

Gender divisions in youth transitions – a matter of choice or something to be tackled?



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The first steps young people take into the labour market matter. In our new report for the Trades Union Congress (TUC) – **The Gender Jobs Split** – we investigate how young men and women experience these first steps differently.

A key finding of our report is the persistence of significant gender divisions in the occupations of young men and women, with young men, for example, dominating manual and skilled trades, and young women dominating jobs in personal services and sales. Why does this division matter? Should policymakers take steps to address it?

Are young men and women making informed choices?

The gender divisions are stark, particularly at the lower skilled (and lower paid) end of the labour market. These divisions have significant implications for young women who tend to work in occupations with lower pay and fewer prospects. But if young men want to be mechanics and young women want to be hairdressers should policymakers seek to challenge this? Some of the gendered variation in the youth labour market will, after all, merely reflect the choices that young people themselves make about the careers they wish to pursue.

Are young people provided with the resources to make informed decisions? And to what extent are young men and women able to pursue pathways into work that break with traditional stereotypes? Young people are expected to make difficult choices at an early age that have a considerable influence on their labour market futures. These choices will inevitably be shaped by friends and family, the level of exposure to different workplaces, and the quality of careers advice and guidance.

Yet studies of careers advice and work experience have highlighted missed opportunities to expose young people to a broader range of career options and challenge stereotypical views about different occupational choices. Instead, they have been found to reflect and reinforce gender-stereotypical patterns of occupational segmentation. Even when young men and women have been interested in sampling non-traditional work experience, they are often not encouraged or helped to follow these alternative paths.

Moreover, if young people had a better understanding about the returns (or costs) associated with pursuing particular pathways into the labour market, it seems reasonable to suggest that gender divisions would not be so stark. Careers advice available for young people in school has never been strong, and, following the government's decision to transfer responsibility for careers guidance to individual schools, has **further deteriorated** in recent years.

A skills mismatch?

Whilst tackling inequalities should be an important stand-alone objective for government, there are wider implications of having a labour market seemingly governed by gender divisions. Skills gaps in the UK economy are well documented. Limiting the supply of labour to one sex might be one of the factors exacerbating these – as in many cases the industries reporting them are dominated by either young men or women. For example, there is a **shocking absence of women in many** **STEM**-

related subjects and careers and very few young men are choosing to work in a growing care sector. Worryingly, both young men and women are increasingly entering elementary (unskilled) work such as cleaning and shelf stacking, further adding to this skills mismatch and dampening the UK's economic prospects as we move to recovery.

What needs to be done?

Young men and women must be able to make genuine informed decisions about their route into the labour market. The current careers advice and guidance on offer is woefully inadequate – immediate improvement is critical. We call for renewed efforts on the Women and Work Commission's call for "systemic change in the way education is delivered in order to reduce stereotypical choices," greater investment in and support for work experience, taster days, and other opportunities for young people to learn about a range of careers. In addition, young people need clear and accurate information about the opportunities and returns (or costs) resulting from different qualifications and employment pathways.

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