

# The feminization of work

by **Melissa Cooke-Reynolds and Nancy Zukewich**

**T**he increased presence of women has been a defining characteristic of the Canadian labour force in recent decades. Some have described this as the “feminization of work,”<sup>1</sup> a concept encompassing three distinct developments: the entry of women into the paid labour force; their continued concentration in certain kinds of employment; and “harmonizing down,” or the increasing tendency for men to do the kinds of jobs traditionally performed by women.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the feminization of work describes a process that affects both women and men and influences gender equality.

Using data from the Labour Force Survey, the General Social Survey, the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics and the Survey of Self-Employment, as well as data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the International Labour Organization, this article describes trends in the feminization of work, and compares the situation in Canada with those in Australia, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

## **Canadian women have made greatest gains in labour force participation**

In 1971, only 44%<sup>3</sup> of Canadian women were in the labour force, the lowest proportion among the study countries.<sup>4,5</sup> By 2001, this figure had risen to about the same level (71%) as that in the United States, and had outstripped the rate in Australia, the United Kingdom and France. Female labour force participation is still highest among women in Sweden (76%).

Looking at the growth in another way, women in the study countries currently account for about half of all labour force participants. Again, the growth has been most dramatic in Canada. In 2001, Canadian women accounted for 46% of the labour force, up from 34% in 1971.

In Canada, married women and women with children accounted for much of this increase. Despite earlier writings, which described women as a “reserve army of labour” that could be called upon temporarily when needed, many of today’s women interrupt their employment only for relatively short periods of time.<sup>6,7</sup>

## **Men’s labour force participation declines but still exceeds that of women**

While the presence of Canadian women in the labour force has grown, that of men has fallen slightly, from around 85% in 1971 to 82% in 2001. Men aged 55 and over, many of whom are taking early retirement, accounted for most of the drop.<sup>8</sup> The average

retirement age has declined from 63.9 in 1976 to 60.4 in 2002 for women and from 65.3 to 61.7 for men. The situation was similar in the other study countries. In the early 1970s, Canadian, French and American men were least likely to participate in the labour force while British men had the highest participation rate (94%). By 2001, the labour force participation of Canadian men was in the middle of the six study countries (82%) while France was lowest at 76%.

Although participation rates are rising for women and falling for men, men of all ages are still more likely than women to be employed or looking for work. For example, labour force participation peaks between the ages of 25 and 54 for both women and men. In each of the six study countries, at least 90% of men this age were active in the labour force in 2001. Women’s rates ranged from a high of 86% in Sweden to 79% in Canada and France, 76% in the United States and the United Kingdom and a low of 71% in Australia. It is during these years that individuals are most likely to both work for pay and care for children.<sup>9</sup>

## **Most women work in traditionally female occupations**

An important aspect of the feminization of work is the tendency for women to work in occupations that resemble the kinds of unpaid work they have traditionally done in the household.<sup>10</sup> In 2002, about 70% of employed Canadian women worked as

nurses, teachers, and clerks and in sales and service occupations, compared with just 30% of employed men.<sup>11</sup>

In most study countries, the broad occupational grouping of “clerk” has the highest concentration of female workers. About three-quarters of clerical workers in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and Sweden were female in 2001.<sup>12</sup>

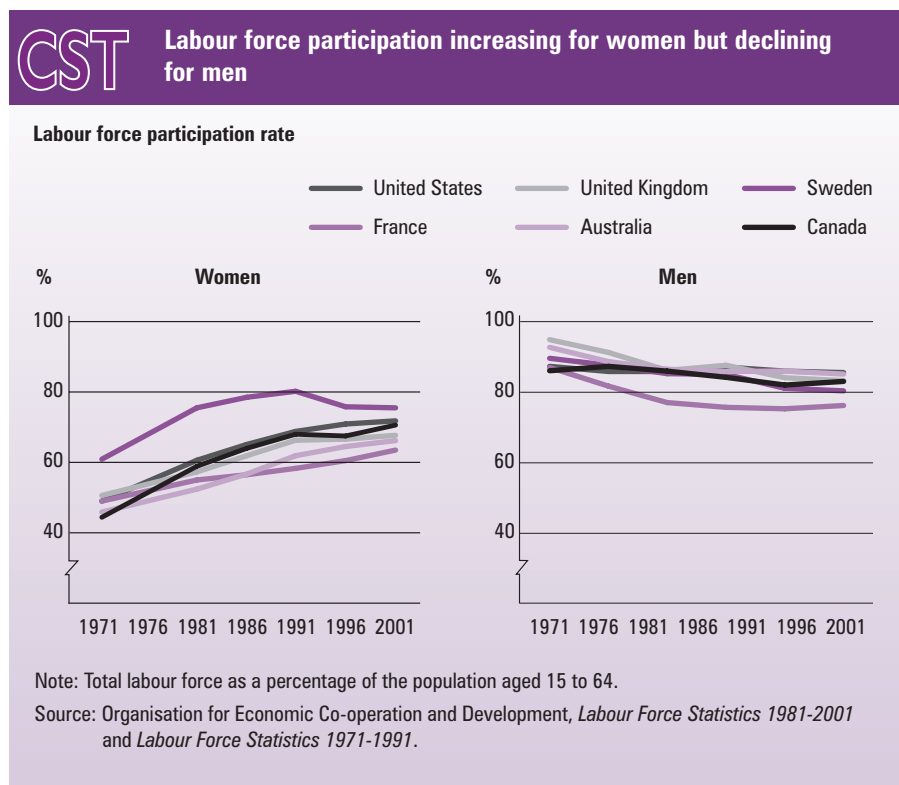
### Women's presence in professional jobs on the rise

