Instead of Work, Younger Women Head to School

By CATHERINE RAMPELL

Workers are dropping out of the labor force in droves, and they are mostly women. In fact, many are young women. But they are not dropping out forever; instead, these young women seem to be postponing their working lives to get more education. There are now — for the first time in three decades — more young women in school than in the work force.

“I was working part-time at Starbucks for a year and a half,” said Laura Baker, 24, who started a master’s program in strategic communications this fall at the University of Denver. “I wasn’t willing to just stay there. I had to do something.”

Many economists initially thought that the shrinking labor force — which drove down November’s unemployment rate — was caused primarily by discouraged older workers giving up on the job market. Instead, many of the workers on the sidelines are young people upgrading their skills, which could portend something like the postwar economic boom, when millions of World War II veterans went to college through the G.I. Bill instead of immediately entering, and overwhelming, the job market.

Now, as was the case then, one sex is the primary beneficiary. Though young women in their late teens and early 20’s view today’s economic lull as an opportunity to upgrade their skills, their male counterparts are more likely to take whatever job they can find. The longer-term consequences, economists say, are that the next generation of women may have a significant advantage over their male counterparts, whose career options are already becoming constrained.
For now at least, many young women still feel that the deck is stacked against them.

“Almost everyone in my program is female,” said Ms. Baker, who hopes a master’s degree will help her get a job running communications at a nonprofit group. “That’s partly because of the program, but also because as women we feel like we have to be more educated to be able to compete in really any field.”

Women still earn significantly less than men. And in the two and a half years since the recovery officially began, men age 16 to 24 have gained 178,000 jobs, while their female counterparts have lost 255,000 positions, according to the Labor Department.

Apparently discouraged by scant openings, 412,000 young women have dropped out of the labor force entirely in the last two and a half years, meaning they are not looking for work.

Among young men, the labor force fell during the recession but has been flat since the recovery began. Today, across all age groups, an unemployed female worker is 35 percent more likely to drop out of the labor force in the next month than an unemployed male worker.

Some studies suggest that women are pickier about their job choices than men. Already earning lower pay, women are less willing to work when wages fall further, especially if they are able to rely on an employed (and these days, often newly re-employed) husband. Women are also more reluctant to work night or weekend shifts, according to government data on how Americans spend their time, partly because they have more family responsibilities.

“The jobs out there just aren’t very good, and men seem more willing to take them for whatever reason,” said Jonathan L. Willis, an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. “The women are looking at those same jobs and saying, ‘I’ll be more productive elsewhere.’ ”

Then there are societal influences that affect a person’s willingness to take a lesser job or return to school.

“There is still this heavy cultural message that men should be out there earning money and supporting themselves, and they feel more distressed by losing their breadwinner role,” said Stephanie Coontz, director of research at the Council on Contemporary Families. “We’ve made much more progress overcoming the ‘feminine mystique’ than this masculine mystique.”
While these roles evolve, community colleges are reporting record enrollment.

Both men and women are going back to school, but the growth in enrollment is significantly larger for women (who dominated college campuses even before the financial crisis). In the last two years, the number of women ages 18 to 24 in school rose by 130,000, compared with a gain of 53,000 for young men.

The education gap aside, in some ways young women will already have an advantage over men in the coming decade. Many of the occupations expected to have the most growth, like home health aides and dental hygienists, have traditionally been filled by women. That is not to say that men cannot take those positions, but they may not want to.

“Today young girls are told they can do anything, go into any occupation. But if boys express any interest in traditionally female occupations, they get teased and bullied,” Ms. Coontz said. “Lots of guys are not understanding what’s happening to traditional low-income or middle-income male jobs.”

Jobs in the male-dominated manufacturing industry and in other sectors involving manual labor have been, and still are, in structural decline. These careers can also be hard to maintain indefinitely because youthful strength eventually fades. And now many manufacturing workers do not have pensions to carry them through when their bodies do break down.

“It doesn’t surprise me that in a poor economy women are ramping up their schooling,” said Heather Boushey, an economist at the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning research organization. “The real question is: Why aren’t more men doing that too?”

The main risk in going back to school is the accompanying student loan debt. Tuition increases have been outpacing inflation for years, a trend accelerated by state budget cuts.

“Our funding per student has been cut 25 percent in the last three years,” said Stephen Scott, the president of Wake Technical Community College in Raleigh, N.C., which is one of the fastest-growing community colleges in the country. Consequently, class sizes have risen, and so has tuition. But the students — again, mostly women — still pour in.

“We now have 6,000 students on a waiting list because we didn’t have the resources to offer
more classes,” he said.

Those attending more expensive private schools, like Ms. Baker, will have an even tougher time guaranteeing that their educational investment pays off. Including the loans that financed her undergraduate education at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, she will complete her master’s program next year owing about $200,000 in debt.

“I have to have faith that I will eventually get a good job that pays enough to pay my living expenses and pay back my loans,” she said, “and hopefully make me happy in the process.”