



# Why do more young women than men go on to tertiary education?

## EDUCATION INDICATORS IN FOCUS

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# #79



- The gender gap in favour of women is wider among new entrants to tertiary education than among those graduating from upper secondary education in almost all OECD countries.
- Gender differences in programme orientation and educational performance in upper secondary education may give girls greater access to tertiary education than boys.
- A greater variety of tertiary programmes and changing perceptions on the role of women in society may have encouraged more young women to pursue tertiary education.
- Young women have more to gain in the labour market than men from a tertiary degree, in both employment levels and earnings.

In recent decades, the share of women with a tertiary education has risen consistently, reversing the historical gender gap in favour of men. In 2019, 51% of 25-34 year-old women held a tertiary degree compared to 39% of men on average across OECD countries. The dynamics behind this reversal are complex and multi-faceted. Among other factors, the trend hinges on the pivotal years of upper secondary education, and on expected career prospects following a tertiary education. Understanding these gender dynamics in the transition from upper secondary education could support policies targeting equity in access to education educational performance, as well as the pathways through education.

### **Differences in girls' and boys' upper secondary pathways and performance may influence their transition into tertiary education**

Upper secondary education is a decisive period in young students' educational paths and plays an important role in their choices after they complete their schooling. It also offers a starting point for understanding the interplay of factors affecting students' transition into tertiary education.

On average, OECD countries achieve near gender parity among those graduating from upper secondary education: in 2018, 51% were women. However, there are wide differences among countries, with the share of female upper secondary graduates ranging from 47% in Hungary to more than 55% in Finland and New Zealand. This narrow gap widens for tertiary education, where women represent 54% of new entrants to the level. This rise in the share of women is observed in the vast majority of OECD countries. Even in the 12 OECD countries where women made up less than half of upper secondary graduates, they accounted for more than half of first-time entrants into tertiary education. Among OECD countries, the greatest increase in the representation of women is observed in the Czech Republic, Iceland and Sweden, where the share of women rose by at least 8 percentage points between the two levels. There were only three countries where the share of women fell when comparing upper secondary graduates and first-time tertiary entrants: Colombia, Finland and Mexico (Figure 1).

Differences in girls' and boys' upper secondary education history may account for some of this trend. First, even though gender parity is achieved among upper secondary graduates on average, there are important differences in programme orientation. On average across OECD countries, 46% of upper secondary vocational graduates are women compared to 55% of general graduates (OECD, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>). Programme orientation may determine the educational pathways open to students after graduation. Three out of ten upper secondary vocational students in OECD countries are enrolled in programmes which do not provide direct access to tertiary education (OECD, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>). Even among those participating in programmes that do offer access, they are less likely to do so than their peers in general programmes. This affects the increase in the share of women between upper secondary first-time graduates and new entrants to tertiary education, particularly in countries where programme orientation is strongly influenced by gender. For example, the countries where the share of women increases the most between these two groups are also those where the percentage of women in upper secondary general programmes is at least 10 percentage points higher than in vocational programmes.

Second, while the numbers of students graduating give an indication of the ability of education systems to prepare them to meet the minimum requirements to succeed in the labour market, they do not capture the quality of their educational outcomes. Lower educational performance may deter students from pursuing a higher level of education. Students' performance can also influence their programme orientation at upper secondary level, which in turn determines the educational pathways available to them. The results from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA) show that 15-year-old girls consistently outperform boys in reading in all countries. In some countries, the

