

**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES**

Working Paper Series (Cave Hill)

**Changing Skill Demands in Manufacturing and the
Impact on Caribbean Female Workers**

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**Working Paper No.9
March 2003**

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ISBN: 976-621-096-9

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Working paper number 9 began as a research paper by postgraduate student Daphne Jayasinghe as one of the academic requirements for the Master of Philosophy degree in Political Science of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus. Ms Jayasinghe successfully submitted her thesis in July 2001. Ms. Jayasinghe was awarded a graduate student grant from the Republic of the Netherlands collaborative project to support teaching and research at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies of the University of the West Indies. One condition for the award of the grant was that the research would be published by the Centre. This is the second Working Paper to be funded by the RNE support for Graduate Student Research.

Ms Jayasinghe reviews some of the policy recommendations that advocate a shift in manufacturing away from low cost, labour intensive production towards the output of goods and services where high productivity, high value and improved technology produce the competitive edge. She assesses the degree to which this shift has taken place in Barbados, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. Ms Jayasinghe reviews the changes in output from high skilled manufacturing and female dominated manufacturing in the three countries and contributes a theoretical analysis of the ways in which gender issues have shaped women's experience of employment in the manufacturing sector, while simultaneously exploring the implications for women of these changes in the nature of industry in the Caribbean.

She argues that the employment created through a growth in manufacturing has not contributed to sustainable human development and there should be a recognition that labour markets reflect gender subordinations found in the wider society, and this acts as an obstacle to the development of women's skills. Ms Jayasinghe contends that policy makers should recognise that women face obstacles to employment in skilled work that men do not face, and such gender biases must be uncovered and their inherent inequalities challenged.

KEY WORDS

Caribbean women, women and labour, women and manufacturing, women and the global economy, gender issues in manufacturing.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BIDC	Barbados Investment and Development Corporation
CBI	Caribbean Basin Initiative
EDC	Export Development Corporation
FDM	Female Dominated Manufacturing
FTZS	Free Trade Zones
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NDC	National Development Corporation
WTO	World Trade Organization

INTRODUCTION

Women throughout the world have been drawn into the manufacturing labour market to produce goods for export. The propensity for female workers to be employed in labour intensive, low skilled, low paid assembly jobs is a global phenomenon. Evidence of high numbers of women relegated to monotonous, routine assembly work in poor conditions is abundant (Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987; Green 1990; Stuart 1998; Joekes 1999).

In section one of this paper, I review some of these policy recommendations. In section two I assess the degree to which this shift has taken place in three Anglophone Caribbean countries, Barbados, St Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. I review the changes in output from high skilled manufacturing and female dominated manufacturing sectors in the three countries. This is followed by a theoretical analysis of the ways in which gender issues have shaped women's experience of employment in the manufacturing sector. I end by exploring the implications for women of the changes in the nature of industry in the Caribbean.

However, as international trade escalates, global competition is increasing and Caribbean countries are facing a market where cheap labour no longer provides any comparative advantage in the global economy. Policy makers advocate a shift in manufacturing away from low cost, labour intensive production towards the output of goods and services where high productivity, high value and improved technology produce the

competitive edge. If women are to retain their share of employment in manufacturing in the future, they not only need access to training to enable them to adapt to the changing working environment, but gender biases in skill evaluation and terms and conditions of employment must be overcome.

The paper draws on three case studies of women workers in St. Lucia, Barbados and Trinidad to support and develop its argument. Research was conducted between June and December 2000. Semi-structured surveys were used to interview approximately 25 women in St. Lucia, Trinidad and Barbados. Women were interviewed in their homes, in community centres and in their workplaces.

FROM LABOUR INTENSITY TO SKILL INTENSITY – ‘LOW ROAD’ AND ‘HIGH ROAD’ OPTIONS

As competition for the lowest labour costs and the most favourable tax incentives for foreign investors intensify globally, some developing countries have found that they can no longer compete in manufacturing where low wages are the key determinant. In the Caribbean, a combination of Mexico's low wages and preferential access to the US market provided by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has also proved detrimental for manufacturing (Stuart 1998). Between 1994, the year of the introduction of NAFTA, and 1998, it is estimated that over 150 companies and 123,000 jobs have been lost in the Caribbean apparel industry, and many of these firms relocated to Mexico (Caribbean Textile and Apparel Institute cited in ILO 1998a). Moreover,