

# What does the Feminisation of Labour Mean for Sustainable Livelihoods?

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## The feminisation of labour

It is only now, a decade and a half after the global acceptance by most countries of economic liberalisation and market-oriented growth as strategies of choice for development, that reports of their negative impacts are being recognised as reliable. There is now sufficient evidence that these processes, particularly in the South, have resulted in greater inequalities in income and assets between and within countries. It is difficult to arrive at general statements about the specific effects of liberalisation and market orientation on women, since these are mediated by the level of development, forms of integration into the world economy and pre-existing socio-economic inequalities in a particular country. Nevertheless, and despite country-specific variations, the phenomenon of 'feminisation of the labour force' is emerging as a common theme in discussions of the ways in which global economic changes and market-led growth have impacted on women.

The term 'feminisation of labour' is used in two ways. Firstly, it is used to refer to the rapid and substantial increase in the proportions of women in paid work over the last two decades. At the global level, about 70% in the 20–54 age group are members of the paid workforce. In developing countries as a group, the figure is lower at 60%. (United Nations, 1999). These figures do not capture women's participation in rural and urban informal sectors in developing countries which is usually less visible and therefore undercounted. However, this low

wage informal sector continues to be an important employer of poor women in developing and transition countries (Mehra and Gammaye, 1999). The trend in the feminisation of labour has been accompanied by a shift in employment from manufacturing to services in developed countries, and from agriculture to manufacturing and services in developing countries.

With the exception of Africa, women's employment has grown substantially faster than men's since 1980. With a stagnating (or slightly decreasing) male labour force participation rate, the difference between male and female participation rates have shrunk considerably in many regions (United Nations, 1999).

The term 'feminisation of labour' is also used to describe the flexibilisation of labour for women and men, a fallout of the changing nature of employment where irregular conditions once thought to be the hallmark of women's 'secondary' employment have become widespread for both sexes. Informal activities, sub-contracting, part-time work and home-based work have proliferated while rates of unionisation have declined (Standing, 1999). In the South in particular, standard labour legislation has applied to fewer workers, because governments have either not enforced it or abolished it outright, or because existing legislation is weak and enterprises have been able to circumvent and bypass it.

The deregulation of labour markets, fragmentation of production processes, de-industrialisation and emergence of new

## KEY CHALLENGES:

- Greater public sector financing of basic services is required, to mitigate the increase in women's unpaid work
- Greater international commitment is necessary to regulate commercial interests and promote regulation of labour standards, adequate working conditions and support to workers' organisations
- Women's key role in rural and urban agriculture to secure household food supply needs focused policy support
- Women require supported opportunities for public participation, in the face of increasing workloads and gender biases in the structures and processes of governance
- Longer-term consequences of the 'crisis' in masculinity need to be explored and more attention paid to forging more healthy and equitable gender relations

areas of export specialisation have all generated an increased demand for low-paid, flexible female labour. This paper focuses on women's participation in manufacturing and agricultural exports in the South, drawing out the specific policy implications of the feminisation of labour. We will then look at the broader, common issues and their implications for sustainable livelihoods.

### Why are women disadvantaged in the labour market?

- Women workers continue to be primarily responsible for reproductive and domestic work, which is perceived to be their primary function. This perception reinforces structural barriers that prevent women from accessing education, training, land and productive assets. Women's double workload also restricts their time and mobility for productive work, and limits their choices of income-earning activities.
- Women are perceived to be 'secondary' earners so that men often have priority over women in the allocation of opportunities for paid employment.
- Women do not have equal access to productive resources and services. Because they are largely dependent on self-employment for which land, capital, technology and labour are critical, lack of access constrains their productivity and reinforces the stereotype that they are inherently less productive than men.

## The feminisation of labour: Industry

Where poor countries have achieved an expansion of non-commodity exports, there has been relative growth in female-intensive sectors of industry. The lower the income level of the economy, and/or the greater the concentration of clothing production and electronics assembly in export production, the greater the employment-creating effects of trade have been for women (Fontana et al, 1998, p47).

Sub-contracting and supply links between formal sector enterprises and small workshops are widespread, indicating an even higher increase in informal jobs.

