leaving out the occasional "t" or "y."

We eagerly walked into his classroom and sat down in midget-size wooden chairs as his two teachers brought out a long manila envelope. Then came the usual "how nice it is to have your son in our class" patter.

Not far into the discussion came the zinger. "Christopher is having a difficult time with stickers," said one teacher, holding up a sheet of green and purple dinosaurs. "What do you mean?" my husband and I asked in unison. "Well, he hasn't figured out that he needs to scratch the edge with his fingernail and lift and peel," said the teacher. It turns out, at least according to his teachers, whom we genuinely liked, that he was having trouble with his fine motor skills -- grasping and manipulating things with his fingers.

Looking back, the sticker incident was the precise point of liftoff into a world of which I was previously unaware: evaluations with child-development experts, the screening and eventual hiring of occupational and physical therapists (OTs and PTs), and trips to sensory gyms, which supposedly help the brain process sensory information through activities like touching different textures. Like most parents, I wanted to make sure Christopher had every possible advantage to overcome any weakness -- however far-fetched it might sound. After all, we're no experts.

But some two years later, I've come to suspect the diagnosis is often flawed. It turns out that it's not uncommon for young boys to have a so-called problem with fine motor skills.

In Manhattan, where we live, this phenomenon has become the status quo. One reason is that 4-year-olds must score well on a standardized test to gain acceptance to the city's elite private kindergartens. This test has a section that emphasizes fine motor skills. So multitudes of young boys are in OT or PT. A cottage industry, in fact, has sprung up around it -- most private OTs charge upwards of \$135 per 45-minute session. There are waiting lists to get kids -- mostly boys -- into these therapy sessions.

All this for a simple biological fact: Boys typically develop fine-motor skills up to six years later than girls. And in the early years, boys tend to be unfairly compared with girls on that score. This can have a devastating effect, say experts. If boys can't draw and color a bunny rabbit or cut simple shapes with scissors, they are subtly made to feel inferior. And a growing number of professionals believe that pressuring boys early only creates a sense of helplessness on their part. That can extend to how they feel about themselves and how they view school for many years.

Educators should be careful not to single out boys as "developmentally delayed" because they can't color in a sunflower as well as a girl. Now that a few experts are focusing on boys' learning gaps, the danger is to address the problem in the wrong way.

Some schools emphasize teaching methods that allow boys to brandish spatial mechanical skills as well as channel their energy. Says Dr. Leonard Sax, executive director of the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education: "Especially in the early years, schools should be playing to boys' strengths, such as playing games, building forts out of blocks, kicking a soccer ball, rather than emphasizing their weaknesses."

Christopher, who will soon turn 5, suddenly loves writing his name and drawing things from his incredibly vivid imagination, like space monsters and magic men. Last week, he wrote and illustrated a construction-paper book about a little boy whose hair turns into green beans. I think the therapy he has had has given him more confidence with crayons and scissors. But I'm not convinced he wouldn't have come around on his own.

Recently, he got one of the highest scores possible in vocabulary and general knowledge on that standardized test -- though on the part that called for drawing shapes, he fell into the "average" category. Is he still our little genius? More than ever. He has even aced dinosaur stickers. Now, if only he wouldn't put the darned things on the furniture.

Vickers writes about Wall Street and finance from New York.

MAY 26, 2003

COVER STORY

## Online Extra: "It's a Bart Simpson Culture"

**Academic Andrew Sum says one reason men are falling way behind in the education stakes is America's anti-intellectual climate**

From his cluttered office at Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies, Andrew Sum has been watching chart after chart deliver the same disturbing news for several years. The data show a lack of positive educational momentum among boys and young men. Sum says the new gender gap could create a new kind of "social dynamite" that will drive deep rifts in society. If he had his way, high schools across the country would be plastered with posters reading "Wanted: Five Million Men." That's how many more men it will take, Sum points out, to achieve gender parity in higher education by 2010.

*BusinessWeek's* Michelle Conlin talked with Sum at length about his views concerning everything from Bart Simpson to the impending marriage squeeze. Following are edited excerpts of their conversation:

**Q: You're very careful to point out that it's not as if boys are completely worse off than they were a generation ago.**

**A:** That's right. The real issue is that men just haven't made any real progress. The dangerous thing about this is that we're in an economy that is rewarding the educated more and more. And men are just not responding to this new reality.

Yes, some guys are doing very, very well. But more guys are doing very, very badly. And it's those guys that will dominate prisons, homelessness, and who will be far less likely to get married and raise kids. Men have fallen behind, and they're continuing to fall behind. And it's going to be a tragedy for the country.

**Q: Are college degrees the new high-school degrees? In other words, is it even more imperative now that people go to college?**

**A:** Absolutely. Just think back to the heyday of manufacturing in the 1970s. Back then, you could go into trucking or construction and do alright. But you just can't get into the middle class today with a low-class education. Today, your college counterpart will make 90% more than you. And so what we have is a situation where men are really underinvesting in themselves. They're shortchanging their future.

**Q: What's the ultimate cost of this underinvestment?**

**A:** Our country needs a well-educated workforce. Our productivity, our innovation, our growth -- they all depend upon the population getting continuous improvement in literacy and other skills. This lack of progress among men will hold down productivity growth. It will also have a big impact on male earnings, and, as a result, for taxes and government spending.

Already, we've become so much more dependent on the immigrant workforce. It's also true, when we do happiness studies, that better-educated people tend to be much happier. So there are immense social implications across the board here.

**Q: But isn't it true that men with high school degrees still make more than their female counterparts?**

**A:** There used to be a big pay gap between the genders among high-school graduates. But today, boys out of high school only make about 5% more, on average, than girls in the same boat.

