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HIGHER CALLING

Worldwide, girls are outperforming boys at school and university. In the first of two-part series, Elaine Yau examines how this trend is playing out in Hong Kong



It's more than 40 years since Mao Zedong proclaimed that women held up half the sky. These days, they are achieving much more than he might have imagined: women now outnumber men at university and in many professions in Hong Kong.

Of 94,000 students enrolled in the city's eight universities in the 2012/13 academic year, 53 per cent were women, up from 46 per cent of 75,557 students in 1995/96.

The gender gap is particularly striking at Baptist and Lingnan universities and the Hong Kong Institute of Education, where male students make up only about 30 per cent of the student body. At the University of Hong Kong and Chinese University, female students outnumber males by several hundred.

Women have also come to the fore in fields traditionally dominated by men. Of 9,700 students studying medicine, dentistry and health in 2012/13, about 60 per cent were women.

They dominate in law, too: Chinese University enrolled 94 new female law students in 2012/13, compared to 41 males; at Hong Kong University, 119 women were admitted into first-year law, compared to 62 men.

The numbers reflect a global trend. A University of Chicago report in 2010, "Explaining the Worldwide Boom in Higher Education of Women", found there were more women holding college degrees than men in 67 of 120 countries studied. In the United States, about 36 per

cent of women aged from 30 to 34 have college degrees, compared to 28 per cent of men. With just four in 10 British men now securing a degree compared with half of women, Britain's universities minister David Willetts has raised concerns about possible social implications.

In many countries, boys are already falling behind at school.

Public exam results in Hong Kong suggest the same may be occurring here. About 59 per cent of girls earned passing grades in Chinese in the 2012 Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), compared to 40.7 per cent of boys. Similar ratios are observed for English and liberal studies – three of the four compulsory subjects. As might be expected, boys did better at maths with 59.1 per cent earning passes, compared with 55.2 per cent of girls.

Former deputy director of education Anthony Tong Kai-hong suggests boys are falling behind because assessment in education emphasises language skills, which girls are often better at. A switch in how secondary school places are assigned has given them a further boost.

"The reason for more females studying in universities than males can be traced to [changes in] the central allocation system, which assigns primary students to secondary schools," he says.

Previously, girls and boys were placed in separate queues and secondary schools divided places equally between them. But in 1998 a parent complained to the Equal

Opportunities Commission, upset that a boy who did not perform as well as her daughter was given a place in an elite school instead of her. The commission challenged the education department in court, arguing that school places should be offered based on merit.

"When the commission won, separate queues for allocation were abolished [in 2002]. After that, we saw a sudden spike in the number of female students at elite schools, with girls making up 80 per cent in some schools."

The HKDSE further diminishes boys' chances of getting into universities, Tong says.

"Three of the four compulsory subjects depend on language ability. It's like language proficiency determines the chance of entering university. That isn't fair to boys as they may be more creative than girls. Reading boosts language ability. But reading, a quiet pursuit, is more popular among girls than boys."

Tong, who served as the principal for SKH Tsang Shiu Tim Secondary School after he retired from government in 2002, monitored his Form Three students to see if there was a link between reading and how they fared in school.

"I compared two things: the number of books a student borrowed and academic performance. I found the more books a student borrows, the better the results. The positive correlation applies to all subjects. Girls are found to borrow the most books," he says.

Another comparison of Form Seven students showed similar links.

"While we cannot tinker with the central allocation system, schools should do more to encourage boys. I introduced compulsory reading sessions at my school so that boys will get more of a chance to read," Tong says.

The principal of CMA Secondary School, Mak Yiu-kuang, finds girls' dominance in elite schools persists to this day: "In band one schools, two thirds of students are girls and the reverse is seen in band three schools."

