

To what extent has the labour market been feminized?

[Finance](#), [Market](#)



"Feminization" of labour refers to the rapid and substantial increase in the share of women in paid employment. The term is also used to describe the changing nature of employment, where irregular conditions that were once thought to be the hallmark of women's secondary employment have become widespread for both sexes. 1 (U. N. General Assembly, 1999, cited in Maclean, H et al (2004)) Between 1851 and 1951 there was little change in the proportion of women entering paid work.

However, in the 1950s and 1960s, economic growth created expansion in employment, an expansion met in the U. K. first by seeking Commonwealth workers and then by recruiting women. (Bilton, Bonnett, Jones etc, 2002, p. 143) Since then there has been a large increase in women's participation and the gender gap in employment rates is diminishing. While this is mainly due to the growing employment of women, it is also substantially due to the declining employment of men. Between 1984 and 1999, the proportion of women in the labour market increased from 66% to 72%.

Whereas the proportion of men who are economically active declined from 88% to 84%. 2 This essay aims to show that although women have made an impact on the labour market, it does not mean that they have completely taken it over. The Employment Secretary (1980) commented that the 1990s would be "the decade of the working woman" 3 With 46% of people in the labour market being women, this statement seems justifiable. 4 The number of women actively employed in the labour market has risen sharply. This phenomenon has occurred in almost every industrialised nation.

(Martha Darling, *The Role of Women in the Economy*, 1975)⁵ The character of the workforce has therefore transformed since many new women workers are entering the "white-collar" (Ruggie, M, 1984, p. 3) professional jobs and the service sectors. By the end of the 20th century, younger women's qualifications had increased to a similar level to men's whereas older generations of women were generally less well qualified. ⁶ As a result, there have been substantial changes in the proportion of women entering certain professions. This table shows women are the majority in administrative and secretarial (80%) and personal service jobs (84%).

Men, on the other hand were in majority in skilled trades (92%) and process, plant and machine operatives (82%). One can see that men, from this table, that men dominate the "manual" jobs -an originally male-orientated sector- and women dominate areas deemed "female" in terms of work such as secretarial and personal service. What is also interesting to note, is in the professional sector, the percentage of men and women is almost equal -men (59%), women (41%). The reasons behind why women dominate certain sectors and the increase of women into professional jobs shall be discussed in more detail in due course of this essay.

"Women have made breakthroughs into traditional male high level jobs at the same time expanding their share of already feminised lower skilled or lower paid occupations" (1998) I could not agree more with this statement. Women are entering sectors thought to be male orientated and at the same time there is an increasing amount of women entering the service sector which has therefore expanded. An expanding service sector indicates that

the character of an economy which has reached an "advanced industrial" stage is changing, and new jobs of a different sort are being generated, drawing women into the labour force. (Ruggie, M, 1984, p. 31)

Another factor that contributes to women's increasing labour force participation, as argued by Rosemary Cooney, is a high level of economic growth. She argues that the rate of growth has been found to be more important than the level of economic development in augmenting work opportunities of women. When an expanding service sector and high level of growth are combined, women are drawn into the labour force not only because of an increase in the sorts of jobs in which they specialize but also because the expansion in job opportunities is likely to outstrip the number of men available and qualified to fill them.

There is also a decrease of manufacturing jobs (male dominated) therefore a decrease of men in the workforce. An important link between all these factors - level of economic development, rate of growth, expansion of service sector, and labour force participation of women - is increasing enrolment in higher education. As mentioned before, more women are becoming qualified due to also the change in attitude for working women. Some employers may have more preference to women in some areas.

If looking at the service sector, for example, the natural caring nature of a woman is suitable for this somewhat "emotional" labour. (Dermott, E, 2005) The Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Equal Pay Act (1976) also made a contribution to the increase of women in the labour market as the marriage

bar - once a woman was married, she could no longer work - was broken. (Dermott, E, 2005). The focus of the Sex Discrimination Act is to prevent unlawful specific discriminatory practices. (Ruggie, M, 1984, p. 118). A person cannot refuse to hire a woman simply because she is women.

From this there are two kinds of discrimination: Direct and Indirect. Direct discrimination occurs when a woman is treated " less favourably" than a man is or would be treated in similar circumstances; while Indirect discrimination occurs when the proportion of women who can comply with a requirement is smaller than the proportion of men who can comply with it. For example, an employer may place a particular technical or physical qualification on a job, such as a certain weight and height requirements, when performance of the job does not require the qualifications.

(Ruggie, M, 1984, p119). However, although some advances have been made because of the two pieces of legislation, they may not go any further. This is the point argued by Mary Ruggie. Ruggie argues that the law may well " reduce prejudice by discouraging the behaviour in which prejudice finds expression" (Home Office, Equalityfor Women. (LONDON: 1975))¹⁰ However, the law alone is limited as a tool to deal effectively with the forces that produce prejudicial behaviour in the first place. Ruggie may have a point with this comment.

We have to question, for example, why nurse aides are paid at a lower rate than sanitation workers? We also now need to question how far the labour market has been feminized. This table shows women's share of higher paid

jobs is still lower and men made up the majority of employees in the five highest paid occupations. Women predominated in the lowest paid occupations. Although there have been improvements in recent years, sex stereotyping remains evident in many professional occupations. Although there are legislations preventing open discrimination, those who seek to cross gender boundaries can get ridiculed.

For example, people's sexuality could be questioned like men working in caring occupations could be labelled as " gay", while women in manual work may be called " dykes". (Charles 2002)¹⁵ " It's so hard to strike a balance - if you are seen as feminine or desirable they think you're available, and if you are not they call you a dyke. " (McDowell 1992)¹⁶ Many occupations tend to be gender based. This is known as Horizontal gender segregation. (Bilton, Bonnet and Jones etc, 2002). The separation of men and women into qualitatively different types of jobs may lead into differentiation in pay.

Certain jobs may then be labelled as " less skilled" such as nursing. In 1991, 92% of nurses and midwives were women, while 89% of police officers were men. (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1991; Office for National Statistics.)¹⁷ Vertical gender segregation refers to the separation of men and women into higher or lower grades within the same occupation. (Bilton, Bonnet, Jones etc, 2002). Although there is evidence of a decline in vertical gender segregation, women still seem to be concentrated in the lower positions and men in the higher.

It could also be argued that childcare responsibilities force women into part-time jobs therefore increasing gender segregation in certain jobs. In 1998, 83% of women who worked were working part-time¹⁸. Women, therefore, remain disadvantaged compared to men as occupational segregation means they are concentrated in lower skilled and lower paid jobs. Part-time employments are confined to certain occupations and industries and are generally low paid. The labour market to some extent has been feminized. More women are working, more women are working in professional jobs and more women with children are working.

An increase in the service sector and increase in male unemployment have contributed to this "feminisation" of labour. However, women are still being paid less than men and several forms of gender segregation and discrimination still take place along with more women dominating the lower-paid occupations and more women than men working part-time. Women, although they have climbed higher, have not reached the top. There has not been a "female takeover". It could be argued that it is not the labour market that has been feminized but "It is the men who find themselves increasingly out-earned and out-ranked by women. "