

Have We Left the Boys Behind?

Addressing the Decline of Male Participation in Higher Education in Quebec

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ABSTRACT

Generally, research related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) focuses on people with disabilities, ethnic or cultural minorities, and sexual or gender minorities. It follows in the tradition of initiatives that have progressively enabled women to take their place in society, expanding these efforts to include a broader range of underrepresented groups. Men who do not live with disabilities and who are not part of a minority group are therefore often overlooked in these studies. Yet, available data show that in higher education, they have not been the majority among students for quite some time. This highlights the need to examine what is happening earlier in the educational pathway, as academic delays and dropouts often begin in childhood. This invites us to question the potential role that certain technologies could play in supporting boys' academic success. Additionally, we will see that income inequalities disadvantaging women may also help explain differences in the return on investment in higher education between men and women—underscoring the importance of considering the relationships between traditionally studied minority groups and others who may not appear marginalized at first glance.

Keywords: gender, student, higher education, equality, inequality



Introduction

For many years, education was reserved for a minority, but in the twentieth century it was gradually democratized in all Western countries and the development of distance education, namely with the creation of open universities, supported this democratisation (Glikman, 2021). Nowadays, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies still aim to expand access to education at all levels as broadly as possible. Many countries have set the target that by 2030, about half of young people should be higher education graduates (DEPP, 2022). Indeed, the population's level of education plays a crucial role both socially, namely in terms of wellbeing, health, and criminality, as well as economically, where a high level of education fosters innovation, productivity and, therefore, growth (OECD, 2009; Heckman *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, "The Education 2030 Framework for Action, [...] explicitly recognizes gender equality as a guiding principle linked to the realization of the right to education. It states clearly that girls and boys, women and men, must be equally empowered 'in and through education'" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 7). Equality in education can be a major issue both for individuals—the more highly educated an individual is, the higher their remuneration and the lower their unemployment rate—and for companies, as skills requirements are constantly increasing and the higher the remuneration, the higher the tax benefits, as is the case in Quebec (Demers, 2008, 2018). Encouraging both men and women to pursue further studies is important from a societal standpoint. Indeed, economically, it is necessary to meet the great need for skilled labour. Socially, tertiary education institutions are the first places where women and men meet (Bozon & Rault, 2013; Cyrulnik, 2025), and homogamy—or even hypergamy—remains widespread when it comes to choosing a spouse (Kaufmann, 2014; Dagnaud & Cassely, 2021). Therefore, a gap in educational attainment between men and women—and thus in their potential positions within a society grounded in meritocracy—is likely to result in increasing numbers of individuals remaining single, not by choice.

While democratization in the quantitative sense of numbers attending educational institutions is undeniable, democratization in the qualitative sense of equal opportunity for all individuals deserves a more thorough examination (Annot & Étienne, 2020). In terms of gender, we must remember that, historically, schooling and university education were intended for men long before including women, and that lessons have long differed along gender lines (Chouinard, 2010). However, in most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, girls have progressively outnumbered boys in high school, and by the age of 15, they are outperforming boys in both reading and science (CMEC, 2019). Women are also more likely to pursue higher education than their male peers, and to achieve better results than the latter (Sabiston & Leung, 2020), so that even though the proportion of graduates in the overall population is increasing, the proportion of women is rising more sharply than that of men, as revealed by OECD and UNESCO reports (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2018). Thus, OECD countries are faced with a reversal of inequalities that has received little attention and the social consequences of which are still unclear (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). How can we explain this phenomenon?

We propose a look back at the notions of equality and meritocracy, followed by the examination of a specific case. While comparative studies are somewhat difficult to carry out, not least because of differences in school systems between countries, we propose to study the question of gender in higher education in Canada, which is the country with the highest proportion of 25-64 year-old graduates among OECD countries (OECD, 2023, p. 42). As education falls under the purview of the provinces, it is difficult to discuss the Canadian situation as a whole. Thus, we will take a closer look at one particular province, Quebec. Our reflection, based on data available from the Quebec Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, revealed that since the early 1980s, women have outnumbered men in higher education. We will see that this trend has increased over time, and we will shed some light on this phenomenon and open questions on the role technologies or distance education may play in the future.



Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework is based primarily on the concepts of meritocracy and equality, which shape society, and on sociological theories.

Meritocracy and equality

One of the main avenues for investigation in the sociology of education concerns equal opportunity in schooling, and the way in which the education provided by educational and training institutions influences social equality. In modern societies, there is a lot at stake, insofar as educational pathways and the academic qualifications that crown them are thought to determine the positions occupied by individuals in society. Indeed, Duru-Bellat explained that to resolve the tension between individuals who have become equal under the law and the increasingly diverse and unequal social positions, meritocracy has gradually imposed itself as the founding ideology of democratic societies. Political equality is supposed to go hand in hand with equality, not in social positions and the various benefits associated with them, but in individuals' chances of achieving these positions, on the basis of their aspirations and personal qualities. One's ultimate place in the social division of labour should no longer depend on inherited factors, but on the resources acquired and mobilized by the individual: Merit becomes the great architect. (2006, p. 8)

Therefore, a meritocratic system implies that it is egalitarian for the different individuals. However, while the term equality is often used, we must remember that the concepts associated with it may differ. As Wotherspoon explained (Wotherspoon, 2014), education equity can be approached in three different ways: equal access, equal treatment, and equal outcome.

- The right to education, or equal access, corresponds to the idea that everyone should have the same opportunity to attend educational institutions. This approach is generally supported by a conservative vision, according to which the role of the State is limited to providing a certain number of services to all citizens, while the way in which these services are used is a matter of individual responsibility. As all individuals are assumed to enjoy identical opportunities, they are responsible for their own success and failure, as well as for ensuring their own wellbeing.
- Equality in education, or equal treatment, relates to a more interventionist conception of the State. Inspired by liberal philosophy, this approach calls for existing differences in the population (sociodemographic characteristics, background, needs, interests, etc.) to be considered, to propose educational programs and forms of assessment that are tailored to the learners. Thus, equal treatment requires equal access, but goes beyond it by being proactive.
- Equality through education, or equal outcome and chances of success, is an approach based on social structuring. Stemming from critical or social democratic philosophy, this approach considers that individuals are not unemployed or poor due to their lack of ability, but because society is a source of poverty, unemployment, and inequality that does not provide equal opportunity for all. It calls for active participation not only of the State, but also of the most affluent individuals, in order to guarantee a minimum standard of living, access to services and opportunities for success for all. Thus, success or failure is not as much a matter of the individual or their environment as of the school system, which must then compensate for individual handicaps, whatever their nature.