While most women do work in traditionally female occupations, their presence in professional jobs has been rising over the past three decades in most study countries. For example, among doctors and dentists in Canada, the proportion who were women rose from 44% in 1987 to 54% by 2002, an increase of 10 percentage points in only 15 years. Since professional jobs are typically well-paying, this increase represents a substantial economic improvement for certain women.<sup>13</sup>

In Canada, Australia, Sweden and the United States, women have also made gains in the managerial category, a high status and well-paying

one, traditionally dominated by men. In 2001, Canadian women made up 35% of managers, up from only 17% in 1972.<sup>14</sup> In most study countries, however, women still account for a relatively small share (one fifth to one third) of managers except the United

States where nearly half (46%) of managers are women. In addition, women managers do not often hold the top positions. For instance, Canadian women are more likely to be employed as administrative or “other” managers.<sup>15</sup>



### CST In 2001, women of all ages were less likely than men to be in the labour force

Age	Sex	Canada	United States	United Kingdom	Australia	France	Sweden
		Labour force participation rate (%)					
15 and over	Women	71	71	69	66	62	77
	Men	82	83	84	82	74	81
15 to 24	Women	63	62	64	68	27	54
	Men	66	67	72	71	33	54
25 to 54	Women	79	76	76	71	79	86
	Men	91	91	91	90	94	91
55 to 64	Women	42	53	44	37	34	67
	Men	61	68	64	60	44	74
65 and over	Women	3	10	3	3	1	6
	Men	9	18	7	10	2	14

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Labour Force Statistics 1981-2001*.

### **Women double their presence in agriculture and manufacturing**

In most of the study countries, women have also increased their presence in agriculture and manufacturing jobs. Canadian women essentially doubled their representation in these two fields between 1971 and 2001. In Australia and Sweden, women's share of manufacturing jobs also doubled. The proportion of women in agriculture increased nearly fivefold in Australia. Despite these gains, however, women remain a small minority of workers in these occupations. For example, in 2001, in all study countries except Australia, less than one quarter of employees in manufacturing were women.

Women's increased presence in professional, managerial, agricultural and manufacturing jobs suggests that they are slowly moving into traditionally male-dominated occupations. However, while professional and managerial jobs often result in better pay, in Canada those in agriculture pay below average weekly wages and manufacturing pays about average.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the wage gap is particularly large for jobs unique to primary industry.<sup>17</sup> In 2002, on average, Canadian women in primary industry jobs had hourly wages that were 63% those of men's; in manufacturing jobs, 71% those of men's; and across all occupations, 82% those of men's.<sup>18,19</sup>

The large hourly wage gap between women and men in manufacturing jobs may be influenced by the fact that women and men typically perform different types of work. For example, men are more likely than women to be in unionized jobs that offer benefits.<sup>20</sup>

### **Non-standard work more common for women**

In all study countries women are still responsible for the majority of housework and child care, which may affect the types of paid work in which they engage. In Canada, women make

up the majority of those with non-standard employment.<sup>21,22</sup> Non-standard forms of work may offer advantages for balancing work and family, such as flexible hours and easy "entry/exit/re-entry" to the labour force.<sup>23</sup> For example, a notable increase in part-time employment seems to coincide with a rise in the labour force participation of women and a growth in service sector employment.<sup>24</sup> These forms of work, however, can also mean relatively lower pay, reduced access to social benefits and training and limited career possibilities.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the 2000 Survey of Self-Employment finds that financial security is a concern for many self-employed people, as is the lack of employer-sponsored and government benefits like extended medical coverage, pension plans and maternity and parental leave.<sup>26</sup>