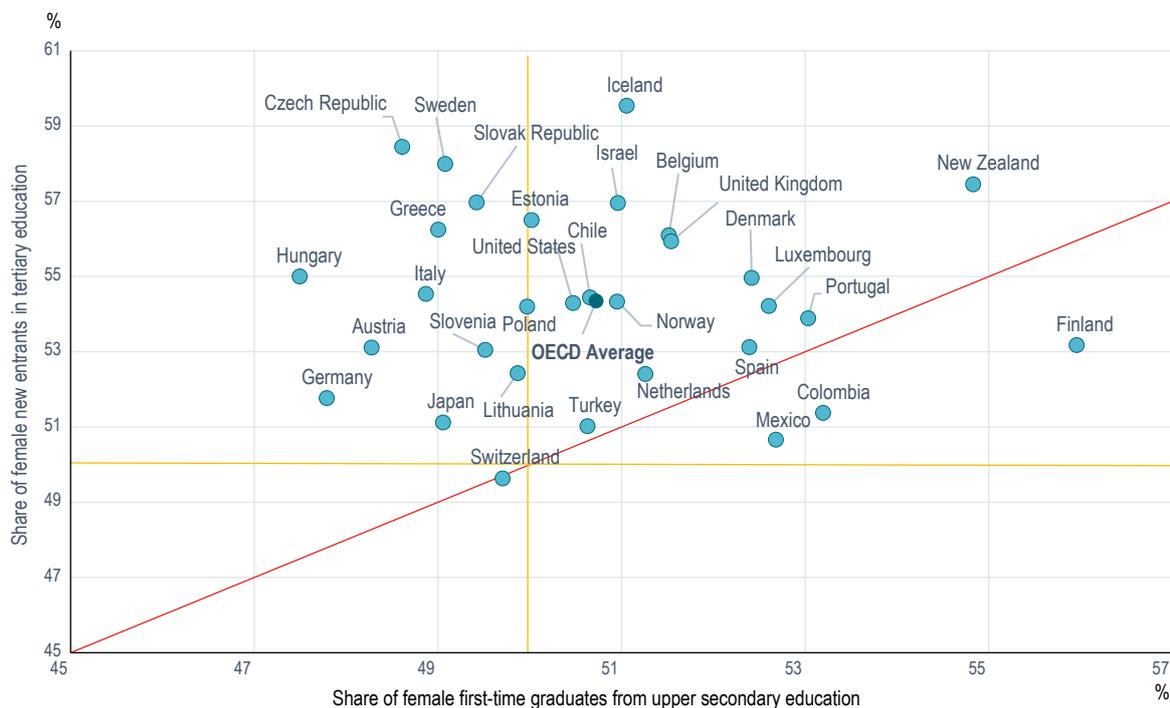
differences are particularly high. For example, in Greece, Finland, Iceland, Israel, Norway and Slovenia, girls outperformed boys in reading by at least 40 points (OECD, 2019<sup>[2]</sup>). As a result, girls are more likely to complete upper secondary education than boys, in both vocational and general programmes (OECD, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>). They also have a higher likelihood of being admitted to tertiary education in countries with selective admission processes (OECD, 2019<sup>[3]</sup>).

## A greater variety of tertiary programmes and societal values may also encourage women to choose tertiary education

The growing number of different university courses offered and changes in the degree requirements of jobs may also explain the rise of women in tertiary education. For example, women are far more likely than men to study subjects relating to education, health and welfare. When a tertiary degree became a requirement to train as a nurse in many OECD countries, instead of a vocational qualification, it naturally brought more women into tertiary education. In 2018, almost three out of four new entrants to tertiary health and welfare programmes were women on average across OECD countries.

Finally, social attitudes to the expansion of women in tertiary education and the changing status of tertiary-educated women in society and the workplace have also influenced the rise of women in higher education. Countries where citizens highly value a university education for girls are also more likely to have greater enrolment of women among tertiary students. Indeed, in Mexico, the lower share of women among tertiary entrants compared to upper secondary graduates is attributed, among other factors, to the lower social value of university for women than for men (Stoet and Geary, 2020<sup>[3]</sup>).

**Figure 1. Share of women among first-time upper secondary graduates and new tertiary entrants (2018)**



Source: OECD (2020<sup>[1]</sup>), *Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>.

## Young women have more to gain in the labour market from a tertiary degree than men

Career prospects are also expected to influence students' decisions to pursue higher education. Across OECD and partner countries, a tertiary degree significantly reduces the risk of unemployment compared to an upper secondary education for most 25-34 year-olds, but women benefit more than men. Young