Equality can thus be considered at different levels, either from a general or individual standpoint.



Sociological and economic approaches

Even in societies with the strongest tendencies toward equality and meritocracy, not all individuals pursue long years of study, although this is supposed to lead to a better socioeconomic position. Despite the determination of international organizations and many governments to promote equality between men and women, research shows that inequalities related to social background or gender in education and higher education still abound (Corrigan *et al.*, 2023; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Huber & Paule-Paludkiewicz, 2024; Mead, 2023). Well-known sociological and economic approaches appear likely to enhance our understanding. On the one hand, the social reproduction approach, advocated namely by Bourdieu and Passeron (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), refers to the differences in social, cultural and economic capital, as well as to the habitus that influence individuals' educational pathways independently of their will. To clarify, the system may be meritocratic, but not all individuals have the same chance of displaying the valued behaviours and of being considered deserving. Thus, several studies have shown that schools play a part in social reproduction, in the sense that the more educational capital parents have, the greater the (statistical) chance their children will (happily) remain in the school system for a long time (Lahire, 1998). The habitus and gender stereotypes integrated by girls favour their adaptation to school norms, and, consequently, their academic success, but also foster a certain lack of self-confidence according to Bouchard and Saint-Amant (1993). This leads women to remain in fields of study, and later in employment sectors, that are less socioeconomically valued than those toward which the majority of men gravitate (Baudelot & Establet, 1992; Verdugo-Castro *et al.*, 2022).

While choices are a function of social environment, it also appears important to consider the influence of family or educational institutions on educational pathways, as suggested by Terrail (1992). He recommends examining family mobilization around the school issue (Terrail, 1992, p. 674), as well as the school environment itself, taking into account the way in which education is provided and the support available to students. In this approach, while the effort of learning and therefore, the “credit” may belong to the student, those who receive guidance and help would still have a better chance than others of doing well. Families are more likely to support girls' schooling than boys', namely by helping them with homework and career choices (Bugeja-Bloch & Couto, 2018). In addition, the quality of education and support received at home and at school is said to have a greater impact on boys than on girls (Autor *et al.*, 2016). More generally, DiPrete and Buchmann (2013, p. 153) highlight: “Boy's educational attainment appears to be more sensitive to the level of resources in the family than in girls' educational attainment. In particular, the gender gap in cognitive skills appears to be sensitive to the presence of the father in the household”.

On the other hand, the theory of rational choice or human capital (Becker, 1964) and, in a broader, less instrumentalist way, the theory of methodological individualism (Boudon, 1973), emphasize that inequality of opportunity at school stems from social stratification itself, since expectations and choices are a function of the social position one occupies. In other words, when achieving the same results, individuals' choice of pursuing further education differs according to calculated risk-taking by these individuals, who take into account the costs and benefits of their choices whether they are deciding to study for an extra year or to opt for one stream or another. These calculations are not necessarily monetary, but generally a function of the beliefs and values shaping individual rationality. Thus, methodological individualism—based on the premise (Boudon, 2004, p. 281) that every social phenomenon is the result of a combination of individual actions, beliefs and attitudes that can be understood by reconstructing their meaning to each individual and the reasons that lead them to think or act in this way—helps us consider the individual decisions involved in an educational pathway. As men's and women's main fields of activity and salaries are not identical, the results of their respective calculations of education-related benefits may differ (Heckman *et al.*, 2018), and “males may be more likely than females [...] to underestimate the value of college, and to overestimate their labor market chances without a college degree.” (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013, p.206).



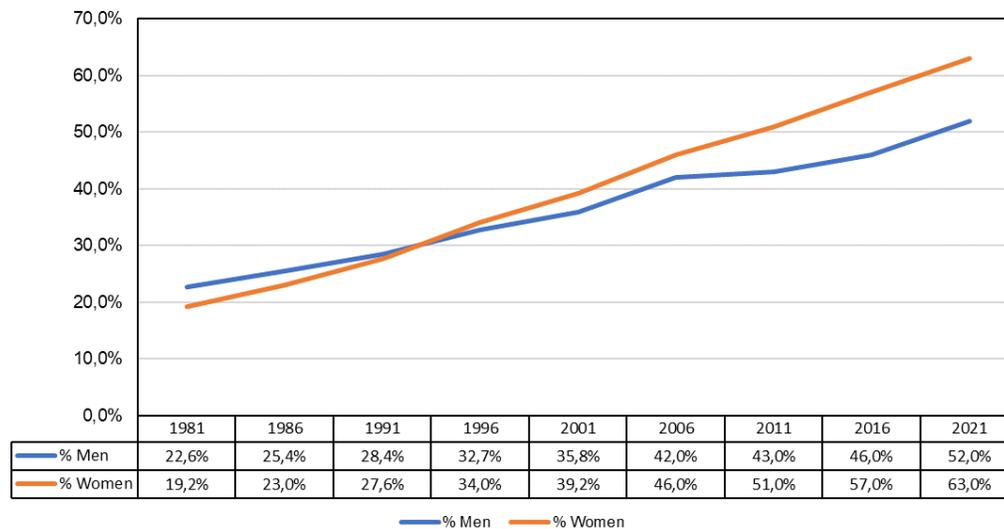
Although numerous studies highlight the overrepresentation of female students in United States, there is only a few works about it in Quebec. So, we can wonder if the situation is the same and if those major sociological fields of explanation can still contribute to explain differences. In other words, what are the observable gender inequalities in higher education in Quebec, and how can they be explained?