In Canada in 2002, 15% of women working part-time, compared with just 1% of men, worked part-time because of childcare responsibilities. Similarly, in 2000, 10% of self-employed women and only 1% of men cited balance of work and family as the main reason for becoming self-employed. In some instances, part-time or self-employment reflects the unavailability of full-time paid jobs. In 2002 in Canada, slightly over one quarter (27%) of all part-timers were working part-time because of poor business conditions or because they could not find full-time work, and in 2000 just over one fifth of the self-employed (22%) said that they became self-employed because they could not find suitable paid employment.

### **Women are still far more likely to work part-time than men**

While women's part-time work as a proportion of women's employment has stayed reasonably stable in Canada, Sweden and the United Kingdom in the past 20 years, it has grown in Australia and France and declined

in the United States.<sup>27</sup> In comparison, the men's percentage has been rising in most study countries. The United States is an exception to this trend. This indicates a process of "harmonizing down," since more men are moving into an employment situation typically thought of as "female."

Nonetheless, in all six countries, employed women are still substantially more likely than employed men to work part-time. In the United Kingdom and France, for example, employed women are five times more likely than employed men to work part-time hours, four times more likely in Sweden, three times as likely in Canada and Australia, and twice as likely in the United States. Part-time employment among women ranged from a high of 42% in Australia to 27% in Canada to a low of 18% in the United States. Canadian men had the second highest rate of part-time employment (10%) behind Australia (16%). France had the lowest rate (5%).

### **Temporary employment on the rise**

In Canada, temporary employment is slightly more common among women than men (14% compared to 12% in 2002).<sup>28</sup> This is up from 8% for women and 7% for men in 1989. However, Canadian women and men generally perform different kinds of temporary jobs. Men usually work at full-time seasonal jobs, while women make up the majority of casual temporary employees, the majority of whom work part-time.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the insecurity of not having long-term employment, temporary jobs also tend to pay less than permanent jobs and recent wage growth has been slower for temporary than permanent work.<sup>30</sup>

In most study countries (except the United States), women are somewhat more likely than men to have a job with a pre-determined end date. As in Canada, temporary work is on the rise among both sexes in France. However,

there has been little change in the share of employees with temporary work in the United Kingdom (7% for women and 5% for men) or the United States (4% for both women and men), the two study countries with the lowest prevalence of temporary work. In contrast, the temporary employment rate has virtually doubled in Canada and France since the mid-to late 1980s. Temporary work is also very common in Sweden, which has reported rates of 17% for female employees and 12% for male employees each year from 1997 to 2002. In 2002, women made up about half of all temporary employees in most study countries, while they accounted for nearly six in 10 in Sweden.<sup>31</sup>

### **Self-employment grows fastest in Canada**

In Canada, men have historically been more likely than women to be self-employed. This also holds true in the other study countries. In 2002, Canadian women had among the highest rates of non-agricultural self-employment. Along with women in Australia (9%), Canadian women (8%) had the highest prevalence of self-employment, while this form of work was most common among men in Australia and the United Kingdom (15%). The comparable figure for Canadian men was 9%.

Between 1990 and 1997, non-agricultural self-employment in Canada grew faster for women than for men (average annual growth of 6.5% versus 3.8%).<sup>32</sup> However, self-employed women working on their own without paid help account for most of this growth.<sup>33</sup> The “solo” self-employed generally work fewer hours and earn less money than those who employ others.<sup>34</sup> Self-employed women are also much more likely than men to work part-time.<sup>35</sup>

Self-employment grew marginally in the 1990-1997 period in Sweden and for women in France and the

United States, but was stable for women in Australia. In contrast, self-employment declined slightly for both sexes in the United Kingdom and for men in the United States and Australia. By the end of the 1990s, non-agricultural self-employment had fallen slightly for both sexes in most study countries. Men in Australia were the exception, experiencing a marginal increase in self-employment between 1996 and 2002. By 2002, women accounted for a high of 42% of non-agricultural self-employment in Canada and a low of 26% in Sweden and the United Kingdom.

