



FEMINIZATION HAS HAD ONLY A MODEST IMPACT ON REDUCING GENDER INEQUALITIES

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IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

The feminization of work

KEY DATES

From the 1960s The rise of globalization and industrialization in the developing world attracts the attention of feminist scholars of work.

1976 Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* claims that gender roles and relations are socially constructed discourses.

1986 Sylvia Walby publishes *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment*.

1995 R.W. Connell's fluid conception of gender categories as things that are flexible and open to change is articulated in *Masculinities*.

More women are entering—and **feminizing**—the workforce.

Although globalization has helped to erode **men's domination of the economy**, the **unequal gender division of labor** persists.

Significant feminization of the industrialized economy can occur only if...

...**labor demand** outstrips the capacity of the male workforce available.

...women are more available for work due to better **access to higher education and childcare**.

...the trade unions either support the access of women or are **unable to exclude them** from "male" occupations.

See also: Karl Marx 28–31 ■ Michel Foucault 52–55 ■ R.W. Connell 88–89 ■ Roland Robertson 146–49 ■ Robert Blauner 232–33 ■ Jeffrey Weeks 324–25

In recent decades, despite a big growth in the participation of women in the workforce in Southeast Asia, the gender division of labor has been redrawn rather than eliminated. US feminist and sociologist Teri Lynn Caraway studied industries in Indonesia in her book *Assembling Women: The Feminization of Global Manufacturing*. Building upon the work of Michel Foucault, she says that gender in the workplace is fluid and constantly renegotiated, and it is even influenced by the ideas of femininity and masculinity held by factory managers, who may determine machine operations that suit male or female workers.

Caraway rejects mainstream economic theory because it views individuals as rational and genderless, reflecting the male, middle-class characteristics of those who developed it. She also dismisses Marxist analyses because they prioritize social class over gender. Whereas the conventional wisdom is that employers pay women lower wages,



Female factory workers in Indonesia, like these garment workers in Sukoharjo, receive equal wages with men. According to Caraway's research, this is not the case in East Asia.

which has led to more women entering the global workforce, Caraway claims that this underestimates the power of gender in labor markets. Instead, ideas and practices about men and women providing distinct forms of labor—what she terms “gendered discourses”—play a key role in the feminization process.

Conditions for feminization

Caraway says three conditions are necessary for the feminization of industrial labor to occur. First, when demand for labor exceeds supply (for example, when there are insufficient male workers), industry turns to women. Second, only when family planning and mass education are available can women enter the workforce. And third, work for women becomes possible when barriers such as trade unions—which protect male-dominated workplaces from being undermined by cheap female labor—are no longer effective. In Indonesia, this happened when the state weakened Islamist organizations and trade unions, both of which are potential opponents of female labor.

Caraway notes the general assumption that some employers pay more to men because they perceive their work to be superior, while others consider women to be unreliable in the long-term (due to motherhood or marriage). In fact, Caraway argues, both are examples of complex “gendered cost benefit analysis”; how female workers are perceived and treated, and therefore why women are seen as better for certain types of labor, can be explained by wider cultural ideals, values, and beliefs about gender roles within a society. ■

Globalization and gender well-being

The economic changes created by globalization and the new, flexible requirements of labor markets are thought to benefit women. Although feminization “opens the door of job opportunity to women,” as Teri Lynn Caraway puts it, the outcome is mixed. Caraway, Sylvia Walby, and Valentine Moghadam have all shown that female workers are far more likely to suffer ill health. Moreover, women's disproportionate burden of domestic work means that employment outside the home places greater strain on them.

German sociologist Christa Wichterich argues, in *The Globalized Woman* (2007), that rather than liberating women into the workplace, globalization has bred a new underclass. She shows how, from Phnom Penh to New York, women's lives have been devastated by having to respond to the demands of transnational corporations, surviving in low-paid employment, and coping with the erosion of public services.

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Employers feminize their workforces only if they imagine women are more productive than men.

Teri Lynn Caraway

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