Context and Methodology

The Quebec school system consists of six years of primary education, followed by five years of secondary education, and then two or three years of college, which may be a technical college program or a stepping stone to university. The number of secondary and post-secondary students has risen sharply since the 1970s, so that today, nearly three quarters of Quebec's 25-64 year-olds have a post-secondary education, compared to less than half in OECD countries overall (Statistics Canada, 2023). An analysis of Canadian census data reveals a gap in favour of women in the proportion of the population aged 25-64 with a college or university degree. This gap has been widening since the early 1990s, from 1.3 percentage points in 1996 to 11 points in 2021 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Distribution of the population aged 25-64 in Quebec, by gender and highest level of schooling (certificate, diploma or degree), for Census years 1981 to 2021



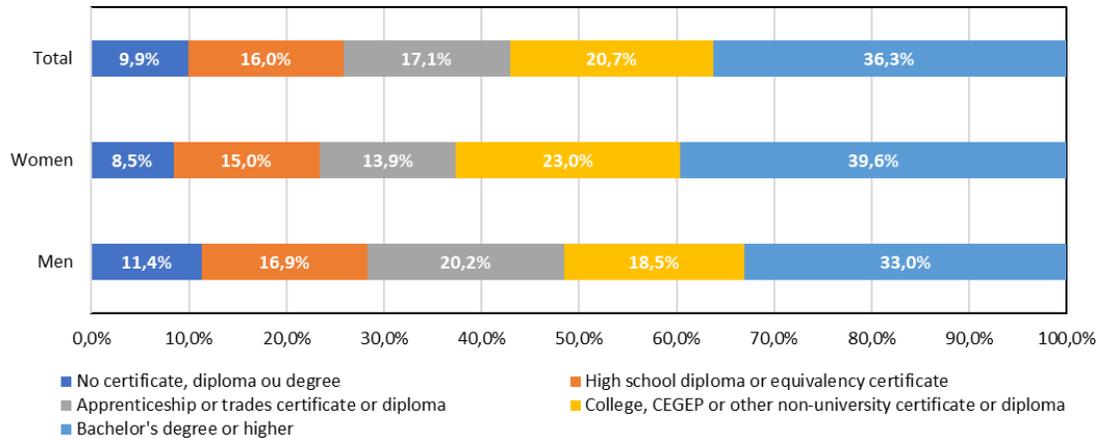
Note. Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue.

These data also show that in 2021, while a higher proportion of men attended vocational training (20% of men vs. 13% of women), more women attended college (23% of women vs. 19% of men) or university (40% of women vs. 33% of men) (Figure 2).



Figure 2

Distribution of the population aged 25 to 64, by highest level of schooling and gender, Quebec, 2021



Note. Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue.

To determine the extent to which the democratization of education has promoted equal access, treatment, and outcome by gender, we looked at the evolution of men's and women's schooling. To do this, we used data available from Quebec's Ministère de l'Éducation and Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, namely two types of indicators. On the one hand, we considered school performance indicators, which provide access to longitudinal tracking of student cohorts, namely information on graduation rates. On the other, we examined accessibility indicators, which constitute an estimate of young people's probability of entering tertiary education for the first time before a given age, if current rates are maintained in the future. We also looked at Ministère de l'Éducation data concerning the (public/private) education system, students' academic delay and schools' socioeconomic index (IMSE) to explain the phenomena observed in higher education. We generally calculated the rates based on Statistics Canada data to have the total population, as well as the gap between genders. Data are presented as tables or figures for ease of reading and it is important to note that the concept of self-declared gender is relatively recent, which means that for the purpose of studying longitudinal phenomena, only sex assigned at birth can be considered. As such, the notion of gender is used synonymously with sex in the statistical data presented.

Key Findings

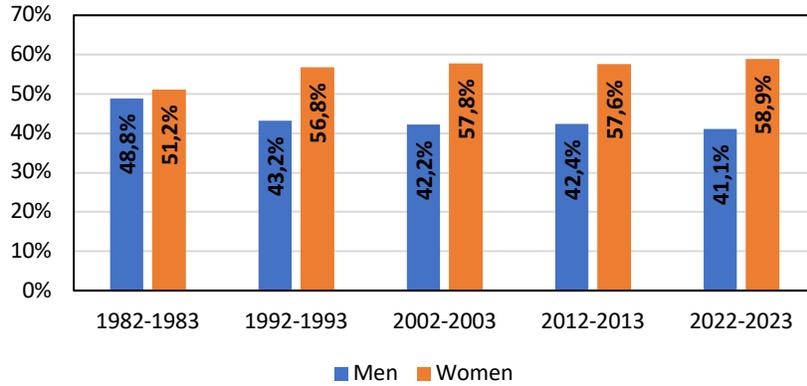
Current situation

Since the 1980s, we have seen a higher increase in women's enrollment in higher education than in men's. As shown in Figure 3, in Quebec, while men accounted for 48.8% of those enrolled in higher education in 1982-1983, 40 years later they represented only 41.1%.



Figure 3

Distribution of student representation by gender, 1982-1983 to 2022-2023

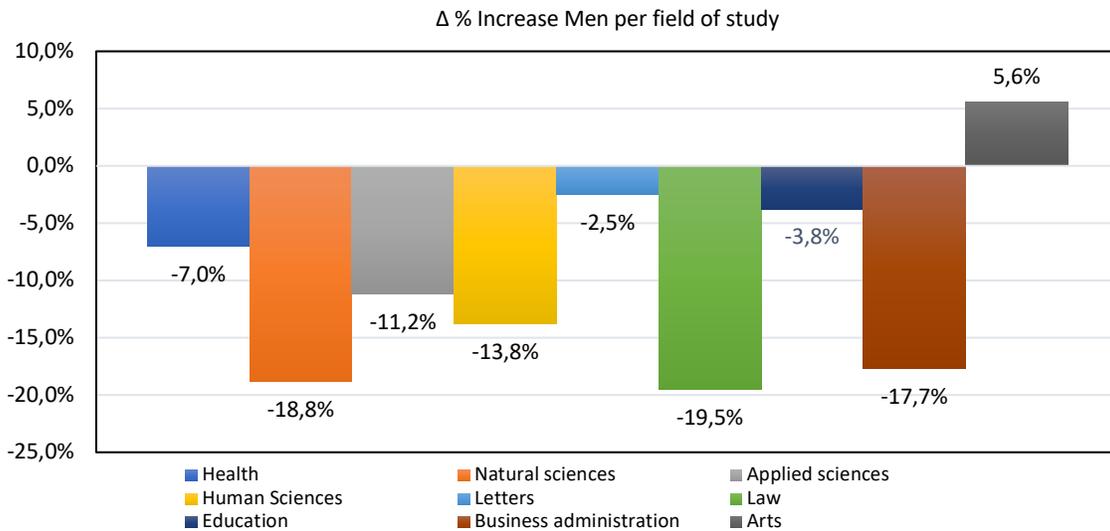


Note. Sources: MES, data as at 2023-02-18, GDEU system, data as at 2023-02-26.

