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Lack of college shouldn't keep women down

Dawn Turner Trice
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At some point during my senior year of high school, an older relative reminded me that my family couldn't afford to send me to college, so I should plan to find a job at a downtown department store after graduation. This relative wasn't trying to be discouraging, just practical.

I didn't take the advice, but I'm sure that's why I have a bias toward kids going to college. In my heart, I believe it's a must. But I know the reality is that not everybody will make it to college.

The reality also is that it's not the only way to make a decent living.

I thought about this when I heard about Sharon Mastracci's new book, "Breaking Out of the Pink-Collar Ghetto: Policy Solutions for Non-College Women."

Mastracci, an assistant professor of public administration at the University of Illinois at Chicago, looks at how women who don't have college degrees, compared with men who don't, often become rooted in low-paying jobs that don't offer many transferable skills.

Mastracci's examples include jobs for women in cashiering, waitressing, clerical work and some nurse's aide positions. She calls these fields the pink-collar ghetto because women become entrenched, and find themselves walled in, with limited mobility.

By contrast, men who don't have college degrees--and can find employment--have more opportunities to get higher-paying jobs as truck drivers, carpenters, plumbers and construction workers.

These types of jobs involve apprenticeships and extensive job training. Men learn skills that are transferable so if they have to reside in a job ghetto for a while, they can move on up and out much faster than their female counterparts.

Mastracci is suggesting that women who don't have college degrees change collars, from pink to blue, and more aggressively pursue jobs that were once the domain of men. She suggests women do this mainly because of the opportunities to make a better living wage.

"The pay disparity has to do with head-to-head discrimination where women are paid less even 30 years

after the Equal Pay Act," she told me. "But a lot has to do with women and men being concentrated in different types of jobs."

Women and men often end up in certain jobs because they are steered that way. The steering isn't necessarily overt. Mastracci says sexual socialization starts early when boys and girls begin to see themselves in certain roles. And when women think that only certain jobs are open to them, that further limits their choices.

Mastracci's study looks at non-profit organizations around the country that are trying to encourage women who don't have degrees to pursue non-traditional jobs. It's tough because high-stakes standardized testing, among other things, has shifted the educational focus and funding away from vocational training.

Still, one-stop job centers use public service announcements explaining that if you can follow a recipe, you can determine proportions and measurements on a construction site. If you can follow a dress pattern, you can learn to read blueprints.

The challenge is to get women thinking differently about the range of jobs they can perform. The challenge also is to prepare them.

Mastracci said Chicago Women in Trades is just one group that has been working to open doors for women in the skilled trade professions. The 20-year-old organization has teamed up with groups in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Ohio to pool resources.

After welfare reform, many employers hired and trained women during the 1990s, when the economy was flush and demand high for workers. But Mastracci says these days few government grants are available for training programs and few companies are hiring.

That high schools put a strong emphasis on curriculum for the college-bound is not a bad thing. Young people need to learn the three R's even if they don't make it to college. The problem is that such an emphasis has sapped the juice from vocational programs.

If you're a young woman who has an opportunity to go to college, that's fantastic. But if you don't, then there's nothing wrong with becoming a plumber, an electrician or a welder.

There may be a traditional track for young women. But the point is to make a decent living, and we can't lose track of that.

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