

### **The Problem**

Men's economic, social, and health indicators reveal concerning trends.

# THE MALE

### **Why It Matters**

Outdated gender roles limit workers, industries, and economies.

### **The Solution**

Remake workplace cultures so jobs and skills are not gendered.

Most indicators show men are struggling to find their place in a changing professional world. What's the solution?

**By Meghan Walsh**

# DIVIDE



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**J**uan Candelaria was in his mid-20s and working in the construction industry doing HVAC and other odd jobs. “I wasn’t really doing much with my life,” the now 37-year-old recalls. A conversation with his mom, a healthcare worker, inspired Candelaria to enroll in a semester-long training program at the local community college in phlebotomy (the drawing of blood from patients). Candelaria went from construction, which has an 89 percent male workforce, to a field that is 89 percent female—and, to his surprise, discovered it to be a much better fit.

Now a supervisor, Candelaria has been working for a large laboratory in Albuquerque for more than a decade, tripling his income in that time period and finding in his profession a sense of purpose—and his wife, who is a nurse. “I found that I love patient care,” he says, explaining that he enjoys talking to people and helping them to feel better, in both mood and body.

Candelaria’s story contains many stories. There is the story of the young man professionally unmoored, like many in today’s society. The story of a changing economy with increasing opportunity in the interpersonal fields. The possibilities that emerge when men consider careers beyond those historically regarded as masculine. For several years, headlines have been sounding alarm bells about the state of boys and men: The man meltdown. The male drift. The dangers of toxic masculinity.

Underpinning these proclamations are a multitude of trends that suggest some men, particularly those in the working class,

are, in fact, struggling, which has far-reaching implications for businesses.

Indeed, the rate of prime-age men who have been out of the workforce has continued to grow over the last 50 years, from 5 percent in the 1970s to a stubborn 11 percent in recent years. And while women have made progress breaking into a variety of male-dominated fields, including STEM, men have not embraced the HEAL professions—healthcare, education, administration, and literacy—which may be of increasing relevance in the AI-integrated economy of the future. These trends are only likely to worsen, experts say, as a growing number of boys fall behind girls academically and choose to forgo college.

Business leaders might think that more men are helping at home with unpaid labor, especially as more women pursue higher education and join the workforce. Not according to the data. Men who drop out of school and the job market are more likely to be unmarried and without kids. They spend more time alone, online, and watching TV, and suffer from higher rates of depression, addiction, and suicide.

For men, whose societal value in modern history has been linked to being providers, career stability and life satisfaction are deeply intertwined. But as economies and gender roles rapidly change, many men are uncertain of their place. The old script has been torn up but

not yet replaced with a new one. “We’re telling girls they can be anything boys can be, but we’re not telling boys that they can be anything girls can be,” says Cody Ragonese, associate director of programs at Equipundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice in Washington, D.C.

Men, according to Ragonese and other experts, need a new story.

**T**o some degree, gender has long been a ready-made solution for dividing labor. There is little debate, for example, that men and women have unique biological expressions that dictate what they can do physically. But whether men and women are innately suited to certain roles remains quite controversial. Some evolutionary psy-

chologists argue that the psyches of men and women have genetically adapted in response to differing challenges. Social role theorists, on the other hand, contend that personality differences between the genders emerge in response to social, economic, and ecological conditions. This means if women take part in childcare, they are more likely to cultivate a caring disposition, but it doesn’t mean they are born caregivers. Likewise, when men do the caregiving, they become more caring. It’s the classic nature-versus-nurture debate.

Regardless of whether

male and female dispositions come pre-programmed, both sexes have a number of shared capacities as humans: the ability to rapidly adapt, to cooperate, to learn social norms, and to create cultures that reinforce those norms. Gender is one of the first social categories babies internalize, usually by age two. As children grow older, they learn that behaviors that fit these gender roles are rewarded and nonconformity is punished. So they adapt to meet expectations. “Starting very early, genderization sets the trajectory for what in 20 years the labor market is going to look like,” Ragonese says. And despite

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advances in women’s rights, over the last 50 years culture has become increasingly genderized, experts say.

As University of Melbourne professor Cordelia Fine, who studies gender in

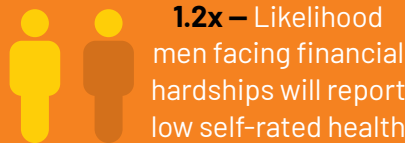
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## HIS(TORY)

The difficulties men are facing in the workplace are documented by several key indicators.



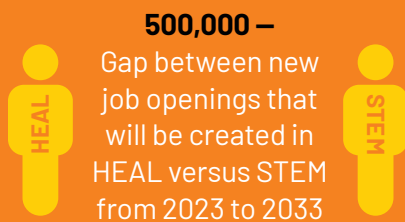
11% – Percentage of prime-age men out of the workforce



1.2x – Likelihood men facing financial hardships will report low self-rated health



22% – Percentage of HEAL jobs (healthcare, education, administration, literacy) held by men



500,000 – Gap between new job openings that will be created in HEAL versus STEM from 2023 to 2033



42% – Percentage of four-year degrees earned by men

Sources: The American Institute for Boys and Men; National Institutes of Health; Equimundo; Center for Masculinities and Social Justice; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

the workplace, writes in *Patriarchy Inc: What We Get Wrong About Gender Equality—And Why Men Still Win at Work*, hyper-genderized divisions of labor may have made sense in particular contexts: societies with high fertility, economies abundant in roles that require physical strength, and cultures that place low value on autonomy. But in a post-industrial, AI-powered global era, the skills most needed are changing. According to an American Institute of Boys and Men analysis of US labor statistics, over the decade from 2023 through 2033 there will be half a million more new job openings in HEAL than in STEM. Meanwhile, manufacturing jobs have been on a steady decline for the last half a century. The in-

demand skill of the day is relational competence, rather than brute strength.