Since the 1980s, with the exception of the arts, the proportion of male students has decreased in every university field of study, especially in law, pure sciences and administrative sciences (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Variation in the representation of men (%), enrolled in university, in the fall term, 1982-1983 compared to 2022-2023



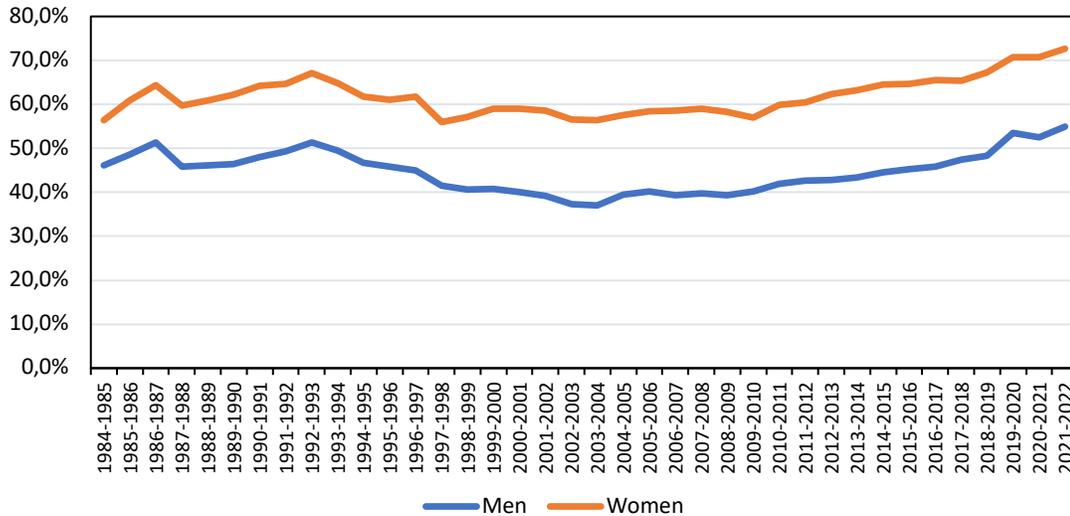
Note. Source: MES, data as at 2023-02-26.

The gap between men and women is widest at the undergraduate level (almost 20 points). In 2021, 49.7% of graduates were women and 29.8% were men. In fact, even before the issue of graduation rates, it's clear that university access rates have changed dramatically. In 1984-1985, approximately 30% of men and women attended university, with a gap of 0.1 percentage points between the two. This gap widened to 20.9 percentage points in 2021-2022, with just under 40% of men and just over 60% of women attending university. In fact, as soon as students enter college, which is the gateway to higher education in Quebec, the gap is in favour of women, and tends to widen over time (Figure 5).



Figure 5

Change in rates of access to higher education in a college program (technical and pre-university), by gender, 1984-1985 to 2021-2022



Note. Sources: Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur (MES), data as at 2022-11-06. Statistics Canada, Population Estimates adapted by the Institut de la statistique du Québec (September 2022).

In other words, although women have a higher rate of access to college than men, this difference in access is much greater today for pre-university programs than for technical programs, and that regardless of college orientation, more women than men re-enroll after the first year and go on to graduate from college.

Potential causes

The predominance of women in higher education develops throughout the educational pathway. Indeed, even before they enter higher education and whatever their socioeconomic background, boys fall further behind than girls. This happens as they progress through primary and secondary education (Table 1). The socioeconomic index (IMSE) is composed of two variables, namely low maternal education level and parental unemployment, which emerge as the strongest explanatory variables for academic underachievement. A student's IMSE rank corresponds to that of the settlement unit in which they live. IMSE 1 indicates the most privileged environment and IMSE 10 the most disadvantaged.



Table 1

Distribution of the relationship between the socioeconomic index and the proportion of students experiencing academic delay¹ by the end of secondary education, by gender, 2019-2020 to 2022-2023

	IMSE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Academic delay by the end of primary education	Boys	7.3%	7.0%	7.2%	8.0%	8.3%	8.4%	8.4%	8.6%	8.7%	10.9%
	Girls	5.4%	4.6%	4.9%	5.6%	5.4%	6.3%	6.2%	6.7%	6.7%	9.0%
Academic delay by the end of secondary education	Boys	8.9%	9.7%	10.8%	12.4%	13.1%	14.2%	15.8%	18.0%	20.4%	27.0%
	Girls	5.8%	6.1%	7.2%	8.5%	8.8%	9.8%	11.9%	12.8%	15.4%	21.9%

Note. Source: Ministère de l'Éducation (MEQ), Information portal, Charlemagne system, data as at 2023-04-13.

As academic delays likely lead to students' progressive exclusion from school, it is understandable that men are proportionally less represented than women by the time they enter higher education. In fact, it appears that boys tend to fall further behind than girls at the primary and secondary education levels, and that both boys and girls fall further behind the more disadvantaged their background (socioeconomic index decile between 8 and 10)². Moreover, it is clear that at the secondary education level, the share of boys who fall behind tends to increase even more than that of girls when they are from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (IMSE ranks 8 to 10). Among students from privileged backgrounds, proportions are 12.1% for boys and 8.3% for girls (i.e., a 4-point difference), and proportions among those from disadvantaged backgrounds are 21.8% for boys and 16.7% for girls (i.e., a 5.1-point difference), as shown in Figure 6.

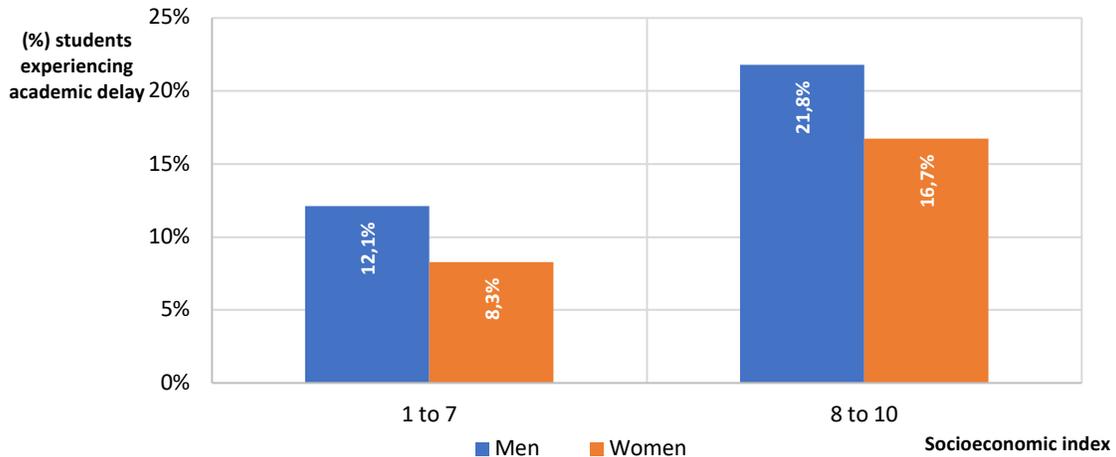
¹ Academic delay is a measure of the observed difference in the number of students who are over the normal age (or underage), at the time of enrollment, on September 30 of the school year, by gender.

