

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

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**Feminisation of labour describes 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. In general, increasing numbers of women have been incorporated into paid employment under conditions inferior to men.**

It is now more widely recognised that the promotion of economic liberalisation and market-oriented growth, particularly in the South, have resulted in greater inequalities in income and assets between and within countries. The ‘feminisation of the labour force’ and the ‘feminisation of poverty’ are terms which have been used to describe the ways in which global economic changes and market-led growth have impacted on women. However, it is difficult to generalise about gender-specific effects since much depends on a country’s level of development, forms of integration into the world economy, socio-economic structures and dominant culture.

Feminisation of the labour force refers to the rapid and substantial increase in the proportions of women in paid employment over the last two decades. The deregulation of labour markets, fragmentation of production processes, de-industrialisation and new areas of export specialisation have all generated an increased demand for low-paid, flexible female labour. 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. In ‘non-traditional’ horticultural exports, low-paid seasonal female employment has a crucial role in production in many countries in the south. Support to micro-enterprise development for both urban and rural

women has expanded enormously since the 1970s. Furthermore, informal activities, sub-contracting, part-time work and home-based work have proliferated while rates of unionisation have declined. In the South, in particular, standard labour legislation has applied to fewer workers, because governments have not enforced or abolished it, or because enterprises have circumvented and bypassed legislation.

## The feminisation of poverty

The concept of the ‘feminisation of poverty’ in its initial usage was a simple one: that 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 has been used to illustrate the links between the social and economic subordination of women. Increasing employment and household income does not necessarily lead to poverty reduction and increases in household welfare. It depends on who controls the income and what it is used for. We know that expenditure patterns *tend* to be gender-specific with women emphasising food and basic goods for household consumption, and men tending to exercise greater rights to personal spending and also prioritising items for investment. Since the control of household income is highly variable according to socio-cultural context, poverty

## KEY CHALLENGES:

- Greater public financing of basic services is required, to mitigate the intensification of poor women’s unpaid work brought about by liberalisation and privatisation
- Longer-term consequences of the ‘crisis in masculinity’ need to be explored, including whether more healthy and equitable gender relations can be forged
- Greater international commitment is necessary to regulate commercial interests and promote public regulation of labour standards, adequate working conditions and support to workers’ organisations
- A decline in women’s key role in rural, and even urban, agriculture to secure household food supply needs more policy attention
- Women require supported opportunities for public participation, in the face of increasing workloads and gender biases in the structures and processes for participation

reduction and welfare benefits are dependent on gender relations at the household level.

A number of social and environmental consequences of liberalisation and women's increased participation in the labour force require further policy attention. There is little evidence that women's increased involvement in paid work has significantly reduced *poor* women's share of unpaid work, in caring for households. The costs of raising children, how the labour force is reproduced and maintained, how society protects vulnerable groups all relate to women's gender-ascribed 'caring' roles and affect how paid markets work. 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 considerable evidence of negative consequences for women's health and well being and for household welfare. When women work for meagre income, girls may be taken out of school to help with household work, increasing their chances of being poor in the future.

Across the globe, men have reacted to the difficulties in fulfilling 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. The longer-term consequences of this 'crisis in masculinity' and whether more healthy and equitable gender relations can be forged are largely unexplored questions.

In developing countries, market liberalisation has tended to benefit larger farmers and widen inequalities between these and small, resource-poor farmers. 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, population pressure, 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. 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.

The constraints which women face are not always addressed in the current emphasis on building the capacity of civil society organisations, as a counter to the power of the state and the private sector, and in order to broaden the participation of less powerful groups in policy processes and 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.

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.

### **What needs to be done to counter the negative effects of the feminisation of labour and promote more sustainable livelihoods?**

Firstly, current debates about globalisation have to integrate household level considerations, the intensification of women's work as well as the changes in men's roles. Greater public resources have to be invested to support the work that women do on an unpaid basis.

Secondly, household level food security and local livelihood systems should be given priority over corporate interests and profits. The natural resource base that underpins local livelihoods requires greater protection. Policies will be more equitable and sustainable if we understand the links between household level strategies, livelihoods and larger scale economic, social, environmental and political processes.

Thirdly, 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. Policy formulation in key sectors such as agriculture, trade, health and education need to be better integrated.

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. Secure and sustainable livelihoods for less powerful groups, both women and men, who are in the majority, should become a more central concern as should the public regulation of the power and profits of the few. ●