In parts of the Caribbean, Central America, south and south-east Asia, light industry export-processing zones have employed labour which is overwhelmingly young and female. There is considerable debate on the effects of pay and conditions on women's livelihoods and well-being, particularly in the longer term. Some researchers have argued that the overall effect for women is positive given the choices they face in their given contexts. They contend that earning a wage increases women's bargaining power and 'status' within their households as well as providing resources to meet household needs (eg Lim, 1990). Kabeer (2000) in her investigation of women garment workers in Bangladesh argues that women have moved from the margins of the labour market to a more central, better paid and more visible place in the economy.

Other researchers have emphasised the poor wages and working conditions, the precariousness of the work and the fact that mainly younger women without children are given these opportunities (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Pearson, 1998).

The longer-term benefits for women are even less clear. Women may stay locked in at relatively low levels of pay and skills in the export sector, becoming increasingly discriminated against as export production is diversified and/or mechanised. To take some examples, the share of women in export-processing zones has fallen off markedly in Singapore, Mexico (Fontana et al, 1988) and the Dominican Republic (CIPAF, 2000).

### The Philippine garment industry

The establishment of industries in the countryside has opened employment opportunities to many educated young women and men. Employers, however, prefer young women, often because of gendered notions of docility, nimbleness and flexibility. The new jobs come at a cost. Foreign investment has been attracted by the state on several premises: tax breaks, cheap labour and protection from labour organising. While it is true that more factories in industrial estates or export-processing zones pay the legislated minimum wage than those outside, wages are kept low. Moreover, job security is non-existent and women lose their jobs when they get pregnant. On the job, women have been vulnerable to sexual advances of foreign employers who think that local women are 'easy' or need the job too much to refuse them.

Source: Jeanne Illo, 2001, pp 3-4

Advocacy efforts to reduce discrimination against women in labour markets and to improve wages and working conditions in export activities have to tread a fine line. There are definite risks in taking local action to demand compliance with labour standards and codes of conduct, since countries which are shown up as non-compliers risk penalties. If the most negative aspects are stressed, then there may be unanticipated losses for the poorest countries and advantages for countries better able to meet higher standards. In many cases, workers' organisations themselves may oppose efforts to implement strict codes.

The international adoption of labour standards, enforced through official machinery, will not have any impact on the informal sector, where women are predominant. Without complementary measures, the divisions between protected and unprotected workers could increase. Support needs to be given to working women's organisations which cover formal and informal sector workers, to improve their access to information on labour rights and to strengthen their ability to take collective action. SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association of Ahmedabad, India is a notable example of an organisation which uses such a strategy.

### **The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, India**

SEWA was founded in 1971 and registered in 1972 as a trade union movement for women in the informal sector. A few thousand women subsequently established the SEWA bank as a co-operative to provide poor self-employed women with access to credit and financial services and to reduce their dependence on exploitative money-lenders.

SEWA has strategically used the collective bargaining tools which have characterised many trade union movements. However, in areas where there are few prospects for employment, traditional unionising techniques do not work. In such situations, SEWA has worked at the grass-roots levels to form village organisations. SEWA helps women to run their own organisations, form co-operatives and bargain collectively in the market-place.

Perhaps more important than only access to credit, SEWA has concentrated on empowering women to use their resources more effectively. In the villages of Gujarat, and in the city markets of Ahmedabad (where SEWA has its headquarters), women are speaking out more, taking leadership roles, and realising how far they can go when they have collective bargaining power for wages, better working conditions, combating domestic violence, or improving education and family health.

**Source:** Adapted from SEWA Homepage  
<http://www.gdrc.org/icm/sewa.html>

### **Women's role in horticulture: Chile and South Africa**

In Chile and South Africa, employment in fruit export production is contracted on a wage labour system by commercial farms (rather than plantations or small holders which can be found elsewhere). In Chile this tends to be off-farm while in South Africa, it continues to be on-farm black labour. As household subsistence has increasingly depended on market purchase, women's wages have become an important element in household survival. However, the insertion of women into paid employment has only been partial, possibly limiting change to underlying gender relations. During the season, women largely continue to take responsibility for domestic work and childcare adding to their work burden and are less likely than men to find out-of-season employment than men. Out of season, they return to a primarily reproductive role within the home.