² In Quebec, environments are considered disadvantaged if their IMSE rank is 8, 9 or 10. These represent 30% of elementary and high school students. [http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/references/indicateurs-et-statistiques/indices-de-defavorisation/#:~:text=Pour%20l'ann%C3%A9e%20scolaire%202021,socio%2D%C3%A9conomique%20\(IMSE\).](http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/references/indicateurs-et-statistiques/indices-de-defavorisation/#:~:text=Pour%20l'ann%C3%A9e%20scolaire%202021,socio%2D%C3%A9conomique%20(IMSE).)



Figure 6

Distribution of the relationship between the socioeconomic index and the proportion of students experiencing academic delay by the end of secondary education, by gender, 2019-2020 to 2022-2023

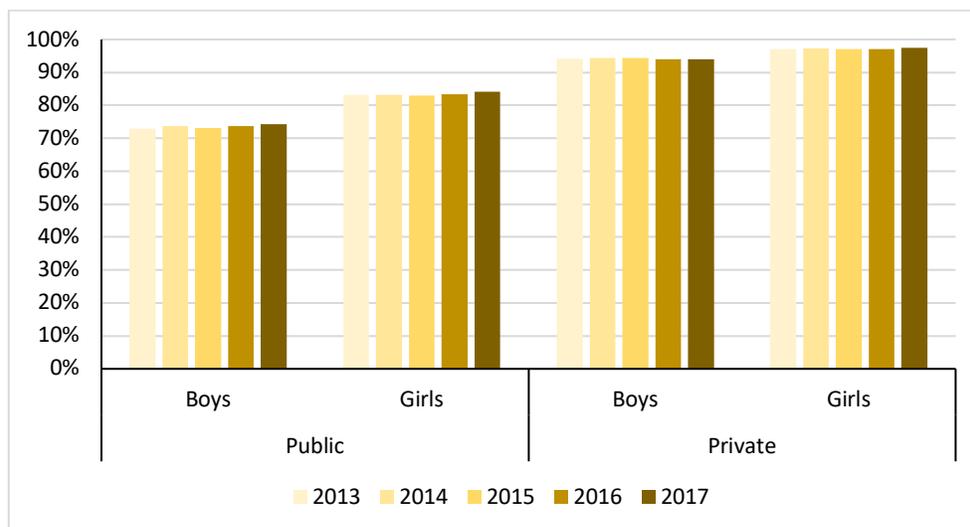


Note. Source: Ministère de l'Éducation (MEQ), Information portal, Charlemagne system, data as at 2023-04-13.

We can see that attending a private high school increases the probability of entering college and continuing one's education. Indeed, the average gap between men and women in the rate of transition between high school and college is 9.6% in the public system versus 3.0% in the subsidized private system, still in favour of women. In other words, although the gap still works against boys, it is clearly smaller in the private system than in the public system, to the point where boys in the subsidized private system have greater access to college than girls in the public system, as shown in the figure 7.

Figure 7

Distribution of the rate of transition from high school to college, by students' gender (M/F) and high school education system, 5 years after high school graduation (DES), between 2009 and 2017



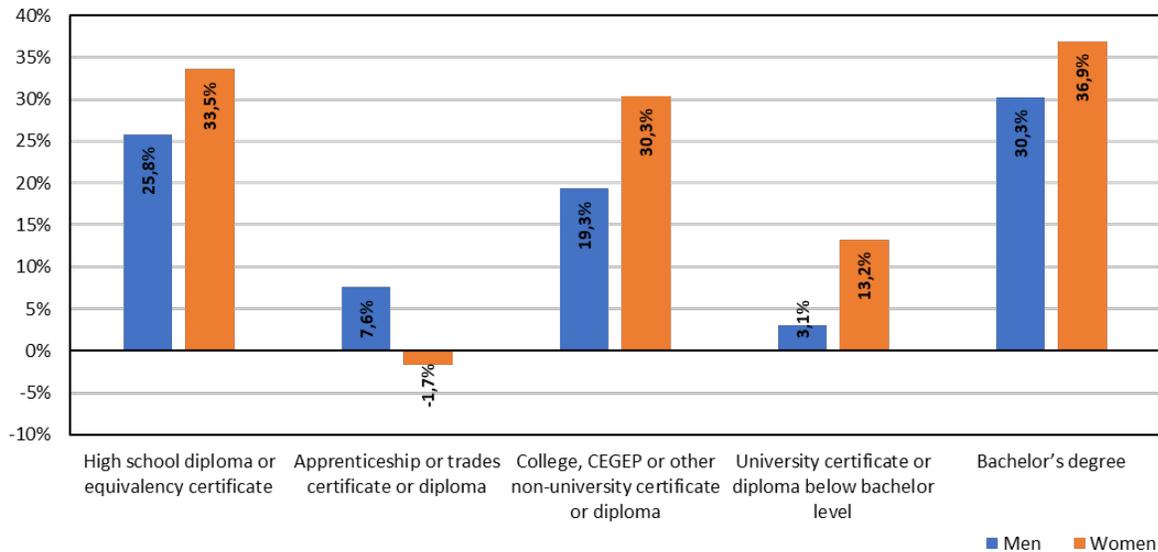
Note. Source: Ministère de l'Éducation (MEQ), data as at 2023-04-13.



We can also notice that when it comes to obtaining an undergraduate degree, the gain relative to the previous level of study is 36.9% for women, but only 30.3% for men. The only exception is an apprenticeship or trade school certificate or diploma, which provides an enticing gain for men (7.6%), but not for women (-1.7%), as shown in the figure 8.

Figure 8

Average additional employment income of workers from one level of education over the previous level, people aged 25 to 64 working full time, full year, by gender, Quebec, 2021 Census



Note. Source: Statistics Canada. Table 98-10-0427-01. Employment income statistics by Indigenous identity and highest level of education: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations with parts.

Similarly, when calculating the private cost/benefit ratio (for the individual, who spends time studying rather than working, has to pay tuition fees, but potentially receives bursaries and finds a job after graduation, etc.), we can see that the salary increase achieved with a bachelor's degree relative to a high school diploma was 11.6% for women versus 8.5% for men in 2016. In other words, even after deducting costs, it is still more profitable for women than for men to obtain a bachelor's degree.

