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Girls outperforming Boys at School : The XX Factor

7 September 2011

The gender gap in school educational qualifications that shows girls outperforming boys is now a well-established trend.

It's been around now for at least two decades in Scotland - or three generations of the 6 year secondary school session

The Scottish Government summarises the gap as follows :

"Nowadays in Scotland, more girls than boys stay on at secondary school after the compulsory school leaving age;

"Girls leave school with more and higher qualifications than boys on average;

"Girls are more likely than boys to go on to further and higher education after leaving school, with young women now making up the majority of entrants in both sectors.

This year's SQA exam results show that girls are ahead in subjects long regarded as the bastion of the boys such as Physics and Mathematics.

For Scotland as a whole, these are :

Higher Maths Pass Rate Girls 73% Boys 72 %
Advanced Rate Maths Pass Rate Girls 71% Boys 63 %

Higher Physics Pass Rate Girls 82% Boys 76%
Advanced Higher Physics Pass Rate Girls 86% Boys 78%

The gender qualification gap is not purely a Scottish or British experience; it's to be found across Europe , the US and beyond.

Academic research frequently explains the gap through factors such as girls working harder, applying themselves more, having better skills in language, recognising the value of an education more, treating school more seriously, , being better organised, more mature, more respectful of authority, and a more "female-friendly" learning environment, and seeing more career opportunities becoming available to them as a result.

It is fascinating to put female education into the wider perspective of women struggling for the right to have their place in society, at work, in the home and in democracy recognised.

A century ago it was extraordinarily difficult for most girls to benefit from education.

They received a restricted curriculum, with a school leaving age at just 14, and horizons set for many at the level of the factory or in domestic service.

Arguments were expounded that education would be wasted on women because they would just get married.

They might threaten the livelihood of professional men by competing with them for jobs.

Education might make girls "strong-minded".

In "A Woman's Place", Judy Batson describes the obstacles placed in women's path to achieve equal access at university.

Citing Oxford University, she wrote,

"By 1906, all colleges theoretically admitted women to lectures, although individual dons could exclude them if they wished.

"At first, the University only allowed women to take special women's examinations, despite the argument that, if their higher education was ever to be taken seriously, then women should be judged by the same standards as men.

"Some feared that access to ancient literature and modern physiological research would be morally detrimental to young women.

"Others doubted that women's physical and mental health could endure the strain of taking university examinations."

100 years ago a woman could enter a school classroom to teach, but not to vote in a General Election.

Arguments against Votes for Women pressed the case that women could "not be trusted with the vote" because of their "emotional" thinking, whereas emotions never swayed male decision-makers, particularly those in positions of power.

Advance now to the 1980s when women now had the vote and when a female decision-maker was in such a position of power with Margaret Thatcher as Britain's first female Prime Minister.

Successful role models are frequently projected as examples of achievements for both girls and boys to aim for in modern adult life, and Margaret Thatcher has been one such favourite for some.

The young Margaret Thatcher showed some early signs as a potential advocate for the cause of women.

Writing in the now-defunct Sunday Graphic in 1952 she said,

"Why have so few women in recent years risen to the top of the professions?

"One reason may be that so many have cut short their careers when they marry. In my view this is a great pity.

"For it is possible to carry on working. taking a short leave of absence when families arrive, and returning later.

"Should a woman arise equal to the task, I say let her have an equal chance with the men for the leading Cabinet posts. Why not a woman Chancellor—or Foreign Secretary? "

However once installed as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher did very little to promote such women, with just one woman promoted appointment to her Cabinet in 11 years.

Add to that the figure of one million women in Britain who became unemployed during the second term of her premiership, and the conclusion is that Margaret Thatcher had little interest in being an advocate for women and their rights.

However, the doctrine that became Thatcherism does have some part to play in explaining boys' educational performance.

That's for my next article ...as is the question ... if the gender qualifications gap favours girls over boys why does the gender pay gap favour men over women?