**Source:** Barrientos, 1999

In parts of Asia and Central America, there has been a huge expansion in aquaculture since the mid-1980s. Large tracts of land as well as mangrove forests in coastal Asia have been taken over for shrimp farms, which export to Europe and the U.S.A. The high costs of these operations for local populations and the environment are beginning to be documented (Wichterich, 2000). While poor and landless families may gain from waged labour on shrimp farms, land for local food production has been taken away, soil salinity has increased, food crop yields have declined and the availability of cheap fish for low-income consumers has declined since these are required as aquaculture feed.

In Africa, studies of women's involvement in cash crops over decades has shown that their time for food production and preparation is negatively affected. As Wichterich (2000, p72) puts it, 'The market is occupying the most fertile land, as subsistence production moves out to the margins ... Less and less of agriculture serves to feed the local people themselves.' Inequitous gender relations and women's lack of rights to land excludes them from participation in decision-making over land and natural resource use in many parts of the world. Yet, women continue to bear the major responsibility for household food security and management of natural resources. Their perspectives although critical to planning for food security, are not reflected at the policy level.

Market liberalisation has tended to benefit larger farmers and widen inequalities between them and small, resource-poor farmers (Bryceson and Jamal, 1997). In many developing countries, the expansion of export-oriented agriculture has reduced land for food production, sometimes eroding women's traditional land use rights. Commercial farming tends to be chemical intensive with negative longer-term environmental consequences. The erosion of the natural resource base, reduction in the per capita availability of land, the increasing need for money to meet basic household needs as well as new economic opportunities have led to livelihood diversification, away from or alongside smallholder agriculture.

## **The feminisation of labour: Agriculture**

Trade liberalisation in the South has fuelled recent agricultural policies that are geared to diversification and 'non-traditional' or high-value export goods. Some African examples include horticultural products and cut flowers in Kenya and Zimbabwe, tobacco in Mozambique and vanilla cultivation in Uganda.

In 'non-traditional' horticultural exports, low-paid seasonal female employment has had a crucial role in production in many countries in the South. When compared to industry, agriculture, particularly horticulture, requires higher levels of risk and greater flexibility if a consistent global supply network for fresh produce is to be maintained. The chain is organised in such a way that risk is off-set by the more powerful players at the distribution end onto the more fragmented and heterogeneous producers operating in diverse locations to supply this fresh produce. As Barrientos (1999) argues (see box), it is flexible seasonal employment, particularly of women, which provides these producers with a buffer against risk and allows them to minimise the cost of employment within this highly seasonal sector.

Agro-industries, such as fruit and vegetable exports, are sometimes seen by policy makers to absorb dislocated labour from peasant agriculture and replace 'inefficient' peasant food production with cheaper imports (Razavi, 2000). However, both international factors and the competition in this sector, as well as household level factors including the control over wages from agro-industry, will affect household food security with direct impacts on the situation of women and children.

However, the precariousness and insecurity of many alternative livelihood sources, along with the frequently unregulated privatisation and commercialisation of critical natural resources such as land, water and forests have negative implications for household food security and poverty reduction in the longer term. The implications of a decline in women's key role in rural, and even urban, agriculture to secure household food supply have not been given adequate policy attention.

### **Women's role in household food security: Orissa, India**

In the Indian state of Orissa, forest produce is an important component of seasonal food security for tribal communities as well as the poorest sections of non-tribal communities. Tribal women collect firewood, fruits, edible flowers and leaves, roots and shoots and in times of scarcity, mango and tamarind seeds, which are the main sources of food and livelihood during at least four months of the year. The increasing commercial exploitation of these products has resulted in their declining availability for consumption. Deforestation and policy restrictions on free access to forest and forest produce have most affected tribal women, who were earlier able to tide their families over lean periods by living almost entirely on food collected from forests. Again, since marketing of the main commercial forest produce is monopolised by a few traders/companies, women are forced to sell their wares to these traders at unremunerative prices. In such a situation, practices such as short weighing, under-pricing and part payment are common and difficult for tribal women to challenge. The alternative is to sell their products clandestinely to middlemen and become victims of further exploitation.