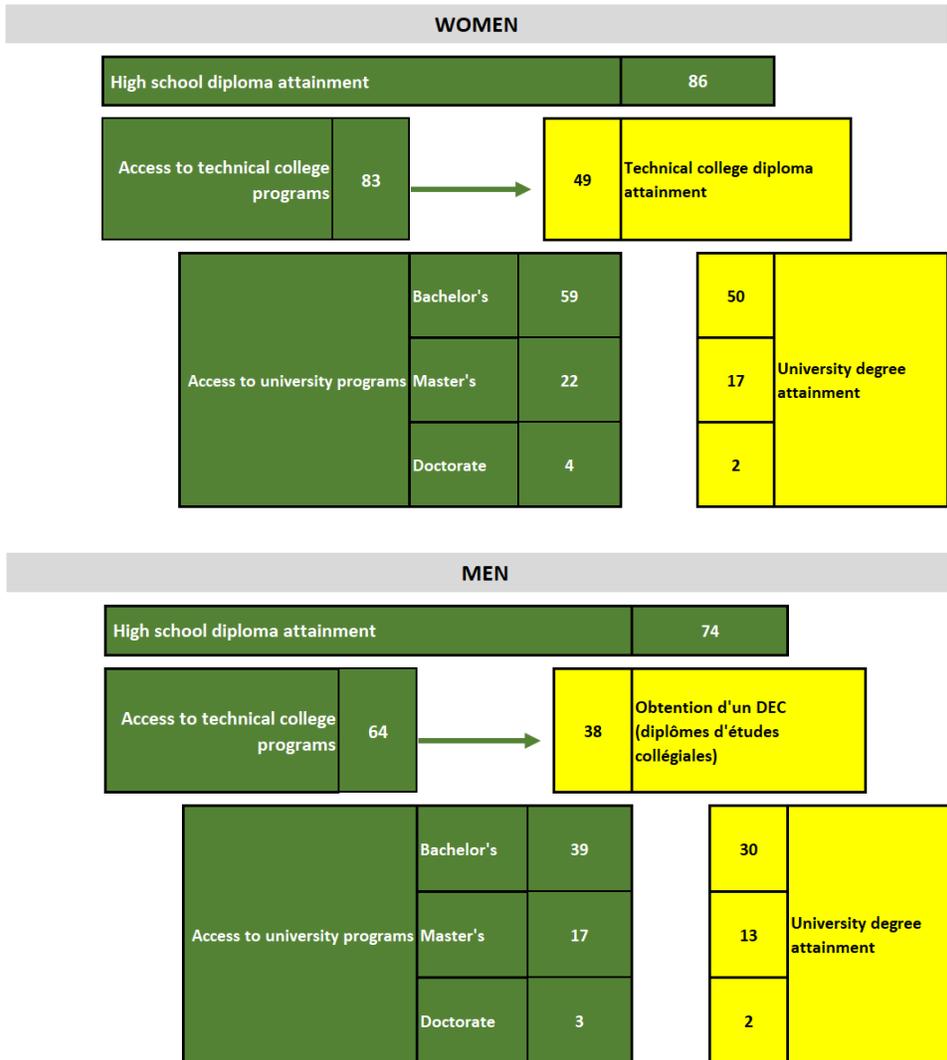
Discussion

Whereas, until the 1970s, women were less likely than men to pursue post-secondary education in Quebec, since the early 1980s, more women than men have been studying both in person and through distance learning (Papi, Thériault & Sauv , 2021) and the gap continues to widen in both social and individual terms, with boys falling further behind girls in school as early as elementary school and through high school. With more women than men graduating from high school, enabling them to go on to college and then university, the gap between men and women in accessing and graduating from higher education is widening over time. In 2021-2022, for every 100 boys entering the Quebec school system, 74 graduated from high school (compared to 86 girls), 38 graduated from college (compared to 49 girls), 30 obtained undergraduate degrees (compared to 50 girls), 13 obtained masters' degrees (compared to 17 girls), and 2 completed doctorate degrees (equal to girls). Therefore, equal access only appears to exist at the primary education level, and equal outcome only happens at the doctorate level, as illustrated in Figure 9 diagrams.



Figure 9

Educational pathway of 100 young students entering the higher education system, if they behaved in the same way as students enrolled in 2021-2022, by gender.



Note. © Autors.

Thus, it would appear that we have shifted from inequality toward women to inequality toward men. Women's previous situation was explained by the historical context in which higher education was reserved for a minority to which they did not belong. However, since the democratization or massification of education—marked in Quebec by the work of the Parent Commission, which recommended equal access to education, leading to free and compulsory primary and secondary education, as well as to the creation of regional CEGEPs (colleges) and universities (Kamanzi, 2022)—the proportion of female students is greater than that of male students. Why is this? The answer is obviously not simple, and there are many factors involved.



The data we have at our disposal enable us to highlight several possible explanations. The first is based on the theory of social reproduction, according to which socialization goes hand in hand with the reproduction of social class- and gender-related behaviours. Indeed, according to this approach, girls' behaviour is closer to that expected at school than boys', and the same is true of children from wealthy backgrounds as opposed to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although socioeconomic background has an effect on schooling regardless of gender, boys' schooling seems to be more susceptible to the environment in which they grow up than girls'. Research has already shown that, although girls and boys from low-income backgrounds are less likely to pursue higher education than those from high-income backgrounds, girls are still more likely to do so than boys (Baudelot & Establet, 2005; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Autor *et al.*, 2023; Robson *et al.*, 2019). This also tends to be confirmed by other studies, indicating that this distinction in susceptibility begins well before entering the education system, in the mother's womb (Lacroix *et al.*, 2023). These gaps between boys and girls are well known. It is often suggested that school favours a single model of behaviour, values order and discipline... and that girls do indeed have the characteristics, skills, and competencies needed to succeed in this community (Schinck, 2002, p. 15). They benefit namely from the fact that hard work seems to be more highly valued as part of their socialization and that intelligence is valued in boys, leading girls to be more aware than boys that success is above all a matter of effort (Bouchard & Saint-Amant, 1993; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Schinck, 2002). In fact, research findings show that considering students' effort helps to explain some of the differences in PISA test results between boys and girls (Anaya & Zamarro, 2024). In this regard, the approach focusing on socialization that is differentiated by background and gender, leading girls to adapt better to the behaviours expected in school, seems relevant to explain the differences in schooling that arise during childhood.