**Q: What role is the culture playing?**

**A:** There are so many strains to that question. But one of the biggest things that jumps out at me is rap culture. It's totally antagonistic to academic achievement. It demeans students who try to do well in school. And I think it disengages boys from academic learning.

**Q: When Michael Moore asked Marilyn Manson about the role of music in his film *Bowling for Columbine*, Manson replied that music wasn't to blame. The real problem was a media machine that promotes fear and consumerism.**

**A:** Well, boys aren't just victims. They play a big role in this, too. They need to get off their butts, basically. It's not cool to take AP classes. It's a Bart Simpson culture. Underachiever and proud of it. Cool to be stupid.

And these are the guys who are going to keep living with mom. I mean male culture has just become totally anti-intellectual. The male cultural heroes and icons -- very few of them have a brain in their head. We glorify male idiocy. And young guys pick up on that.

**Q: And then what happens to the women who may want to date those guys?**

**A:** When you listen to women's groups, and they say there's not enough good men out there, they're right. There are fewer well-educated men than there were 20 years ago. And people tend to like to marry someone within the same educational class. Historically, women have tended to marry up.

**Q: Now what do you think will happen?**

**A:** More women will marry down, or marry younger, or not marry at all.

**Q: What's your prescription then?**

**A:** Men have to realize what women did. We have to go back and earn it. We have to start

paying our dues.

MAY 26, 2003

COVER STORY

## Online Extra: "This Is a World Made for Women"

**The Pell Institute's Thomas Mortenson says today's education system isn't preparing boys for the New Economy -- and that hurts women, too**

Thomas Mortenson is a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. For a decade, his campaign has been a lonely and frustrating one: convincing educators, politicians, and parents that boys are in trouble. *BusinessWeek* Working Life Editor Michelle Conlin talked to Mortenson about how the crisis could affect women -- and why addressing the problems with boys in high school is too late. Following are edited excerpts of their conversation:

**Q: About 20 years ago, there was a famous article in *Newsweek* about how women could pretty much kiss marriage goodbye if they hadn't walked down the altar by the age of 30. Of course, that turned out to be completely false. Much of the research the story was based on was discredited. But you believe that women could be in for store for a marriage squeeze -- a real one. Why?**

**A:** Black women are really the canaries in the coalmine on this. Put simply, I believe white women are headed to where black women are today. If white women want to see the future of what will happen if men aren't brought along through the educational system with them, they should listen to the problems among black women today.

When I make presentations, I can see 95% of the women in the audience nodding to along to this, agreeing with me. I don't think some women -- and some gender feminists -- have fully thought through the idea of what it means to leave a generation of boys behind. And by the time this gender imbalance really hits whites, it will be too late. We're stuck back in the 1960s in terms of producing college-educated men.

**Q: Still, you oppose affirmative action for boys in college.**

**A:** Affirmative action in college doesn't get at the causes in the previous 18 years of a boy's life. The problems go all the way back into elementary schools. We need to start there and work our way up. By a time a boy is in high school, it's often too late.

So the answer is not to put a thumb on the scale of admissions to get more boys in. The answer is to use research and training to prepare schoolteachers. To help them create more engaging learning experiences for young boys in the same way we've done with girls.

**Q: When did it hit you that something was awry?**

**A:** I've been studying educational data for 30 years. Back when I started in 1970, women were far behind in college continuation rates out of high school. Then in 1990, it hit me. Why hadn't boys made any progress over this period of time? I started looking into it. Nobody else had reported it. Even people who run higher education hadn't been tracking this redistribution of enrollment. So I dug in.

**Q: And this isn't just an American problem.**

**A:** It's an issue throughout the industrial world -- women are just beating the pants off guys in college. The move away from a goods-producing economy is just killing men's jobs. But it's creating wonderful opportunities for women. Manufacturing has shrunk from 35% of GDP after World War II to 14% today. Within a decade it will slip to 10%. Then think about agriculture.

**Q: Do you agree that women tend to be better-suited for the New Economy?**

**A:** New Economy jobs tend to require communication skills, interpersonal skills. This is a world made for women. So the question in my mind is: How do we design educational experiences for boys that, from the beginning, are engaging and exciting to boys and are geared toward getting them into jobs in the service economy. Health care, business services, even education.

We can't allow boys to think, gee, just because they had fun in high school working on their cars with their hands that they'll be able to make much of a living in their lives. Of course there'll be some manufacturing jobs. But they are fast disappearing to China and South India. These guys that put their lives into the auto plant -- and then it closes -- they simply drop out of the labor force. They're lost.

**Q: What would you tell elementary-school teachers?**

**A:** I would get my boys out of the classroom, and we'd be in a field all day long chasing tadpoles and pollywogs and looking at swamp water. I certainly wouldn't have them sit down at a classroom desk and read a book in the first grade. I just don't think we've developed education that's appropriate for boys' learning styles.

We've tried to force this model that works so well for girls onto boys. And we're paying a very steep price.

**Q: So what's needed now?**

**A:** When I was growing up and it was thought that girls just couldn't do high-level math, the women's movement took up the cause. They put girls' feet to the fire to learn science and math. Now men need to do the same thing for boys. We need a boys' project.

**Q: And women?**

**A:** My belief is that until women decide that the education of boys is a serious issue, nothing is going to happen. Some women are threatened by the issue of raising boys' problems in the educational system because they're fear it will take away from the progress of women. That's not what I'm advocating. What everyone needs to realize is that if boys continue to slide, women will lose too.