

# **WOMEN IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET IN THE 2000s: GROWTH, POST-CRISIS SCENARIOS AND GENDERED JOB PRECARIOUSNESS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The reversal of the low economic growth trend, which has been observed since 2000, enabled the Brazilian economy to reestablish a positive output-employment relation. However, the challenges of mitigating autonomous occupations and informality in labor markets still remain. Both are signs of the wave of job precariousness that has hit the Brazilian occupational structure since the early 1990s, whose impacts were strongly gendered. In fact, the ‘feminization’ of Brazilian labor market has followed the path of decent job deterioration.

Considered the case of Northeastern Brazil in particular, where precariousness levels are overwhelming, the observed economic recovery of the last five years has depended very much on public investment (through an active fiscal policy combined with growing social spending, both previous to the 2008 crisis, that helped to sustain income levels) as much as on natural resource-intensive production, with all available indicators portraying not only the growth of workforce demand but also the recovery of formal employment.

In the following we aim to understand the situation of female jobs and women’s occupational trends in Northeastern Brazil in the 2000s, in the light of the above mentioned economic context. The paper is organized as follows. Chapter 1 reviews the employment trends for Brazil in the 1990s, with emphasis given to the macroeconomic determinants of the growth in formal employment. Chapter 2 addresses the issue of the ‘feminization’ of Brazilian labor market’. In Chapter 3 we assess the situation of female jobs and women’s occupational trends in Northeastern Brazil in the 2000s, after a brief economic-historical account of the employment problem in Northeastern Brazil. In our Concluding Remarks we will try to bring forward some considerations on post-Crisis scenarios, while expressing our belief that the structural transformations of the labor market dating to the 1990-2000s are still valid, and that the present conjuncture has managed to reinforce gendered vulnerabilities.

## **1 EMPLOYMENT TRENDS IN THE 2000S: MACROECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF THE GROWTH IN FORMAL EMPLOYMENT**

Formal unemployment was possibly the most negative outcome of the macroeconomic stabilization-structural reform programs implemented in 1990s Brazil under the aegis of neo-liberalism. Such phenomenon lead not only to increasing job precariousness but also – and *et pour cause* – to an overwhelming political fragmentation of the proletariat, as expressed in rising de-unionization.

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Indeed the nation faced the late arrival, though in a different socio-economic context, of the same strong pressure on national governments for changes on public labor market and industrial relations regulations which had been experienced in Western Europe since the end of the 1970s. Along came the discourse on the “end of (salaried) work”, reaching not only Brazil but the semi-periphery and periphery of capitalism more or less as a whole. Such discourse reached its peak during the high years of the Real stabilization Plan (1995-1996), when it got amplified to Brazilian society. As Dedecca (2009: 136) points out, globalization and the need to overcome a labor market that was very much referred to wage contracts were then seen as inevitable,

with the nation having to recognize the winds of change and thus taking the correct measures to soften the transition to a new labor market structured on autonomous work and entrepreneurship. Moreover, the nation had to get used to less State regulation of labor markets and industrial relations, and by this means overcome the regulation framework built during the industrialization period – which continued to be linked to 1940s CLT law [*Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho, established by Vargas in 1942*]<sup>3</sup>.

So, neo-liberal policies based mainly on strict budgetary controls and exchange rate appreciation resulted in jobless growth and in a dramatic increase on the levels of consumption of foreign, high value-added goods – both outcomes continuously worsening the material conditions of the working class for almost a decade. So, from 1993-1997, employment grew 7,4 against 21,6 per cent of GDP growth; from 1998 to 2003, the figures for growth were 14,5 and 10,8 per cent (employment and GDP growth respectively). The ratio ‘total labor income/ national income’ fell from 44 per cent in 1991 to 37 per cent in 2000 (that is, in a single decade it fell as much as it had fallen from its peak value in the 1950s to the 1990s!).

In the same interregnum, the ratio ‘workforce/population’ grew from 40 to 44%. Not only informal employment rose in all sectors of activity; also, the 1990s faced a somehow pathological growth in the service sector, for the most part concentrated on its less organized segments. Cardoso Jr. (2001: 29) points out that, in the service sector, the relative participation of the less structured segments grew from 44,5 per cent in the 1980s to 50,5% in the 1990s. In fact, during this decade an overwhelmingly large number of former salaried workers went out in the streets of many city capitals, self-employed as vendors (*ambulantes*).