Our data also show that the gender gap in the high school-to-college transition rate is strongly influenced by the type of high school system (subsidized private/public) and is smaller in the subsidized private system. In other words, children, and especially boys, whose parents send them to private school are more likely to pursue higher education than those who attend the public system. These results, highlighting the importance of family choices (Terrail, 1992), are potentially in line with research carried out in the United States, showing that the quality of the school has a greater impact on boys than on girls (Autor *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, recent findings show that girls are more likely than boys to attend private schools or selective branches of public schools, because selection criteria are generally based on language skills, which tend to be stronger among girls than boys (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Plante *et al.*, 2024). This reflection brings to mind the influence of the education system itself, guiding choices beyond the individuals' will, even though individuals integrate these norms into their rationalization (Franquet *et al.*, 2010).

The fact that schooling beyond the secondary level is no longer compulsory, and involves a choice of pathways, means that approaches, such as methodological individualism in sociology, or the theory of human capital in economics, must also be taken into account. Indeed, when we look at the average additional employment income of workers from one level of education compared to those of the previous level (among individuals aged 25 to 54 working full-time in Quebec in 2021), we notice that women enjoy a greater net gain than men, for different levels of training. In fact, both in Quebec and Canada (Smith-Carrier *et al.*, 2021), we observe that with equivalent levels of education, women earn less than men, but that this gap decreases as the level of education increases (Waite, 2017). In addition, the private cost of training to take someone with a high school diploma through to a bachelor's degree is estimated to be approximately \$74,000 for a man and \$57,000 for a woman. The cost is higher for a man because of greater lost earnings, but also because the actual length of study is somewhat longer for a man than for a woman (Demers, 2018, p. 4). Thus, the private rate of return was 8.5% for men and 11.6% for women, in 2015-2016 (Demers, 2018, p. 6). This is a very rational explanation for the fact that a higher proportion of men than women opt for vocational training (electrician, plumber, carpenter, etc.), as it pays off for them, but not for women, who have a greater interest in pursuing education further. The inequalities in favor of men in the labor market thus encourage them to study less than women, for whom the labor market is less favorable.



Gender stereotypes are still present (Bouchard & Saint-Amant, 1993) and as Charles & Bradley (2002, p. 591) underline “gender-egalitarian cultural norm do more to undermine vertical than horizontal inequalities, and they help account for the persistence of extreme segregation by field of study in even the most gender-egalitarian of contexts”. However, women are more likely to opt for traditionally male areas of study, which can be interpreted in two ways. The main interpretation is that because these are domains where jobs are better paid than those in highly feminized fields, there are more women who go into traditionally male fields than men who do the opposite, even when a scholarship is involved. The second is that women, who, according to some studies, gather more information than men to make career orientation choices (Bugeja-Bloch & Couto, 2018), are more likely to calculate the potential benefits of their studies. This calculation may be all the more accurate given that the girls’ superior academic outcomes at the secondary and college levels means that they are more likely to enter their chosen field of study in higher education, despite quotas restricting entry to certain fields (Lacroix *et al.*, 2023).

As a result, while equal access seems to have been a reality since the 1970s, it has benefited women more than men and inequalities remain. In fact, we’re a long way from equal treatment; not only are boys’ particularities not taken into account, but interventionist policies always favour girls, namely encouraging them to enter science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs. Obviously, those programs play an important role to encourage women to study in fields where they are still underrepresented compared to their male peers (Charles and Bradley, 2009; UNESCO, 2018). Thus, in Quebec,³ as elsewhere⁴, various programs have been rolled out to encourage girls to enter scientific fields, and they seem to have had an impact, as seen in Quebec universities between 1982-1983 and 2022-2023. Thanks to such initiatives, there was a more significant increase in female student representation in the sciences than in the humanities or educational sciences, fields that were already heavily dominated by women (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). However, such programs do not exist to encourage men to study in health or educational programs where they are underrepresented and where the society lack of workers constitute a real problem such as teaching or nursing. Furthermore, even in the more male-dominated fields of study, women tend to persevere more and therefore to be proportionately more successful (Wall, 2019). That being said, equal outcome doesn’t seem to be an option either, since it would involve providing more support to boys from disadvantaged backgrounds from an early age; this need is now even greater as the pandemic caused boys to fall even further behind girls in literacy, especially learning to read (Mullis *et al.*, 2023, Papi, 2024).

Moreover, while research has often shown that, girls tend to align more closely with the behaviours expected at school, it is important, on the one hand, to ensure that such trends are not reinforced by teachers’ actions (Détrez & Perronnet, 2017), and on the other hand, to explore ways of making academic learning more engaging and better suited to boys. The development of boys’ maturity appears to be slower than that of girls (Cyrulnik, 2025). Therefore, making greater use of playful or game-based learning methods could be beneficial, and the integration of technologies may represent a promising avenue to explore in this regard. For example, although men and women play video games in equal measure (Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017), men are more likely to identify as gamers than women (Howe, Livingston & Lee, 2019), and the stereotype that they are more comfortable with technology remains prevalent. Promoting the use of immersive technologies and video games in learning may therefore help to leverage gendered cultural differences and stereotypes to support learner motivation and engagement (Lewis & al., 2023)—particularly among boys—while also contributing to the deconstruction of gender stereotypes by reinforcing the idea among female learners that they, too, can feel at ease in traditionally male-dominated fields. However, video games for educational purposes may have different effects depending on multiple factors like social background (Vincent, 2023).

³ Notable examples are the “Chapeau les filles”: <https://www.quebec.ca/gouvernement/reconnaissance-prix/education/chapeau-les-filles-excelle-science/a-propos> and “Les ambitieuses” initiatives: <https://colabnumerique.com/parcours/les-ambitieuses/>

⁴ For example, at the University of Toronto, researchers have shown that a program set up to attract women to a chemical engineering program has worked well. This program now boasts equal numbers of men and women and they perform as well as their male peers (Norval & Chan, 2022).



Lastly, it's important to remember that beyond the differences engendered by socioeconomic differences in compulsory education, the economic interest in higher education can be explained by another type of inequality; the gender gap in salaries, where women with the same level of education earn less than men, even though this gap decreases with increasing levels of qualification (Auspurg *et al.*, 2017; Gharehgozli & Atal, 2020; Waite, 2017). While only 20% of professional activities are truly gender-mixed (Dubet & Duru-Bellat, 2020), encouraging girls to pursue more lucrative fields does not seem to be enough. In other words, supporting equality in secondary and tertiary education also means fighting for equality in the labour market.

