

Men are leaving occupations increasingly taken up by women, finds study

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Many women and men still work in sex-typed occupations. One important reason for this is that men are selectively leaving occupations that are increasingly taken up by women, a recent study from the University of Zurich has shown. This could explain swings in the sex compositions of jobs and why some specializations within occupations become female or male-dominated.

Despite progress toward gender equality in recent decades, most [women](#) and men still work in different occupations. For example, many care jobs are held by women while blue-collar jobs are dominated by men. This sex segregation has previously been linked to three factors. First, men have advantages in accessing higher status jobs. Second, stereotypes about men's and women's abilities and preferences guide occupational choices, e.g., men work in jobs that require [math skills](#) or [physical strength](#), while women prefer roles that require social skills or creativity. Finally, the stereotypical division of labor in heterosexual couples often results in women working in jobs that are compatible with family life, e.g., through part-time work.

However, the sex composition of many occupations cannot be explained fully by these factors. Additionally, in recent decades occupations such as primary school teachers and pharmacists have shifted from male to female-dominated, even though the corresponding skill profiles or work conditions have not changed substantially. Furthermore, sex-typed specializations within occupations cannot be accounted for by these factors. For example, radiologists are more likely to be men, while dermatologists tend to be women. To explain these inconsistencies, a theory developed by gender scholars suggests that men selectively leave occupations and specializations when the number of women in these

jobs increases.

New empirical approaches from network research

Per Block, professor of sociology at the University of Zurich, tested this theory using new methods originating in network science. In his study, the labor market is understood as a mobility network in which employees link different occupations by changing jobs. This enabled the researcher to analyze whether men selectively leave occupations that are increasingly feminizing.

The analysis accounted for the occupational characteristics that channel to women and men into different occupations and careers. The study used data from Great Britain, a country that shares important [labor market](#) characteristics with both the U.S. and mainland Europe.

Are men leaving feminizing jobs?

The findings clearly show that men are less likely to remain in jobs when a higher proportion of women enter the occupation. "For example, when comparing two hypothetical occupations that are identical in all occupational characteristics and only differ in the share of female inflow (25% vs. 75%), the analysis shows that men are twice as likely to leave the feminizing occupation," says Professor Block.

The consequences of this behavior are explored through a simulation study in which women and men pay no attention to the sex composition in their occupation or its changes, when deciding to stay or leave a job. According to this simulation, if job movements only depended on occupational characteristics (such as wage, work-hours, and skill use), sex segregation in occupations would decrease by 19% to 28%.

Origins of stereotypical job profiles

These findings suggest that sex segregation is not only caused by sex-typed occupational attributes but also by men (and women) consciously or unconsciously avoiding to work in mixed-gender occupations. Perceived occupational characteristics might, therefore, also be a consequence rather than only a cause of sex-typed occupations.

"Nurse as an occupation tends to be described with stereotypically female attributes, such as social and caring. If the majority of nurses were men, we might use entirely different words to describe the [occupation](#), for example, requiring authority or being physically demanding," Per Block suggests.

The paper is published in the journal *Social Networks*.

More information: Per Block, Understanding the self-organization of occupational sex segregation with mobility networks, *Social Networks* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socnet.2022.12.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2022.12.004)

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