### **Earnings gap narrows over time**

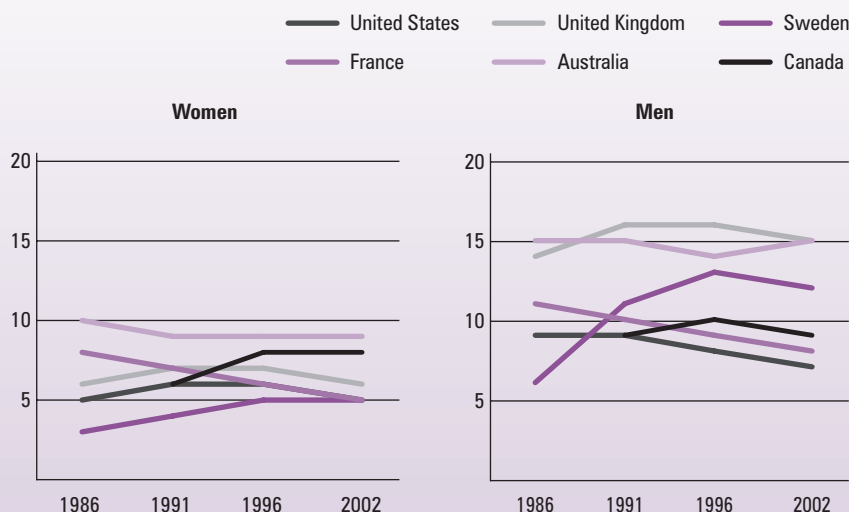
In Canada, the gap between the earnings of men and women has narrowed over time, due to an increase in women's and a slight decline in men's earnings.<sup>36</sup> In 2000, women employed full-time earned 72% of men's earnings, up from 59% in 1976. In both

the mid-1970s and today, the earnings ratio in Canada is among the lowest of the study countries. The ratio was close to 80% in both Australia and Sweden even 20 years ago. Over the past two decades, the gap narrowed dramatically in Canada, France, the United Kingdom and the United States, but changed little in Australia and Sweden. By the end of the 1990s, the earnings ratio was highest in Australia and France, where women earned 82% as much as men, while the gap was still greatest in Canada.

Some of the wage gap between men and women can be attributed to characteristics such as education, experience, job tenure, union status, firm size, presence of children, marital status and part-time status. However, a substantial proportion of the gap remains unexplained by factors measured in Canadian labour market surveys.<sup>37</sup>



% of employment that is self-employed



Note: Excludes the agricultural sector and unpaid family workers.

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. September 26, 2002. Table on "Labour market statistics - Data — Employment (civilian) by professional status." [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org) (accessed October 23, 2003).

have declined slightly, with the drop being most pronounced in France.

Most of the study countries also demonstrate the persistent concentration of women in particular kinds of work, despite greater gender parity in certain occupations. A process of harmonizing down is occurring in each country. More men are now starting to experience employment situations typical of female employment, such as part-time and temporary work. The prevalence of part-time employment has increased everywhere except in the United States, while temporary employment has become more common among men and women in Canada and France. The earnings gap has also narrowed, and is the smallest in France and Australia, where some aspects of harmonizing down are most pronounced.

These indicators of the feminization of work illustrate that gender equality has improved not only because of gains made by women but also by relative declines in men's status.

Is Canada a leader in labour force gender equality? According to the United Nations, in 2003, Canada ranked ninth in the world in terms of gender empowerment. Sweden was third, the United States 10<sup>th</sup>, Australia 11<sup>th</sup> and the United Kingdom 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>1</sup> Iceland and Norway were first and second in this measure. The Gender Empowerment Measure encompasses a wide array of indicators that relate to the feminization of work, including labour force participation, occupational segregation and earned income of men and women.

1. France is not ranked on the gender empowerment measure but ranks 17<sup>th</sup> on the Gender development index, another measure of gender equality, behind all of the other countries studied in this article.

### Summary

The past 30 years have seen a substantial increase in women's labour force participation rate in all the industrialized countries included in this study. This is the most basic indicator of the feminization of work. Canadian

women have made the most progress in terms of participation rates, and have caught up with women in most other countries. However, women in Sweden continue to have the highest rate of labour market participation. At the same time, male participation rates

1. Armstrong, P. and H. Armstrong. 1994. *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart; Vosko, L. 2000. *Temporary Work: The Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Vosko, L. 2002. *Rethinking Feminization: Gendered Precariousness in the Canadian Labour Market and the Crisis in Social Reproduction*. Presentation given at the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Roberts Lecture, April 11, York University, Toronto.
2. Armstrong and Armstrong. 1994.
3. Total labour force as a percentage of 15- to 64-year-olds.
4. The Labour Force Survey undergoes a redesign every 10 years following the decennial census. Data from 1976 have been revised, but data prior to 1976 have not been revised.
5. Sweden had the highest women's labour force participation rate at 63%.