Conclusion

Through our examination of equality between men and women in education, we've highlighted that the democratization of education, or equal access, has benefited women more than men but still seem quite unfair for both gender. Indeed, while it wasn't until 1907 that secondary education was made available to girls in Quebec, and it took until the second half of the twentieth century for secondary and higher education to become more democratic, it's clear that girls have gradually caught up with and surpassed boys in terms of enrollment and academic outcomes. Since the early 1980s, women have outnumbered men in post-secondary education, even during the recent health crisis (Doray *et al.*, 2022). We focused on Quebec, but this phenomenon has been observed throughout the Western world.

We have seen that these differences arise in childhood, as girls tend to perform better in school than boys, and boys fall further behind, especially when they come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, which is likely to influence their educational aspirations (Shapka *et al.*, 2012). As differences manifest from an early age, it would seem appropriate to provide boys from disadvantaged backgrounds with more support, as well as promoting fields of study toward which they are less inclined, such as primary or secondary education, where boys often lack male role models. In addition, it has been noted that in Quebec public schools, nearly one in five boys dropped out of high school during the pandemic (Dion-Viens, 2024), which is partly related to the fact that troubled youth suffered more from the pandemic, and that the majority of them are boys (Royer, 2017). Thus, the underrepresentation of men in higher education seems unlikely to change if we don't change anything. That's why it seems important to think about what can be done. We know that since the 1970s the development of open universities allowed lot of women and first students generation to study. Nowadays, we may wonder if well-thought use of certain technologies could sustain boys' motivations, engagement and learning and can consider that such a perspective deserves careful investigations taking into account multiple parameters.

Furthermore, male undergraduates earn less additional income than women, so higher education may appear less attractive to them. This serves as a reminder that, for the same level of qualification, women's wages remain lower than men's, not least because the most feminized professions tend to be less well paid than those that are more heavily dominated by men. Therefore, it seems impossible to achieve equality in higher education without putting an end to existing inequalities in the labour market. Focusing solely on the inequalities suffered by men or by women, in education or employment, seems too restrictive. To foster equality and be more inclusive in our societies, we must consider the broader picture.



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Résumé / Resumen / Resumo

Avons-nous laissé les garçons de côté? Comprendre le déclin de la participation masculine dans l'enseignement supérieur au Québec

RÉSUMÉ

Généralement, les recherches en lien avec l'équité, la diversité et l'inclusion (EDI), s'intéressent aux personnes handicapées, aux minorités ethniques ou culturelles ainsi qu'aux minorités sexuelles ou de genre. Elles s'inscrivent dans la lignée des actions ayant progressivement permis aux femmes de prendre leur place dans la société en l'élargissant à une plus grande diversité de publics particuliers. Les personnes de sexe masculin ne présentant pas de handicap et ne faisant pas partie d'une minorité constituent ainsi souvent l'impensé de ces études. Pourtant, les données disponibles mettent en évidence que sur le plan de l'enseignement supérieur, ils ne sont plus majoritaires parmi nos étudiants depuis longtemps. Nous verrons ainsi qu'il est nécessaire de regarder ce qu'il se passe en amont des études supérieures, car les retards et abandons scolaires commencent dès l'enfance. Cela peut amener à remettre en question le rôle que pourrait jouer l'intégration de certaines technologies pour soutenir la scolarité des garçons. Par ailleurs, nous verrons que les inégalités de revenus en défaveur des femmes sont également susceptibles d'expliquer une différence de rentabilité de l'enseignement supérieur entre hommes et femmes, ce qui souligne l'importance de prendre en considération les rapports entre les publics particuliers étudiés et les autres.

Mots-clés : genre, étudiant, enseignement supérieur, égalité, inégalité

¿Hemos dejado atrás a los chicos? Analizando el descenso de la participación masculina en la educación superior en Quebec

RESUMEN

En general, las investigaciones relacionadas con la equidad, la diversidad y la inclusión (EDI) se centran en las personas con discapacidad, las minorías étnicas o culturales, así como las minorías sexuales o de género. Estas investigaciones se inscriben en la continuidad de acciones que han permitido progresivamente a las mujeres ocupar su lugar en la sociedad, ampliándose a una mayor diversidad de grupos específicos. Los hombres que no tienen discapacidades y no forman parte de una minoría suelen ser, por lo tanto, los grandes olvidados de estos estudios. Sin embargo, los datos disponibles muestran que, en el nivel de la educación superior, hace ya tiempo que dejaron de ser mayoría entre el alumnado. Por ello, es necesario observar lo que ocurre antes de llegar a la educación superior, ya que los retrasos y el abandono escolar comienzan en la infancia. Esto lleva a cuestionar el papel que podría desempeñar la integración de ciertas tecnologías para apoyar la escolarización de los chicos. Además, veremos que las desigualdades salariales en perjuicio de las mujeres también pueden explicar una diferencia en la rentabilidad de la educación superior entre hombres y mujeres, lo cual subraya la importancia de considerar las relaciones entre los grupos minoritarios tradicionalmente estudiados y otros que, a primera vista, pueden no parecer marginados.

Palabras clave: género, estudiante, educación superior, igualdad, desigualdad



Deixámos os rapazes para trás? Abordando o declínio da participação masculina no ensino superior no Québec

RESUMO

De modo geral, as pesquisas relacionadas com a equidade, diversidade e inclusão (EDI) concentram-se em pessoas com deficiência, minorias étnicas ou culturais, bem como em minorias sexuais ou de gênero. Essas pesquisas seguem a linha das ações que, ao longo do tempo, permitiram às mulheres ocupar seu lugar na sociedade, ampliando o foco para uma maior diversidade de públicos específicos. Homens que não possuem deficiência e que não pertencem a nenhum grupo minoritário são, assim, frequentemente deixados de lado nesses estudos. No entanto, os dados disponíveis mostram que, no ensino superior, eles já não são maioria entre os estudantes há bastante tempo. Por isso, é necessário olhar para o que acontece nas etapas anteriores à educação superior, pois os atrasos e o abandono escolar começam na infância. Isso leva a questionar o papel que a integração de certas tecnologias poderia desempenhar no apoio à escolarização dos meninos. Além disso, veremos que as desigualdades salariais que afetam negativamente as mulheres também podem explicar diferenças na rentabilidade do ensino superior entre homens e mulheres, o que destaca a importância de considerar as relações entre os públicos minoritários tradicionalmente estudados e os demais.

Palavras-chave: gênero, estudante, educação superior, igualdade, desigualdade