

Before and beyond the Great Financial Crisis: Men and education, labour market and well-being trends and issues in New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of a research area in which there is scant research and limited impact on public policy; namely men and the issues they face concerning their education, participation in the labour market and their well-being and trends in New Zealand. Men have had lower levels of educational achievements compared to women across primary, intermediate and secondary schools for some time and this has become a long-term, embedded pattern. This has subsequently influenced tertiary education where the current dearth of domestic male students has become noticeable in several fields (including some concerning ethnicity patterns). The labour market trends have recorded two rather contradictory patterns: on one hand, some traditional occupational and industry gender patterns have been remarkable slow to change while other gender patterns, particular in service and professional occupations, have recorded a dramatic transformation in recent decades. Finally, men's poor well-being, such as their high rates of suicide, incarceration, (particularly among young men), and work-related deaths and sickness, needs to be a public policy concern.

Introduction

There have been significant changes in gender participation patterns in education and paid employment over several decades, and these changes have had widespread economic, social and well-being effects. While most of the research has focused on women and their situation, this paper will predominantly focus on trends and issues associated with men. The reasons for focusing on men (as opposed to women) are that there have been considerable changes in men's educational attainment and participation in the labour market and these changes will have wide-ranging impacts. Moreover, the education, labour market and well-being issues associated with men have often been bypassed or downplayed in the gender literature.

While some studies take a rather inflammatory or hostile approach to new gender participation patterns, this paper will take a more descriptive approach since there is still – even amongst gender researchers – a considerable lack of understanding of basic trends and issues associated with men. In particular, the paper will focus on New Zealand trends and debates. It will also raise concerns when it comes to the dearth of thinking and research into practical 'solutions' in New Zealand. These concerns are even more alarming when we consider the poor rates of well-being among a growing number of men, particularly groups of boys, and the major implications that these have for our society.

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While this paper focuses on men, it is important to acknowledge that there are still considerable educational, labour market and well-being issues for women (Dye, Rossouw & Pacheco, 2012). The very slow adjustment in gender patterns amongst highly paid jobs and board positions has been a mainstay in recent research and media reports (e.g. Black, 2012; Human Rights Commission, 2012) and it is an indictment of the current New Zealand society. While these powerful and well-paid positions are important, they only represent a fraction of overall jobs and positions, and there are many more women clustered in traditional and/or low paying occupations and in atypical employment arrangements. As with male labour market trends and issues, until recently there has been too little research into the work experiences of these groups of women. Finally, many men and women will be affected by the post-2008 punitive changes to social welfare benefits, statutory minima and employment rights in New Zealand (see *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* 36(3), Fletcher, Hanna & Anderson, 2012; Rasmussen & Anderson, 2010).

The paper will first address the educational gender patterns which show that, although both sexes have increased their level of educational participation, the educational achievements of women have leaped that of men. Although this is not the case across all forms of education, there are many forms of education where traditional gender differences have reversed and/or the gender imbalance in favour of women has increased over the last decades. Then, the paper overviews labour market trends which show two rather contradictory patterns: on one hand, some traditional occupational and industry gender patterns have been remarkable slow to change while other gender patterns – particular in service and professional occupations – have recorded a dramatic transformation in recent decades. Finally, the paper presents briefly some well-being trends and issues which show some rather disturbing gender patterns in terms of suicide, incarceration and work-related deaths and sickness.

Educational gender patterns

It is important to note that female students have been doing better across primary, intermediate and secondary schools for the past three decades and continue to do so. The increasing number of female students excelling at school was already well established trend in the 1980s, although Baker (2006) argues that there was a small gender gap of around 2.3 percent as early as 1970, with girls leading in 12 School Certificate subjects and boys in nine subjects. While it took some time to become an established trend, there was already a significant gender gap of 6.1 percent in 1993. At that time, boys were ahead in only four of 21 School Certificate subjects (Baker, 2006).