The observed growth of domestic workers (private, personal services providers for the wealthier) was considerable as well. Taken together, both can be seen as indirect measures of rising inequality, along with the continuous feminization of the Brazilian labor market.

By implementing neo-liberal macroeconomic policies (stability at any cost) and economic reforms (trade, financial, public spending, and labor market reforms) as they did since the 1990s, most Latin American countries sought to give a renewed response to the challenges of technological-productive backwardness and persistent poverty. Both are economic development problems that globalization made even harder to overcome. An easier access to external savings did not compensate the oblivion of the State and the

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<sup>3</sup> We are responsible for all versions into English of the bibliography originally available in Portuguese.

neglect of domestic production; the bet proved to be wrong. As far as deindustrialization, economic policy took a great part of the blame.

The radical suppression of protection – tariff and non-tariff – of domestic industrial production, the deregulation of foreign direct investment, privatizations, and the recurrent appreciation of local currencies had as a consequence the return of a productive specialization pattern based on static comparative advantages, that is, [in Latin America] those policies linked the productive structure to the endowment of previously existent factors, with a great emphasis on natural resources. (Carneiro, cit.: 32)<sup>4</sup>

That was the greater Latin American picture. In the Brazilian case, not only the level of industrialization (the ratio industrial output/ GDP) fell from 1990<sup>5</sup> to 1998 (when a slight but sustained recovery took place), but also, from 1996 to 2006 the only industrial branches that increased its share of the industrial transformation value were the natural resource-based ones, while the others (labor-intensive, scale-intensive, science-based) experienced a decrease, reflecting other changes engendered by policies which main effect was a tendency to regressive specialization.

Such tendency has been strengthened by a perverse association of the current exchange rate policy with the neglect of industrial policies. Both constitute a hindrance to the incorporation of more technologically dynamic industrial branches. This situation was partially reversed only in the aftermath of the 1999 foreign currency crisis, when Brazil was forced to take back domestic production incentive policies – thus partially internalizing imports.

## **2 'FEMINIZATION' OF BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET': IMPACTS ON PERSISTENT GENDER INEQUALITY**

The combination of transformations of the productive structure and positive outcomes from different forms of collective action has led, in the last decades, to important changes in the patterns of insertion of women in the occupational structure. Their entrance in intellectual occupations, in the field of symbolic services and high administration gets intensified, as much as among those professions closer to a traditional definition of 'feminine' occupations. However, inequality remains and is much expressed in wage differentials and in the permanence of relative positions: women as 'gendered' labor force.

In fact, the observed changes in *conditions* hide the permanence of *relative positions*: equalizing [employment] opportunities... must not mask persistent inequalities in the distribution among the same educational

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<sup>4</sup> Particularly in Latin America, the primary force driving globalization is Minsky's money chasing yield process, in such an environment where multidirectional gross capital flows predominate over the unidirectional ones, engendering portfolio diversification at a global scale (Carneiro, 2009). Financial globalization may have widened the access to external savings, but at the cost of making them more volatile and risky, therefore loosening their connection with investment. The productive dimension of globalization (or its secondary driving force), which set new international competence patterns and lead to core business specialization via outsourcing and to efficiency seeking strategies which benefit from the more advanced forms of foreign direct investment has been, according to UNCTAD (2003), the exception, not the rule, for the periphery, and so far has restricted itself to some Asian economies.

<sup>5</sup> The descent actually started in 1986, and until 1991 it was, for the most part, associated to the industrial stagnation which followed hyperinflation episodes.

levels and possible careers, simultaneously. The same logics dictates the access to different professions and to different positions inside each one of them... just like in Education, women's progresses are not to dissimulate the corresponding progresses made by men, which assure, like in a handicapped race, that the structure of *distances* remains. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 109-110)

In nowadays Brazil such process face demographic changes like the continuous decline of fertility rates, with consequent population aging, and the entrance in labor market of older, married women with growing status of responsible for the household income<sup>6</sup> (Leone, 2003; Lombardi, 2010). Considered altogether, those changes led to a growth of female labor participation rates – which, from the 1990s on, was closely associated to greater female labor force vulnerability and to crescent job precariousness, characterized by the deterioration of labor relations and to the decline of social protection institutions.