Those who track gender ideologies find that often economic dynamics change first, followed by culture. This has put men in a bind. There are abundant health and education jobs open, but socially men may be punished for straying from more “masculine” career paths. “How can the modern man meet the shifting demands and roles happening in society?” asks Ariel Binder, a research fellow at the American Institute for Boys and Men.

As it did for Candelaria, learning may offer a path to possibility. But something curious has been occurring as women integrate into educational and professional settings, and it may help to explain the weakening graduation and employment rates for men.

In 2010, sociologist Anne Lincoln published a study examining the changing gender dynamics of the veterinary field. In 1969, men represented 89 percent of veterinary students. By 1987, there was a fifty-fifty split between the sexes. And in 2009, she reported that less than a quarter of veterinary students were male. (Fast-forward to 2024 and that number had plummeted to anywhere from 12 to 17 percent.) While some point to the rising cost of tuition to explain the drop in enrollment, Lincoln’s research found that men and women

“Men need gender equality just as much as gender equality needs men.”

were equally affected by the financial burden. “There was really only one variable where I found an effect, and that was the proportion of women already enrolled in vet med schools,” Lincoln wrote.

If, as some argue, certain professions have become socially coded as feminine, so too has education as a whole, which has diminished the perceived value of learning. In 1972, the year Title IX, which prohibits sex-based discrimination, went into effect, men claimed 56 percent of all bachelor’s degrees. Now, the tables have turned, with women earning around 58 percent of four-year degrees. Between 2010 and 2021, the number of Americans attending college fell, with men accounting for the majority of that drop. To be sure, there are many factors calling into question the value of higher education, but the impacts of forgoing school remain.

Trade schools and technical training have also proved to be effective in drawing men back into the workforce. But the pay for those roles has stagnated, creating an increasingly precarious situation.

# “Who is advantaged and disadvantaged by gender beliefs is a complicated story.”

Men facing financial insecurity are 16 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation, according to an Equimundo survey. Those from the poorest zip codes are most susceptible to opting out of school. “Who is advantaged and disadvantaged by gender beliefs is a complicated story,” says Fine. “It’s tricky to talk about.”

Tricky indeed, affirms Korn Ferry’s president of global healthcare services Greg Button, pointing to gender dynamics in healthcare as an example. While the majority of nurses, techs, and administration workers are women, top leadership is almost exclusively men.

“We have such a female-dominated industry, the conversation has been that we should have females at the top,” Button says. “It hasn’t been a conversation of how do we even this out on all levels.” Button also says there’s a massive shortage of healthcare workers, and that it will only worsen as the population ages—unless recruiters can expand their net. And as roles become more gender balanced, Fine says, they are more likely to be fairly compensated rather than over- or undervalued. Or as Ragonese from Equimundo points out: “Men need gender equality just as much as gender equality needs men.”

Of course, as most leaders readily acknowledge, culture comes from the top. But that doesn’t just mean the C-suite. Boys, experts say, need role models in the classroom, community, and office. “Boys need role mod-

els who look like them,” says Binder of the American Institute for Boys and Men. That means incentivizing men to go into teaching and care professions, as well as creating corporate cultures that allow dads to be more present for child-rearing. Studies have shown that boys from poor neighborhoods are more likely to continue with their education, and thus become reliable workers, if they have father figures in the community, even if those fathers are not their own.

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ing men back into the workforce. Businesses can offer incentives and normalize ongoing education and upskilling. They can even create in-house training, as Candelaria’s employer has done to prepare aspiring phlebotomists.

It’s an insidious feedback loop. When boys and men don’t have strong role models, when they don’t have well-defined purpose, or when they are financially insecure, experts say, they become more susceptible to ideologies that equate masculinity with dominance, aggression, and rebellion. If culture continues to genderize hard and soft skills, it may distinctly disadvantage men. “Thinking, stoicism, strength—these are all good things,” says New York University psychology professor Niobe Way, who wrote *Rebels With a Cause—Reimagining Boys, Ourselves, and Our Culture*. “It’s the dismissing and demeaning of the soft skills. You need your thinking and feeling skills.”



## CLOSING THE GAP

Experts recommend several solutions for bridging the gap for men who are struggling to adapt to a changing social and economic landscape.



Create **technical training** opportunities that offer an alternative to traditional higher education.



Provide **living wages** and clear career paths that offer financial stability and purpose.



Ensure boys have **access to role models** in fields with low male representation.



Intentionally de-genderize **social roles** and skills that limit possibilities for the sexes.



Incentivize and **create pathways** for men to go into teaching, healthcare, and other jobs of the future.

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