Why is it important to highlight the fact that there has been a gender gap in school achievements *for a considerable time*? The answer is because it puts the current debate and its inability to foster practical interventions into perspective. It also shows that there has been an inexplicable reluctance to react to the growing gender gap, and there are, even today, very few suggestions of how to deal with the growing gender gap in school achievements. There have been a considerable bias for several decades and it is only recently that this gender imbalance favouring women has become a focus for research amongst a selected, limited band of researchers. This considerable time-lag and the continuous lack of focus on countering gender imbalances and opening of educational and labour market opportunities appear driven by an embedded research bias which highlights areas where a gender imbalance favours men but overlook areas where a gender imbalance favours women. It is also necessary to acknowledge a well-established research bias in favour of focusing on well-paid, high level jobs amongst professionals and managers (McLaughlin, 2000).

Not only has there been a significant gender gap among school children, but there has also been a fundamental shift in gender patterns amongst teachers and that this shift has been remarkably swift. While teaching has attracted women for a long time, it was traditionally a male-dominated profession (especially when it came to senior positions). Most observers appear to have forgotten that men constituted 42 percent of all primary school teachers in 1956. These days, the picture is totally different. In some primary schools, boys will seldom or not at all be taught by male teachers. This trend will be compounded in the future by the low proportion of new primary school teachers joining the profession in the new millennium. With just around 10 percent of new primary school teachers being male and with a considerable number of new teachers leaving the profession, it is expected that male primary school teachers will become a rarity in most primary schools in the coming decades.

Similar trends can be found amongst secondary school teachers. In 1971, nearly two-thirds (59 percent) of secondary school teachers were male. In recent years, the percentage is around 40 percent and, as older male teachers start to retire, there will be a strong decline in the proportion of male secondary school teachers. This could be very problematic as recent studies show that secondary schooling has become less attractive to teenage boys and they are now leaving secondary schools in droves. Many of these boys are not participating in other form of education or vocational training and thus become part of the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) statistics. The 'young NEET people' have become a key focus for the government's employment and social welfare policies with an emphasis on 'encouraging' them into either education or (often low-paid) employment (Fletcher et al., 2012).¹ There are, however, still a significant number of teenage boys leaving secondary school who are going on to gain some form of vocational training in male dominated industries, such as construction, etc., (see below).

Whether the gender of school teachers really matters in the development of boys and girls has now become a key question. Many gender researchers, however, have previously been concerned (and some still are) about the lack of suitable role models for women. It has also been suggested that how we construct classes and subjects and, in particular, how subjects are taught and assessed will have a strong impact on student interest. Currently, the wider impact and acceptability of the new assessment system, NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement), are heavily debated. Several schools have decided to either run with two assessment systems (giving students a choice of which assessment system they prefer) or offer another standard assessment approach (e.g. the Cambridge International Examination). Leaving these wider considerations aside, it has been argued that the NCEA system is better suited to how female students prefer to learn and be assessed.² Thus, the NCEA system has been associated with the further increase in gender imbalance in favour of girls. Whether this is really the case is far from certain and this debate is still unfolding. What is certain is that the gender imbalance has not narrowed since the introduction of the NCEA system.

When it comes to overall gender patterns in tertiary educational achievements the picture is fairly similar to educational achievement in schools. There has been a gender imbalance for a long time and it has continued to grow over the years, and the gender imbalance gap favouring women will continue to grow, based on gender patterns in NCEA results. There were already 75,000 more women than men graduating in 2004. Interestingly, there was a fall in the sheer number of male students enrolled in bachelor degrees during 2006-2008 while female students increased their enrolments. While there is no doubt that women generally have higher enrolments, higher average pass rates and obtain more degrees than men, there are considerable differences when one considers particular degrees, subject areas as well as under-graduate versus post-graduate studies. There are still three areas – engineering, information technology, architecture and building – where men constitute the majority of students. In many of the other traditionally male-dominated professions – medicine, law, accounting and management – women have higher enrolments than men. In some areas, men have become a very small minority – for example, education and human resource

management – and their overall numbers will probably decline further as NCEA results start to influence future enrolments.

In terms of gender patterns amongst tertiary education staff, there has been a predominance of men in most fields until recently. In that light, what is of considerable interest for current and future trends, is the age distribution of male and female faculty staff and what type of positions and employment arrangements male and female staff are working under.