Female workers have been not only getting the more precarious jobs, but continue to be segregated by economic sector. That is, they are still overrepresented in the service sector and have little, limited participation in other activities: 50 percent of the employed women in 2007 (16 years old or older) were engaged in domestic-‘social’<sup>7</sup> (33,6 per cent) or trade (16,5 per cent) activities (Ipea, 2009). So the continuous growth of female labor force participation coexists with another trend, which is the persistence of positional inequalities.

It is worth noting the female labor force participation in the industrial sector, a branch which is relatively more important to men. Around 17 and 12 per cent of the employed men and women, respectively, were engaged in industrial production in. But a closer look reveals the highly gendered dimension of industrial occupation: in the same year, 65 per cent of the industrial workers were male. The remaining 35 per cent accounted for female industrial workers segregated in branches such as textiles and shoe wear – that are more frequently subject to subcontracting processes in which low paid, precarious jobs are the rule, not the exception –, whereupon the observed segregation that makes the whole picture is reinforced and repeated inside a sector (IPEA, 2009).

As far as wages are considered, besides the fact that, in the Brazilian labor market, women manage to displace male workers in some formal, more structured and ‘superior’ occupations usually by accepting a more modest paycheck, the distribution of the employed population by monthly earnings in 2006 pointed out a situation whereby female workers and less and less relatively represented as higher occupation (or salary) ranks are considered (Table 1 below). Labor market ‘feminization’ – closely related to the concept of poverty ‘feminization’ – is in progress.

Portraying persistent statistical regularity – and thus a structural component which is hard to break -, gender inequalities manifest themselves as (i) **hierarchical**, since women are misrepresented in ‘superior’, better-remunerated job positions, in spite of their growing rates of participation; and (ii) **sectorial**, since economic activities reveal themselves as if they were gendered, and women are more present in some and excluded from others, according

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<sup>6</sup> Data provided by Lombardi (2010) point out that from 2002 to 2007 the ratio of households headed by females grew from 25,5 per cent to 33 per cent. But those demographic changes have hardly meant the betterment of working women's conditions. Sorj and Fontes (2008) identified that households headed by females with children but no spouse (that is, feminine and *mono-parental*) tend to be the worst of all family arrangements in terms of per capita household income, and thus concentrating the largest proportion of poor (almost 60 per cent in 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Includes Education, Health, Social Assistance, and Domestic (household), paid services.

to a certain gender culture (Ipea, 2009; Perez Sedeño, 2001). In the context of a productive restructuration leading to renewed work and production models in which labor market flexibility is increasingly strategic to firms, flexibility itself gets more and more gendered. Not surprisingly, feminist theorists and researchers are bound to consider labor market flexibility as the more revealing aspect of gender issues (Duque-Arrazola, 2008, p. 233).

Regarding the Brazilian case, the work overload which is the outcome of a remarkably unequal distribution of household chores plays the role of a social constraint to better occupational positions. In a recent study (CEPAL/PNUD/OIT, 2008), it is noted that Brazilian women allocate 27 hours per week to household chores, while Brazilian men allocate ten hours to the same activity. So flexibility, along with its grave consequences to women's destinies in the labor market, is also linked to sad complementarities "between the kind of work that enables the production of material goods and the responsibility for the reproduction of life – which crystallizes the invisibility of female work" (IPEA, op. cit., p. 60).

Table 1  
**Employed population by monthly earnings in Brazil, 2006**  
 (Percentages)

| Minimum wage ranks | MEN   | WOMEN |
|--------------------|-------|-------|
| More than 20       | 79.94 | 20.06 |
| More than 10 to 20 | 72.75 | 27.25 |
| More than 5 to 10  | 67.93 | 32.07 |
| More than 3 to 5   | 67.33 | 32.67 |
| More than 2 to 3   | 69.10 | 30.90 |
| More than 1 to 2   | 60.51 | 39.40 |
| Up to 1            | 50.30 | 49.70 |
| No earnings        | 40.33 | 59.67 |

Adapted from Ipea (2009.)

