

Mothers lead their girls up social ladder

A new study reveals that a man's schooling has almost no bearing on his children's fortunes, write Jack Grimston and Cal Flynn

FORGET the old boy network. Mothers are now the strongest influence on children's educational achievements and the key to a family's chances of social mobility, according to a new study part-funded by the Treasury.

Researchers found that the strongest correlation was between the level of education of mothers and their daughters. There was a weaker link between those of mothers and sons, but no statistically significant influence from a father's education.

The findings suggest that after decades of advancement in the education and careers of women, who also tend to retain the lead role in bringing up children, they are now seen as the main educational role models in a household, even if their incomes are still lower than men's.

"It seems the mother-daughter relationship is now the transmission mechanism for social mobility," said Ian Walker, professor of economics at Lancaster University and one of the study's authors.

"It used to be said that the father was the breadwinner and that would dictate household education decisions. If the father was richer, you could afford to stay on at school rather than go out to earn a living. That is clearly no longer the case."

The researchers reached their conclusions after analysing the number of years for which teenagers stayed on in full-time schooling after the age of 16. They studied data for 43,000 teenagers who had been questioned between 1993 and 2006 and compared them with the schooling of their parents.

They found that for every extra year a woman stayed in full-time education, the likelihood of her daughter staying an extra year increased by 20%. By contrast the likelihood of her son staying in education increased by only 10%.

For fathers, however, there was no consistent or signifi-

cant effect. "Our findings are good news for social mobility if you look at the participation rates for higher education, because the increase has been much higher for women," said Walker, who carried out his study with academics at Warwick University and University College Dublin.

Other experts said Walker and his team had identified an important social trend. Heather Joshi, professor of economic and developmental demography at the Institute of Education, said it was the result of greater gender equality.

"Part of the reason for the influence of one generation on another being particularly strong between mother and daughter is seeing driven girls becoming ambitious parents," Joshi said.

"These ambitious women were the forerunners and then it snowballs — they have high expectations for their own daughters, and it becomes more and more widespread."

Other research carried out by the institute has found strong links between a mother's expectations for her children at the age of 10 and their achievements in later life.

Joshi, who is also director of the millennium cohort study, which tracks the progress of 19,000 children born in 2000, added: "The remarkable thing about this new generation of parents is if you compare them with those born in the 1930s, when women received little formal education.

"Forty per cent of the mothers in our cohort are graduates, but almost unanimously, 100% of the mothers want and expect their children to go to university."

Veronica Bennett, 22, who graduated from Cambridge last year, said her mother's enthusiasm for learning had a big influence upon her own education. "Mum was the first of her family to attend university and throughout my childhood she

was always studying part-time," Bennett said. "We were quite a bookish house, always debating something at the dinner table. She had a very high estimation of me and my sister Rachel, but I wouldn't say she was pushy. She always emphasised that learning was important for its own sake."

Their mother, Maria, an art teacher from Liverpool, said: "I was always studying [for my postgraduate degree] when the girls were small, and I think they learnt by example. I remember Veronica as a tiny child watching me revise, then carrying in a pile of her colouring books and joining me at the table with a very studious expression."

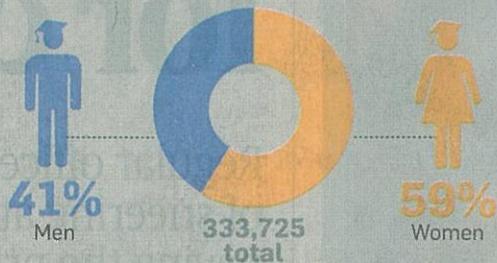


Mother knows best

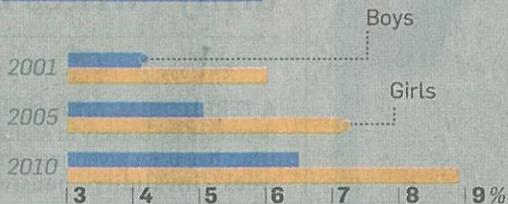
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Women are widening their educational lead over men and closing the gap at work

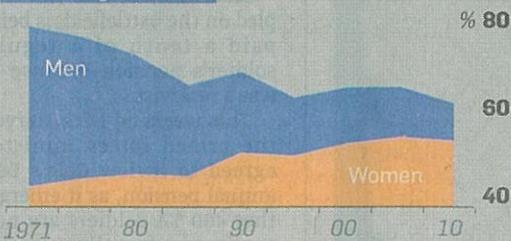
University leavers, 2009



Percentage A*s at GSCE



Percentage in work*



* % of those aged 16 and over in employment or self-employed

Veronica Bennett says support from her mother, Maria, helped her get to Cambridge University