Given that men have dominated trades occupations for a long time, these jobs are of particular interest for the future of male labour market participation. There have been attempts to make trades education more attractive to women but the participation levels are still very low. Not only are trades education critical for New Zealand industries, it is also an area in which men have succeeded. However, in 1992, the National Government introduced a new approach to vocational training – the Industry Training Act 1992 – as the previous approach was considered unsuitable for the post-industrial society and it provided insufficient flexibility, portability and continuous upskilling (for an overview, see Rasmussen, 2009: 250-254). Since its introduction, there have been some worrying signs, such as considerable skill shortages (which have also been influenced by volatile economic trends and insufficient investments in skills), indicating that the current approach is not working.

There are several factors that have influenced negatively on young people's training and job opportunities and, in particular, there are at least three types of systematic problems with the current training approach. First, the underfunding of technical schools has been conflated by these schools sometimes taken rather short-term and financially driven decisions which have not favoured 'expensive' vocational programmes. This was definitely the case during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s but it is also a current concern. Second, most vocational programmes rely on an apprenticeship type of training and this relies again on employers providing a 'public good' type of service where they develop low skill employees into high skill trades people. To make these employer driven schemes function well in a volatile, open economy can be difficult (Rasmussen & Foster, 2011) and, while it is attuned to prevailing business conditions, it can lead to considerable skill shortages and timing issues. Third, time-lag issues have been and are currently rampant in vocational education and training. At the moment, New Zealand is faced with massive pent-up building demands as the fall-out from the Christchurch earthquake, leaking building syndrome (affecting thousands of buildings) and insufficient housing development start to influence future job opportunities. However, the investment in vocational programmes is still flat and young people have great difficulty in finding apprenticeships and training places. This has clearly been bad news for a cohort of young men who were interested or could have been made interested in vocational education and training. It also indicates that it is time to reconsider how we manage the flow and ebb of vocational opportunities and investments.

The above discussion leaves us with one important question: what is being done about this long-term, well-embedded gender gap in educational achievements? The general answer is: not a great deal.

The attempts to reconsider traditional policies and practices must be applauded. The blanket support of female students is no longer in place in most New Zealand universities, Victoria University (Wellington) has quietly dropped its general policy preference favouring female staff, and there are questions being raised about areas where the gender imbalance favouring women has become very large. However, in the latter areas, there needs to be some new thinking since there has been limited long-term success associated with traditional interventions in male-dominated areas. For example, targeted attempts to shift the gender balance in the engineering programmes at the University of Auckland did lead to higher number of female students but they still stayed below 30 percent of all

engineering students. One can only wonder what it would take to shift the low male enrolments in, for example, tertiary programmes in education with the current gender bias in educational achievements in schools.

There also seems to be a lack of willingness to debate the issues and trends. The problem appears to be that the underlying thinking seems to be biased in two ways. There has been limited debate, generally, of the gender imbalances in educational achievements and/or there are attempts to fit issues and trends with the classical notion of female disadvantage. An interesting example can be found in the various reports on equal opportunities from the Human Rights Commission (HRC) where the focus tends to be firmly on female disadvantages. As Callister, Leather and Holt (2008: 31) point out:

A 14 percent difference in pay, in favour of men, is seen as a 'wide' gap by the HRC, but the same 14 percent gap in tertiary participation, in favour of women, is seen by the HRC as a 'slight' gap. This suggests that the perceptions of the observer rather than the actual data are often important.

Similarly, the HRC has also defended women-only scholarships when it was questioned whether such scholarships were discriminatory (see Callister, Leather & Holt 2008: 31-32). While there is an overhang amongst older women (50+ years in the latest 2006 Census) where education and skills are below average, this is no longer the case across the working population and, as shown above, the gender imbalance favouring women in educational achievements is gaining traction and the gap is widening amongst younger cohorts. If one was concerned about female disadvantages then it would probably be more fruitful to focus on the educational choices of females and whether their choices are aligned with high-paying job opportunities. This could, for example, also be aligned with targeted encouragements in areas such as engineering and IT (despite the associated issues/failures mentioned above). However, as discussed below, having high-paying job opportunities are not enough; there needs to be wider career considerations.