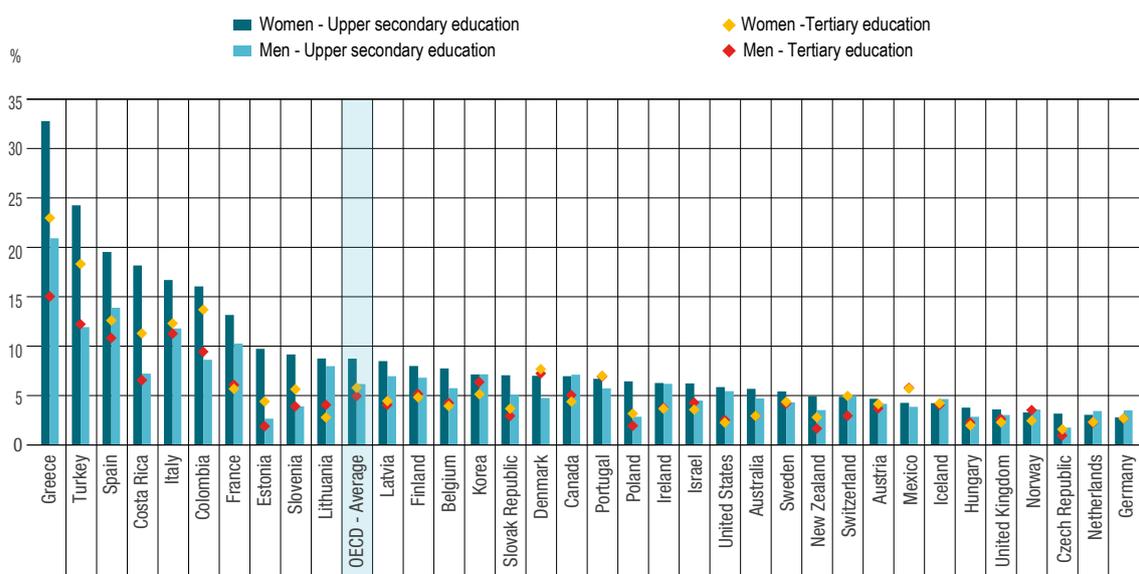
women's unemployment rates fall from 9% among those with upper secondary education to 6% among those with a tertiary education. In contrast, the rates for young men fall from 6% to 5% (Figure 2).

The greater benefit of a tertiary degree for women is mostly due to the significantly higher unemployment rates for women with upper secondary education compared to men. On average across OECD countries, the unemployment rate for young women with upper secondary education is 1.4 times higher than for similarly educated young men. In countries such as Costa Rica, Estonia, Poland, Slovenia and Turkey, women with an upper secondary education are at least twice as likely to be unemployed than their male peers. Even in Denmark, Mexico and Portugal, where both tertiary-educated men and women have higher unemployment rates than those with an upper secondary education, men with upper secondary education have consistently lower unemployment rates than similarly educated women (Figure 2).

In the majority of countries with available data, a tertiary degree reduces the unemployment rate for young women by at least one-third compared to those with an upper secondary qualification. The positive impact of tertiary education on women's unemployment rates is especially high in Estonia, France, Lithuania, Poland and the United States, where the unemployment rate among women with a tertiary qualification is less than half the rate for those with an upper secondary qualification. In contrast, only in the United States and New Zealand does a tertiary degree reduce young men's unemployment rates to such an extent (Figure 2).

Similarly, the earnings advantage from a tertiary degree is larger for young women than for men. On average across OECD countries, 25-34 year-old tertiary-educated women earn 52% more than those with an upper secondary education do. In contrast, the earnings premium for a tertiary degree among young men is 39%. The gender earnings gap among young adults also tends to narrow with higher levels of educational attainment: on average across OECD countries, young women with an upper secondary education earn 80% of what their male peers earn, but this rises to 83% among those with a tertiary degree. However, in the higher age groups, women's earnings tend to decrease compared to men's as their attainment rises. Among 35-44 year-olds, women earn 77% of what men earn regardless of educational attainment. In about two-thirds of OECD countries, the relative earnings for tertiary-educated women in this age group compared to their male peers is lower than for women with upper secondary education.

Figure 2. Unemployment rate of 25-34 year-old adults, by educational attainment and gender (2018)



Countries are ranked in descending order of women's unemployment rate (upper secondary education).

Source: OECD (2020<sub>[1]</sub>) Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators, <https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>.



## The bottom line

Understanding the gender dynamics in educational transitions can help target policies to support equitable access to education as well as its quality and labour-market outcomes. In almost all OECD countries, the gender gap in favour of women is wider in tertiary education than at upper secondary level. Differences in programme orientation and girls' educational performance at school may give them greater access to tertiary education than boys. Changes in the courses on offer in higher education, and the social value of a university education for young women may also influence their choices. In addition, young women tend to gain more from a tertiary degree in the labour market than their male peers, both in terms of employment and earnings, which may make pursuing higher education more attractive.

### REFERENCES :

- [1] OECD (2020), *Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>.
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### CONTACT :

Hajar Sabrina Yassine ([hajarsabrina.yassine@oecd.org](mailto:hajarsabrina.yassine@oecd.org))  
Marie-Helene Doumet ([marie-helene.doumet@oecd.org](mailto:marie-helene.doumet@oecd.org))

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