

JOB SEARCH

Widening gender gap in education now setting stage for 'mancession'

■ For several years, women have been earning the most college degrees. This trend may end up creating a 'Great He-pression.'

BY GREG BURNS
Chicago Tribune

What started as a "mancession" is turning into a "Great He-pression."

The unemployment rate for men is running 2.7 percentage points higher than for women — a "just unprecedented" spread, according to economist Mark Perry at the University of Michigan-Flint.

One obvious reason: The downturn has hammered manufacturing, construction and other male-dominated sectors, while going easier on female-heavy fields such as health care and education.

But a less-appreciated factor could make an even bigger difference in the long run.

For years now, women have been earning the most college degrees. That trend is accelerating, leaving experts to wonder if men are somehow missing the latest economic wake-up call.

Given a knowledge-based economy and a sluggish outlook for skilled trades, men are facing the economic recovery with significantly bleaker career prospects than the opposite sex.

Rutgers University's Lionel Tiger expects a "slow but persistent exile of males from higher education," while anti-feminist scholar Christina Hoff Sommers sees a future with "a lot of strong



TIM LEE/MCT ILLUSTRATION

women and a lot of disaffected men," prone to crime and unable to form stable families.

Women familiar with the wage gap, glass ceiling and marriage penalty may well scoff at the idea of male status at risk in the working world. But the educational-achievement divide is real and growing, even if its ultimate consequence is anyone's guess.

EDUCATED WOMEN

The Education Department's latest projections show that by 2018, women will be earning more sheepskins in every category, including professional degrees for law, medicine and business.

The biggest difference isn't so much who starts college, but who finishes. Men drop out at much higher rates.

It's possible that economic issues play a role in that.

Male students working to support their education, for instance, may be more likely to drop their studies for the lure of a full-time paycheck. In addition, family attitudes have changed from the days when women were viewed as a lower priority for tuition support.

Those issues pale, however, next to academic performance. Females overall perform much better in grade school and beyond.

By the time they're teenagers, in fact, the die is cast.

"Boys and young men don't do as well in school," said Claudia Buchmann, a professor at Ohio State University who studies gender disparities in education.

All this is quite different from the male-dominated education and job markets of the past, and everyone, it seems, has a favorite explanation. A more immediate question: What's the impact?

ECONOMIC FORCES

From his perch in the front lines of manufacturing decline, economist Perry of Flint believes more men will respond to the lack of blue-collar work by heading to school.

Young men who would have gone straight to car factories recognize that "the future is not there," Perry said. "Now you go for the degree."

Buchmann doubts that. "People don't necessarily look at the economy and say, 'This is what I have to do,'" she said. "Trends don't change real rapidly."

In the coming decade, the wage gap will narrow as more women enter high-paying fields and reduce the time away from their careers for child-rearing and other family commitments, Buchmann predicted.

"There's no doubt a college degree will continue to distinguish the haves from the have-nots," she said.

So don't be surprised if the next "man-cession" is even more one-sided than this one.