The Public Distribution System for food has been unable to deal with this crisis. Fair price shops are inadequate in number and unevenly distributed and the commodities available do not match local dietary habits. First, none of the indigenous products that are regularly consumed are available in these shops. Orissa is a predominantly rice-eating area, the allocation of rice is only 13 kg per household, which is far short of the need. On the other hand, the allocation of wheat, which is consumed only in urban areas, is 20 kg per household. Consumers have to buy their quota of rations in one go, but as most poor women cannot put together the amount of money required, their entitlement is sold off to others.

Source: UNDP India, 1999

women and female-headed households tend to be disproportionately represented among the world's poor. However, the feminisation of poverty is not only a phenomenon of increasing numbers, but can be used to illustrate the links between the social and economic subordination of women (Menon-Sen, 2001).

The increase in women's employment does not necessarily lead to poverty reduction and increases in household welfare.

In other words, the fact of women's entry into waged labour is not enough to draw conclusions about the impact on poverty nor does it tell us about the changes in women's economic, social and political position in relation to men. These depend not only on the quantum of women's earnings, but the degree to which women control their own income and the manner in which it is spent.

It is now more widely accepted that household organisation and gender relations are critical variables in livelihood systems. One aspect of this is the recognition that women's control of the income they generate is highly variable. In parts of the world, women have almost total control over their own income (for example, in parts of West Africa). In others, their income is handed over to men or to older women (parts of South Asia). The relationship between women's income and their bargaining power is complex, changing and mediated by processes outside as well as inside the household.

There is a considerable body of research that indicates that women and men have different spending priorities (Bruce, 1989; Kanji 1995, Narayan, 2000). Women tend to emphasise food and basic goods for household consumption, while men tend to prioritise items for personal use or investment, rather than household maintenance. In contexts where men hold the purse strings and do not necessarily prioritise basic household needs, this has resulted in deterioration in children's nutritional status (Evans, 1997). A multi-country study found that the resources (cash and food produce) under the mother's (rather than the father's) control constitute the most important factor in determining the nutritional status of children in low-income households (Blumberg, 1991).

### **Policy concerns**

The consequences of liberalisation and women's increased participation in the waged labour force, in terms of gender equality and the material conditions of women's lives, have remained largely invisible to policy makers.

### **An increase in 'women's' work**

Firstly, women's increased involvement in paid work has not significantly reduced poor women's share of unpaid work in caring for households. Women's gender-ascribed 'caring' roles, the costs of raising children, the existence of social support structures which women can depend on and mechanisms to protect vulnerable groups all affect the extent to which women can enter and participate in the labour market. Along with decreased social provisioning by the state, liberalisation and privatisation have shifted the costs of social reproduction from the paid to the unpaid economy, with evidence of negative consequences for women's health and well being and for household welfare

## **Implications for sustainable livelihoods**

### **The feminisation of poverty**

The 'feminisation of poverty' is another term frequently used in discussions on the effects of changes in global economic policies on women. The concept of the 'feminisation of poverty' in its initial usage was a relatively simple one – that

in successive generations (Elson, 1995; Kanji; 1995; Moser, 1996). When women work for meagre incomes, girls may be taken out of school to help with household work, decreasing their opportunity to acquire marketable skills and increasing their chances of being poor in the future.

### **‘Adjusting to adjustment’ in Delhi, India**

A study of working class households in Delhi revealed how they were ‘adjusting to adjustment’. Most of the households covered in the study were dependent on the labour market for survival, with very few assets and resources to fall back on. Working class households were also dependent on employers and kin networks for loans.

The majority of households had reduced consumption levels to cope with price rises. These ranged from cuts in food to cuts in leisure and non-essentials. However, it is significant that more than a fifth of the households studied were already at minimum consumption levels. In most cases, households became food insecure if even one member is withdrawn from the labour market. Other adjustments included buying and cooking food in bulk and buying cheaper unprocessed food for processing at home. These adjustments led to an increase in women’s work load. Other adjustments like eating less, eating fewer meals and cutting down on fruits and animal products, were compromising the health of women and children.

