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The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What It Means for American Schools


Females have a longstanding reputation for receiving higher grades in elementary and secondary schools, completing more homework, and being awarded higher scores on deportment than their male counterparts. Although they were “good students,” females’ high school graduation rates in the US did not exceed those of males until the 1950s. The college story is even more of an enigma. Before the 1970s, females did not enroll in or graduate from college at the same rate as males. In the mid-1970s, however, rates of female college attendance began to rise gradually, and females now surpass males in both college matriculation and completion rates. With respect to graduate education in the US, females now match and in some instances exceed males in gaining more advanced degrees. What happened, and why, are the basic questions asked in The Rise of Women. Amassing multiple years of data using American (and occasionally international) datasets, Thomas DiPrete and Claudia Buchmann provide critical insights into why there has been a reversal in the gender gap and how a balance can be restored.

The book is organized into three major sections. The first provides a comprehensive analysis of the reversal in the male–female gap beginning with historical data from the 1940s. This section also analyzes the changing incentives and opportunities an advanced degree confers, especially for women entering fields that were once predominantly male. The second part compares the academic performance of females and males and describes how females have capitalized on their academic proficiencies to further their education. Particular attention is given to differences by sex in educational expectations, social and behavioral skills, and attitudes, and to how these differences are shaping success in school. The section ends with an examination of the role of the family, arguing that variations in parental background characteristics, including educational attainment and economic wealth, are partly responsible for disparities by sex. Turning to an institutional analysis, the final part of the book assesses the performance of elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions, suggesting that increasing the quality of education at all levels would improve both men’s and women’s opportunities for economic and social success.

All of this raises the question of whether the male–female gap is institutional or something else. For those who assert that the gap is rooted in biological or cognitive differences between females and males, DiPrete and Buchmann argue convincingly that such differences—if in fact they exist—are too small to account for the dramatic rise in college enrollment and completion among females over the last 30 years. Instead, they trace the source to the response to economic opportunities for women and the social conditions, such as the rise in cost of living for families, that have pressured women to pursue higher education. Their argument suggesting why women today seek more education is compelling, but several explanations could benefit from closer inspection. For example, limited attention is paid to major changes in fertility, especially in terms of the rising cost of living for families with three or more children. As others have shown, the costs of raising children in a household—including health care, college, and other daily living expenses—have exerted pressures on parents, such that most dual-earner couples explain that working for pay is a necessity and
not a supplement for recreational activities. When queried, adolescents expect that their future spouses will work even when the couple has children, and the data confirm that expectation, with the majority of mothers with children under the age of 18 being employed (Schneider and Waite 2005; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013).

As gender segregation has decreased in some fields, DiPrete and Buchmann, building on the work of Goldin and Katz (2011), show that some professional occupations offer women with families new opportunities for work–life balance. What is not explored in-depth is the advent of accessible birth control that gave women greater choice of whether to have children (Goldin and Katz 2000; Bailey, Hershbein, and Miller 2012). The advent of the pill in the late 1960s clearly coincided with the period of women’s rising college graduation. Recent studies suggest that when women have more choice over timing and number of children, they are more likely to obtain more schooling and enter the labor market.

One of the most important topics in this book is the stagnation of males’ college degrees. The authors argue that one must look at the circumstances of both males and females to interpret the gap. A recent analysis using data from the US Census and the 1979 and 1997 National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth suggests that female educational attainment is greatest for those in the highest income bracket (Bailey and Dynarski 2011). It could be that the mothers who today are managers, doctors, and lawyers—and whose own mothers did not hold such jobs in the 1950s and 1960s—are making substantial investments in their daughters’ education to ensure that they, too, succeed. Statistical techniques such as propensity score matching would allow analysis of variations in the educational attainment of populations beyond the more typical categories of race, ethnicity, and broad economic status. The extensive historical longitudinal databases now available provide excellent material for such analysis.

Several changes in the school environment may also be contributing to the gap: the enactment of Title IX that required athletic resources to be more equitably allocated to females and males; the decline of vocational courses and schools; and the increasingly severe disciplinary actions for misbehavior. In all three instances the social context of high schools may be especially inhospitable for males in families with limited resources and weak interest in advanced education. These institutional barriers, along with rising college costs and a lack of information on what type and level of education is needed for stable jobs in particular fields, may be encouraging some males to pursue post–high school vocational training instead of degree programs.

The most noteworthy and useful explanation of changes in the school environment in ways that favor women derives from the analysis of the types of courses males and females take in secondary school. Chapter 4 examines longitudinal historical data showing that in the 1970s males took more of the gate-keeping courses in secondary school in advanced math and science than females. Ten years later females and males enrolled in these courses at about the same rate, and today females outpace males. Later chapters explore the connections between these gate-keeping courses and female entrance into more competitive colleges and careers, such as medicine and engineering. The variations in these high school course selections highlight one of the more interesting anomalies contributing to the male–female gap in wages. Women now take higher levels of math classes in high school but their test scores still tend to be lower than those of males, at least at the upper end of the test score distributions. We do not have a reasonable explanation for why this is the case.
While women now take advanced courses in secondary school and graduate from more competitive colleges, they continue to earn lower wages than their male counterparts in many occupations. In some occupations, such as law and business, where female numbers have significantly increased, female wages still lag behind those of males. Women are gaining in education but not accruing the same economic benefits as males. The incentives required for more males to complete college are not altogether clear. And if more males completed college and entered the labor market, would this further exacerbate the wage gap? One would be hard pressed not to agree with DiPrete and Buchmann that the quality of education should increase for all; but it is not clear that this would lessen the wage gap.

*The Rise of Women* is a significant book. The authors’ thoughtful analysis of the rise in female postsecondary education and women’s place in the labor market is one of the finest descriptions of these topics to date. Their explanations also point out critical areas where some of the conventional explanations of why women are succeeding are likely to be spurious. If one is interested in pursuing additional explanations, this is an excellent place to start. The authors have laid the groundwork for researchers and policy analysts perplexed by the gender puzzle and how to achieve gender parity.

**References**


**ANGUS DEATON**

*The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality*


Angus Deaton, Dwight D. Eisenhower Professor of Economics and International Affairs in the Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs and the Economics Department at Princeton University, tells the story of 250 years of human development. The great escape of his title is the escape from the ill health and poverty that have marked most of human history. Europe and its overseas extensions have doubled life expectancy. They now enjoy income levels many multiples of those prevailing at

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