In short, overall, there have been few attempts to tackle the gender gap in educational achievements in a comprehensive fashion in primary, intermediate and secondary schools, the gender gap continues to widen, the gender bias in tertiary education is also growing, and the large gender imbalance found amongst school teachers continues to grow. There appears to be very strong forces at play which keep these trends and issues off the political agenda, and we have personally been surprised at the unwillingness of professional and union associations to discuss these issues and to present comprehensive, viable plans.

It is telling that when the 2006 figures of graduates were published, Massey University's Pro Vice Chancellor in Education, Professor James Chapman pointed to the long-term consequences for education of having fewer male teachers but he also commented on the disappointing response by Ministry of Education officials when these concerns were raised. While other countries are considering ways of evening up the gender imbalances, there have been hardly any suggestions of how this growing gender imbalance is going to be tackled in New Zealand (Rasmussen, 2009: 230).

Labour market gender patterns

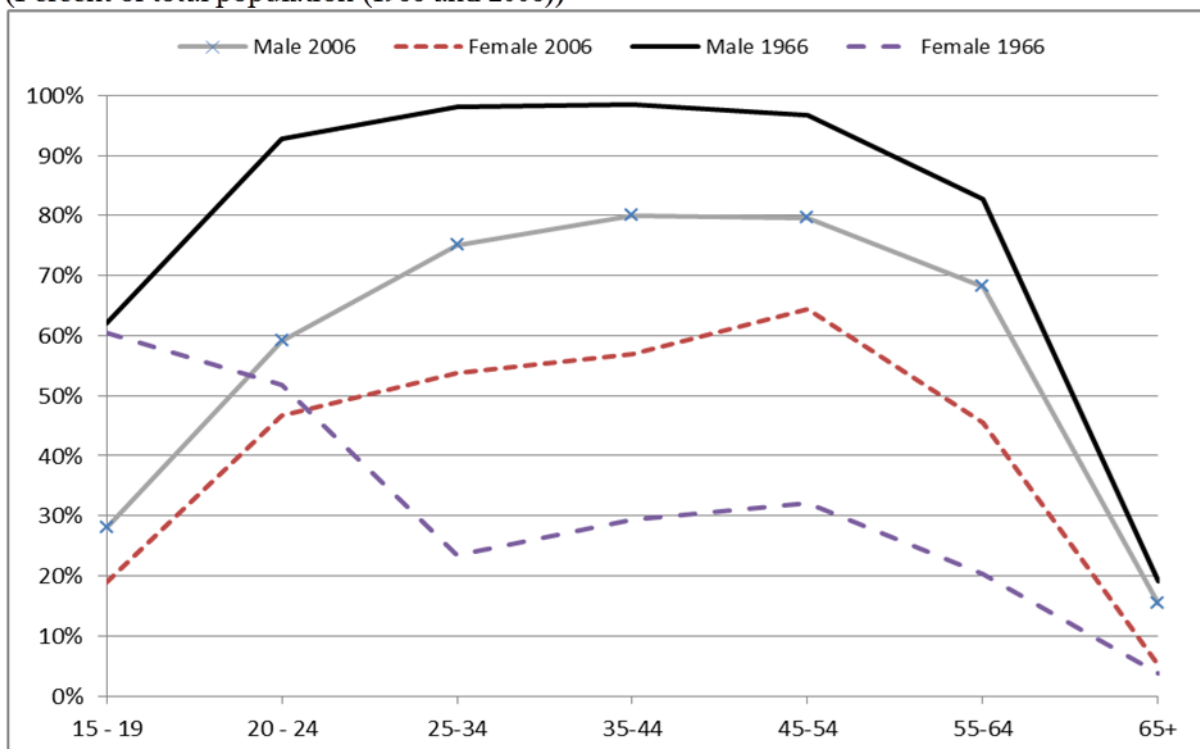
With regard to gender patterns in the labour market, there are several important issues which require further discussion. *First*, the labour market participation rates have changed considerably since the

1960s where paid employment amongst women started to become more of a norm. This has probably been the most important change in terms of modern labour markets. What has happened with men's labour market participation is highlighted in figure 10, presented in Dye et al. (2012: 284). There are probably three outstanding trends illustrated by Figure 10. There has been a dramatic drop in male participation rates over the measured period. The rise in female participation rates is very strong, particularly in the age cohorts beyond 25 years of age. There is still a difference between male and female participation rates and this is marked in the crucial 'career years' from the mid-20s to the mid-40s. The latter point needs to be investigated further.