Families had restructured their everyday lives in order to cut down on expenditure, by reducing spending on clothes, leisure, travel and deferring big purchases. These adjustments also had implications for working women, in terms of reducing their mobility, socialising and opportunities to organise.

While there had been no formal cuts on public spending on health, women’s access to health services was being limited. Medicine is no longer free in public hospitals and fewer workers are covered under the provisions of the Employees State Insurance health services.

Households had resorted to cuts in educational expenses. Many families had taken children out of school, or had moved them to government schools from private schools. Families had taken loans to meet school expenses.

**Source:** Chhachhi et al, 1997

However, women’s increased labour market participation has not necessarily made it easier to participate in public life. Even when women are formally employed, there are restrictions on workers’ organisations which did not exist in the past. Perhaps just as important, increased material poverty makes it difficult for more marginalised groups to take up opportunities for participation even at a local level. Large numbers of women are still excluded from opportunities for public participation, in the face of increasing workloads as well as gender biases that exist in the structures and processes for participation.

### **A crisis in masculinity?**

In an increasing number of contexts across the globe, men have reacted to the increased dependence on women’s earnings and the resultant blurring of their gender-ascribed ‘breadwinner’ roles with increased levels of depression and suicide, violence and abandonment of their families. In richer countries, the declining achievement of boys at school has become a public policy concern, as has male violence, alcohol and drug abuse. In poorer countries, there is not enough research into these problems or public resources to address them. In many contexts, there is a likelihood of a backlash in the form of demands to curtail women’s entry into the workforce. The longer-term consequences of this ‘crisis in masculinity’ and the implications for women’s situations, as well as for more healthy and equitable gender relations in the future are largely unexplored questions.

### **What action can be taken?**

The language of gender equality and women’s rights is today visible even in ‘hard’ sectors such as economic policy. However, if this rhetoric is to be translated into reality, current debates about economic liberalisation and the restructuring of production processes have to integrate gender analyses and women’s perspectives.

A critical aspect of this gendered approach would involve recognition of the role of the ‘care’ economy and women’s roles in unpaid work at the household and community levels. Given the intensification of women’s work as well as the changes in men’s roles, there is a strong case for investing greater public resources in supporting women’s unpaid work. Investments to enable access to affordable food (for example through public distribution systems), setting up childcare facilities and ensuring the availability of water fuel and fodder at the local level can not only enable women to access paid work, but can have a multiplier effect in terms of enabling children, particularly girls, to go to school.

Equitable and sustainable policies require a better understanding of the links between women’s household survival strategies, livelihoods and larger scale economic, social, environmental and political processes. Policy formulation in key sectors such as agriculture, trade, health and education need to be better integrated. Household level food security and local livelihood systems should be given priority in agricultural policy making, with resources being directed to supporting traditional subsistence agriculture. Ensuring women’s access to land, the primary productive

### **Women’s participation in decision-making**

In many contexts, economic and political liberalisation is taking place simultaneously and new opportunities are provided to previously excluded groups to participate in political and policy-making bodies. The global diffusion of information and communication technology, although uneven, has created new possibilities for networking, advocacy and lobbying for interest groups in civil society all over the world.

resource for most poor women, is a critical policy requirement. Policy-makers also need to recognise that the natural resources that underpin local livelihoods cannot be sacrificed to commercial interests. Protecting the traditional rights of access of communities to common property resources is an urgent priority.

Greater international commitment is necessary to promote public regulation of labour standards, adequate working conditions and support to workers' organisations. A key policy challenge is how to prevent individual countries from competing on the basis of cheap labour and lax labour standards. However, labour laws cannot be seen in isolation and the links between economic, social and environmental policy have to be better understood.

Finally, it is not enough to advocate for a larger share of the market for women and more equal access for women and men to the opportunities brought about by global economic liberalisation and integration. The issues highlighted here indicate the need for a more transformative agenda and a more radical rethinking of current priorities. Women's organisations and NGOs in both the south and the north have been advocating and demonstrating viable alternative approaches. These initiatives need to be explored further to derive policy lessons and ensure that secure and sustainable livelihoods for less powerful groups, both women and men, who are in the majority, become a more central concern, along with the public regulation of the power and profits of the few. ●

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