"Teachers favour girls as they are more responsible, meticulous and patient. However, boys excel in fields like maths, science and logic. They like electronic products and video games. The current assessment system does not take into account such talents," Mak says. "In many primary schools, where internal results are used for central allocation, teachers assign 200 marks to each language subject while maths and general knowledge get only 100 marks. Such arrangements mean those with strong language skills have a



Female students make up about 70 per cent of the student body at Baptist and Lingnan universities and the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Photo: Dickson Lee

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Mindful of the odds, Raymond Jao Ming listed mostly boys' schools when his son came to apply for a secondary place through central allocation in 2005.

"Most of my choices are for boys' schools instead of co-eds as I don't want my son to compete with girls after separate queues for allocation was abolished," says Jao.

Hau Kit-tai, professor of educational psychology at Chinese University, says the rise of girls in primary and secondary education "can be seen all over the world". But quick fixes by tinkering with assessment aren't feasible.

"You cannot suggest making science another compulsory exam subject just to help boys out because it's gender based. You can only do it if there is a basis for the curriculum," he says.

There is little evidence to indicate language proficiency is related to biology, "so it means boys are not born to be poorer in languages," Hau says. "It's just that they have poorer motivation. You cannot blame others when you don't study hard yourself."

Although there is no basis for introducing gender-based allocation in schools, Hau believes more can be done to give boys a boost. "Just like female scientists are recruited to encourage girls to pursue science, Jackie Chan can tell boys the benefits of reading."

In any case, unease in some quarters that centuries of patriarchal hierarchy may eventually give way to female dominance seems unfounded.

Women's ascent in education has not wiped out the gender wage gap, says Claudia Buchmann, a sociology professor at Ohio State University who co-authored *The Rise of Women*, a book published last year on the growing gender gap in US education.

"Women now earn 60 per cent of all master's degrees and more than half of all doctoral

and professional degrees [in the US]," Buchmann says. "The only significant area of education in which women still lag behind men is in science and engineering ... Only 25 per cent of advanced engineering degrees go to women, but they earn 52 percent of master's and doctoral degrees in the life sciences."

Yet "women with a college degree continue to earn less on average than men with a college degree", she says.

That trend is reflected in Hong Kong, where women's salaries have yet to catch up even though they hold senior ranks in various professions. A 2013 report by the Census and Statistics Department found a significant pay disparity between the sexes.

Men and women each make up about half of 3.7 million working people. But some 46,000 men earn HK\$100,000 or more each month compared to only 13,000 women. While men dominate in the high-income bracket, the reverse is true for low-income earners. There are 72,500 women earning less than HK\$3,000 a month, compared to 31,900 men.

Research by Buchmann and her colleagues show that "boys' underperformance in school has more to do with society's norms about masculinity than with anatomy, hormones or brain structure".

Boys involved in activities such as art, drama and foreign languages get better grades than other boys. But these

cultural activities are often denigrated as unmasculine by teenage boys, she says.

"Commentators emphasising boys' needs usually propose that schools be made more boy friendly by offering single-sex classrooms, by recruiting more male teachers and by providing more rough and tumble activities. [However], our research shows that this is precisely the wrong strategy," Buchmann says.

In classrooms with more girls, she adds, both boys and girls score higher on maths and reading tests.

"We need schools that set high expectations, treat each student as an individual as opposed to a gender stereotype and motivate all students to invest in their education," she says. "In education, it's time to discard the zero-sum game of the gender wars mentality and start helping males and females to work together for success."

Su-Mei Thompson, CEO of The Women's Foundation, concurs. "I don't think the education system here is skewed towards women. Basically, what we have now is a level playing field." elaine.yau@scmp.com

Gender ratio on university campus 2010

Country	Female	Male
Australia	56	44
China	51	49
Hong Kong	54	46
Singapore	49	51
UK	55	45
US	57	43

Source: University and Colleges Admissions Service, U.S. Census and Education Department, Australian Department of Industry, Ministry of Education of China, Hong Kong University Grants Committee, Singapore Department of Statistics



Public exam results in Hong Kong suggest boys are falling behind at school. Photo: David Wong

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