6. Armstrong, P. and H. Armstrong. 1990. *Theorizing Women's Work*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
7. Fast, J. and M. Da Pont. Autumn 1997. "Changes in women's work continuity." *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 2-7; Marshall, K. 1999. "Employment after childbirth." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XPE) 11, 3: 18-25; Statistics Canada and Status of Women Canada. 2000. *Women and Men in Canada: A Statistical Glance* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 12F0084XPE). Ottawa: Status of Women Canada.
8. Statistics Canada and Status of Women Canada. 2000; Habtu, R. 2002. "Men 55 and older: work or retire?" *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XIE) 3, 12: 27-34.
9. Statistics Canada and Status of Women Canada. 2000; Johnson, K., D. Lero and J. Rooney. 2001. *Work-Life Compendium 2001: 150 Canadian Statistics on Work, Family and Well-being*. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada, Strategic Policy Branch.
10. Armstrong and Armstrong. 1994; International Labour Organization (ILO). 1999. *World Employment Report: Women and Training in the Global Economy*. Geneva: ILO.
11. Statistics Canada. 2003. *Women in Canada: Work Chapter Updates* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89F0133XIE).
12. Data were not available for France.
13. In 2002, female professionals earned on average \$23.71 an hour, while men earned \$26.22, for an earnings ratio of 90%.
14. Occupational coding has changed over the years, which means that the time series may not be completely comparable.
15. Marshall, K. 1996. "The diversity of managers." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XPE) 8, 4: 24-30.
16. Statistics Canada. 2002. *Labour Force Historical Review 2002* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 71F0004XCB).
17. About 60% of jobs unique to primary industry are agricultural jobs.
18. Statistics Canada. 2002. *Labour Force Historical Review 2002* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 71F0004XCB). Table Cd1T38an.
19. Manufacturing includes occupations unique to processing, manufacturing and utilities.
20. Akyeampong, E. 1999. "Unionization: an update." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XPE) 11, 3: 45-65.
21. Non-standard work includes part-time employment, own-account self-employment and temporary work which has a fixed termination date.
22. Krahn, H. 1995. "Non-standard work on the rise." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XPE) 7, 4: 35-42; Vosko, L.F., N. Zukewich and C. Cranford. 2003. "Precarious jobs: A new typology of employment." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XIE) 4, 10: 16-26.
23. Anker, R. 1997. "Theories of occupational segregation by sex: An overview." *International Labour Review* 136, 3; Arai, A.B. 2000. "Self-employment as a response to the double day for women and men in Canada." *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 37, 2: 127-42.
24. International Labour Organization. 1997. "Part-time work: Solution or trap?" *International Labour Review* 136, 4.
25. *ibid.*; Fudge, J., E. Tucker and L. Vosko. 2002. *The Legal Concept of Employment: Marginalized Workers*. Report prepared for the Law Commission of Canada.
26. Hughes, K. May 1, 2003. "How are women faring in the entrepreneurial economy?" *Breakfast on the Hill Seminar Series*. Ottawa: Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. [www.fedcan.ca/english/policyandadvocacy/breakfastonthehill/breakfast-hughes0503.pdf](http://www.fedcan.ca/english/policyandadvocacy/breakfastonthehill/breakfast-hughes0503.pdf) (accessed October 29, 2003).
27. Part-time employment refers to persons who work less than 30 hours per week at their main job. Australia is the exception where part-time employment refers to less than 30 hours per week in all jobs. In the United States, part-time employment includes only wage and salary workers.
28. A temporary job has a predetermined end date, or will end as soon as a specified project is completed.
29. Vosko, Zukewich and Cranford. 2003.
30. Grenon, L. and B. Chun. 1997. "Non-permanent paid work." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XPE) 9, 3: 21-31; Tabi, M. and S. Langlois. 2003. "Quality of jobs added in 2002." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-001-XIE) 4, 2: 12-17.
31. Temporary employment data are not available for Australia.
32. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2000. *Employment Outlook*. Paris: OECD.
33. Statistics Canada. 2000. *Women in Canada 2000* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-503-XPE).
34. Hughes, K. 1999. "Gender and Self-Employment in Canada: Assessing Trends and Policy Implications." *Changing Employment Relationship Series. CPRN Study No. W/04*. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks.
35. Vosko, Zukewich and Cranford. 2003.
36. Statistics Canada. 2000.
37. Drolet, M. 2002. *The 'who, what, when and where' of gender pay differentials* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 71-584-MIE, no. 4).



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