Second, while labour market participation and working time patterns have changed considerably in recent decades, it is still possible to observe distinct gender patterns. For example, traditional job patterns still dominate and that means that there are gender imbalances across a number of occupations and job types. Thus, men are still dominating in trades, engineering, and manual labour while women can be found in nursing, education, retail, hospitality and cleaning. Part-time employment is still predominantly taken up by women and women's labour market participation and working time patterns continue to be influenced by child-rearing.³

Third, there has been considerable change within professional and service sector jobs where the increase in female educational achievements has had significant influence. In short, there is a noticeable decline in the number of young male doctors, lawyers and accountants graduating. This indicates that the dominance of men in these professions is now becoming a thing of the past. In New Zealand, there are also clear ethnicity patterns and this has meant that fewer young male professionals are of European decent.

Figure 10: Labour Force Participation in Employment (20hours+) by Sex and Age Groups (Percent of total population (1966 and 2006))



Data sourced from Census (Statistics NZ). Author's compilation.
Note: All figures are for the census usually resident population.

Source: Dye et al. 2012: 284.

Fourth, the notion of ‘mancession’ has become popular in the USA media debates (Laurence, 2011). This implies that this and future recessions will mainly affect men as they are employed in industries and job roles which are recession ‘sensitive’. Whether this argument really applies in the USA as well as in other OECD countries is yet to be determined, but it fits with the decline in blue-collar and low skilled manual jobs. It also fits with the rise of women becoming the main ‘breadwinner’ in many USA households. There are some indications that the New Zealand labour market has experienced something of a ‘mancession’ during the current global financial crisis:

Between the December 2007 and September 2009 quarters the economy shed 34,000 jobs; 80 percent of these jobs were held by men. Since the December 2007 quarter, women’s employment has declined by 0.7% compared to a 2.3% fall for men. As a result, there has been a larger increase in men’s unemployment rate compared with women (DoL, 2010).

One has to be careful not to over-estimate the short-term changes as recent research has indicated that the severe downturn in construction post-2008 has also influenced negatively the manufacturing sector (Fallow, 2012). These two sectors have lost a lot of jobs and most of these jobs were occupied by men.⁴ It is clear that the upturn in construction will favour men and the associated effects could be even more beneficial for male employment.

Fifth, there have been some interesting changes in working time gender patterns. The Time Use surveys have indicated that there is generally little difference in the amount of work that both sexes do, but there is a stark difference between the amount of paid and unpaid work done by men and women. Men put in a considerable number of paid working hours. In fact, New Zealand men score very high, compared with men in most other OECD countries. This has prompted concerns about long working hours and, while this concern is mainly directed at males, this is another area where women may be ‘catching up’. In fact, Rasmussen, Lind & Visser (2005) suggested that there was a convergence of male and female long working hours; this is still to be analysed in-depth. The growing number of women employed in professions is seen as part of this growth in females working long hours. As Callister (2005) has pointed out, many well-educated women marry well-educated men and this tends to lead to ‘working rich’ households. Callister found that many couples with children were working (in total) more than 100 hours per week.

Sixth, the debate about women’s access to senior jobs and particularly the low level of female board directors has featured strongly in the recent New Zealand media stories (as it has in many other OECD countries). The annual reports from the HRC have focused on the very, very slow progression of women into executive and board positions. This has now become part of a long-running media campaign which has prompted some firms to take more proactive steps to lift the number of women in senior positions. These proactive steps are still very timid, and there needs to be wider considerations of organisational and career approaches. Moreover, given that these senior positions only constitute a fraction of the labour market, the current vigorous debate and media attention are perhaps a little out of proportion. However, the HRC has also started to look at female-dominated occupations in low paid sectors such as age-care, which is a positive initiative.

