



Female-led Industrialization

For many developing countries, there is a clear association between global integration (usually measured as the value of a country's imports plus exports as a proportion of GDP), and women's employment in the manufacturing sector. The evidence is especially strong for countries that have pursued the export promotion of light manufactures, like Mexico, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. (See the table below for a recent survey of women's employment in [export processing zones](#).)

The reason for this association is that the labor-intensive industries that constitute the early stages of [export promotion development strategies](#), such as garments or footwear, are industries that have traditionally primarily employed women.

Also, some argue that women constitute a "cheaper" source of labor for employers in low skill, labor-intensive industries because:

- female unionization rates tend to be much lower than men's, so women cannot organize for better wages and working conditions as effectively;
- partly as a result, employers perceive women as more docile and easier to control;
- employers also perceive women as better at the delicate work that these labor intensive industries often demand (the so-called "nimble fingers" argument);
- women's low labor market attachment, where women are less often the main income earners in their households or must take breaks in employment due to care responsibilities, especially with regard to childbearing, and consequent high turnover work well for industries where little training is needed and job seniority only brings with it increased costs for employers.

Why do women take on this type of employment? The reasons are of course complex, but they can be roughly categorized as "pull" factors and "push" factors. Pull factors describe aspects of the paid labor market that draw women out of the home to work, such as the opportunity to work for an independent wage, wages that are often much better than the income a woman could make in the informal sector or working as an unpaid worker on a family farm or in a family business. Push factors are those that compel women to seek paid work because of worsening economic conditions, say when a husband or father loses a job. This has been the case where [structural adjustment programs](#) have brought about intense economic hardship, while at the same time inducing expansions in a country's export sector, often to earn foreign exchange to pay off international debt.

So, to the extent that export growth is a lead in to economic development, and export sectors rely primarily on women's labor, then it could be argued that industrialization can be female-led.

Despite this general trend in women's employment and manufactured exports in developing countries, there is some evidence that it can be reversed, as has been found to some extent in the maquiladora industry along the U.S.-Mexico border and in South Korea. These reversals have been attributed to the graduate upskilling of export jobs and the reorganization of production, especially multi-tasking of flexible labor involved in high-performance production. As these jobs become more skilled and highly paid, men may increasingly apply for and be hired in these jobs. Some of this decline, however, could also be the result of increases

Women's Employment in Selected Export Processing Zones in Developing Economies

Country	Number of women workers as a percentage of all workers	Main industry
Bangladesh 1998	69	garments, leather, shoes, electronics
Dominican Republic 1998/99	58	garments, electronics
El Salvador 1997	80 ^a	garments, electronics
Fiji 199	80 ^b	garments, food
Haiti 1998	69 ^c	garments
Jamaica 1997	90	garments
Madagascar 1997	60	garments, leather
Mauritius 1997	68	garments, flowers
Nicaragua 1997	72	garments, flowers

Source: van Heerden, Auret. 1999. *EPZs: The New Logic of Global Production*. Geneva: ILO, as cited in *World Investment Report 1999*, Table IX.4, p. 268.

a In maquiladora. b In free trade zones. c In apparel only.

in home-based production and the informal sector, where factory production is being relocated in the continual effort to cut down costs and women's employment disappears from the statistics.

Some have argued that the link between export promotion, women's employment and economic growth is a causal one. Because of the international prevalence of the gender wage gap, where women's wages are systematically lower than men's, export sectors that employ women can sell products more cheaply than if they employed men. Thus, the gender wage gap can directly contribute to a country's export competitiveness and consequent growth in the market sector of that country.

Still, it must be acknowledged that globalization has created an environment in which many women can gain greater personal autonomy because they have more access to paid work and alternatives to traditional patriarchal gender relations. Earning their own income enhances women's bargaining power in the household, enabling them to have more power over decisionmaking about everything from who they will marry to how much of the household budget is earmarked for their children's food and clothing. But globalization also puts them in a low

place in the global hierarchy of economic and institutional power, as women become integrated in the global economy in ways that crowd them in highly competitive industries with little potential for advancement.

Sources:

Süle Özler. 1999. "Globalization, Employment and Gender." Background Papers for *Human Development Report*, Volume I. New York: Human Development Report Office, United Nations Development Programme.

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). 2000. *Progress of the World's Women 2000*. New York: UNIFEM.

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