Well-being gender patterns

A recent article by Dye et al. (2012) has shown that there are number of concerning well-being trends amongst women (for example, high level of self-mutilation, depression and domestic violence). It becomes an even more depressing picture when we consider the men’s well-being trends/levels for most of the classical well-being indicators. It is well-known that men tend to have a much shorter average life span than women and it also appears that, generally, women keep fitter for

much longer. Being in the workforce, working long hours in paid work and having unhealthy lifestyles are all ingredients in the shortening of the life of many males. What is of grave concern is the continuously high rates of male, youth suicides, compared to female suicide rates. This is a disturbing trend and it can only be countered if further research is done focusing on the time period before the suicide and the reasons why such a drastic step is taken.

...the rise in the suicide rates for males in the late 1980s was driven by a sharp rise in youth (15-24 year olds) suicide deaths. This age group also tends to have the highest suicide rates across the years, compared with older members of the population. It is a worrying fact that, in 2007, male youth had the second highest suicide rate amongst the 13 most comparable OECD countries (Dye et al., 2012: 292).

Men also dominate the prison population (over 90 percent are men) and New Zealand has a relatively high number of men in prisons. There is also a strong ethnic skew and, for example, the high proportion of Maori men being imprisoned is a sad record. This concentration amongst particular male groups creates a number of associated labour market and social issues. While less severe in New Zealand, it does remind us of the USA where the high number of prisoners means that integration and upskilling of ex-prisoners become part of labour market development plans (eg. Fischer & Reiss, 2010: 36-37). Finally, the high rate of work-related deaths and injuries amongst men is currently in the spotlight after the Pike River disaster and the government's attempt to cut accident compensation costs. Again, men constitute more than 90 percent of all workplace deaths as they are often employed in high risk industries such as mining, forestry, agriculture and construction.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on issues and trends associated with men in New Zealand. The overall finding is that many New Zealand men are struggling in terms of education, employment and health and well-being. The prevalence of high suicide rates amongst young men should be a warning sign that there are serious issues confronting many of these young men. It is also clear that there is more research required in this area that links male suicide rates with educational, labour market and social position. Moreover, the widening gender gap (favouring women) in educational achievements signal that something is not working in New Zealand schools when it comes to boys and young men. However, this gender gap has been noticeable for a considerable number of years and appears growing constantly. Furthermore, the underperformance of boys and men has wide implications as well as serious well-being impacts. Therefore, one has to question: *why has it been so difficult to get this issue on the public policy and education agenda and to get researchers interested in the topic in order to develop much needed solutions?*

While the lack of significant progression of women at senior managerial and board levels is a 'hot' media topic, there is still too little research looking into the low paid, and often atypical, employment done by many women and men. The lack of educational achievements has become a burden for many men and the debate of so-called 'missing men' and a limited choice for women has become part of popular media stories. Men also constitute a large proportion of the NEET figures and amongst those who drift in and out of the job market. This has become a serious public policy issue subsequent to the 2008 global financial crisis and the current National-led government is determined to make radical changes in terms of social welfare and employment protection. At the same time, it appears that the underlying reasons for systematic biases and inferior labour market outcomes will not be addressed sufficiently (if at all).

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Notes

¹ Recent controversial changes to legislative minima have curtailed employment protection (personal grievance rights) and allowed for payments below the statutory minimum wage for unemployed young people

² An example of such a position is: “Auckland Grammar headmaster John Morris said the NCEA curriculum had contributed to the gender gap, as the internal assessment system favoured girls. He said boys succeeded better in exam-based schooling” (Davidson, 2009: 2).

³ There are some countries where this traditional gender pattern has started to evaporate, as discussed in Rasmussen, Lind & Visser, 2004; Lind & Rasmussen, 2008.

⁴ This has prompted questions about ‘missing men’ and ‘man drought’ as well as a number of popular media articles about the difficulties of finding a ‘suitable’ man. “In 2005 Australian demographer Bernard Salt coined the term ‘man drought’. Based on census data, he described how in Australia there was a shortage of men in the prime labour market and couple forming age groups. But at the time he noted that the man drought was more severe in New Zealand stating the reason for the imbalance being ‘...32-year-old men are not in New Zealand. They’re in Australia, they’re in the UK, they’re in Europe” (Callister & Lawton, 2011: 12).