### **3 FEMALE JOBS AND WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL TRENDS IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL IN THE 2000S**

#### **3.1 Economic-historical background**

It is quite well known that, whether a long run period such as 1960-1990 is considered, the growth of Brazilian Northeastern industry was higher than national industry, and that after 30 years of industrialization, this regional industrial complex gained a reasonable degree of articulation and integration with Brazilian industry. In fact, the most significant similitude – in terms of homogeneity and performance – between national (Brazilian) and Northeastern economies lied, until the early 1990s, within the industrial sector.

Nevertheless, this is only part of the tale. Economic history, which is always of great relevance, tells us that no one should miss another important part: the *detour* taken in the process of induced industrialization in the Northeast. Regional planning by SUDENE (*Superintendencia de Desenvolvimento do Nordeste*, the main federal authority in charge of inducing industrialization in the Northeast from the 1960s to the mid-1990s), at its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, originally aimed, as Goldsmith and Wilson (1991, p. 445-446) point out,

to form a strong base using regional raw materials and creating strong links of trade and supply among factories in the region... At least in theory, SUDENE's promotion of metallurgy, machinery and equipment production, especially in the larger cities, had the potential for a long-lasting effect on the economy, because of the possibility of interconnecting a propulsive network of firms that would be self-expanding. Unfortunately, this potential has not been realized in the medium-sized cities... The dynamic element of the regional economy was external to the region.

As a consequence, the employment problem in the Northeast was not mitigated, and, following the 1990-1992 economic recession, the region entered the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the aegis of globalization but facing unsolved problems prior to early 1900s. Its historical roots, much associated with land property concentration, monoculture, and its regional insertion in the national economy (basically as a commodity supplier), defined its specificity: the land of backwardness, of the worst social indicators, and of an unsolved water 'scarcity' problem. In spite of the industrialization and of the (more recent) implementation industrial niches that soon became 'growth poles'. Despite the positive outcomes of induced industrialization, "the region had always been treated – by the elites and local governors alike – like a case apart, worth of *priority* rather than being considered as part of a national development strategy" (Araújo; Souza; Lima, 1997, p. 59).

Metropolitan unemployment in the 1990s persisted, chronically higher in the regional capitals (especially Salvador, Recife, and Fortaleza) than in its Southeastern and Southern counterparts. The Northeast, a region equivalent to a whole country in territory, is a clear example of distorted growth, in which the recent, above-mentioned 'poles' partially resulted from the settlement of Southern and Southeastern industrial plants, attracted as they were, in the 1990s, by the perspective of extensive use of cheap, unskilled labor.

### **3.2 Women in the Northeastern Brazilian labor market in the 2000s (2000 to 2007)**

As mentioned in the Introduction to this paper, in the following we will attempt to assess the situation of female jobs and women's occupational trends in Northeastern Brazil in the 2000s. Our focus will be on formal unemployment. The consulted database was *RAIS-Relação Anual de Informações Sociais* (Annual Report on Social Information). It is an administrative census of the labor market, updated with data that registered (formal) businesses and employers mandatorily deliver, on an annual basis, to the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MTE). The data is expected to cover basic, personal characteristics of the employees – such as sex, age, education degree, salaries, and job position – and also of the establishments – such as branch of activity, and hiring and layoffs<sup>8</sup>.

Some sectors of activity were selected, due to their regional importance in terms of labor market formality. When aggregated they corresponded, in 2000, 2003, and 2007, to 89,5, 90,1, and 90,3 per cent, respectively, of the employed in the Northeast (Table 2 below).

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<sup>8</sup> We are quite aware of the almost obvious shortcomings of this census, since it excludes self-employed (autonomous) and informal workers as well as unregistered entrepreneurs – especially common in the service sector. But it must be mentioned that, due to the spatial disaggregation it enables and also to its periodicity, RAIS has been very much used as tool to monitor changes in the occupational structure of regions and municipalities.

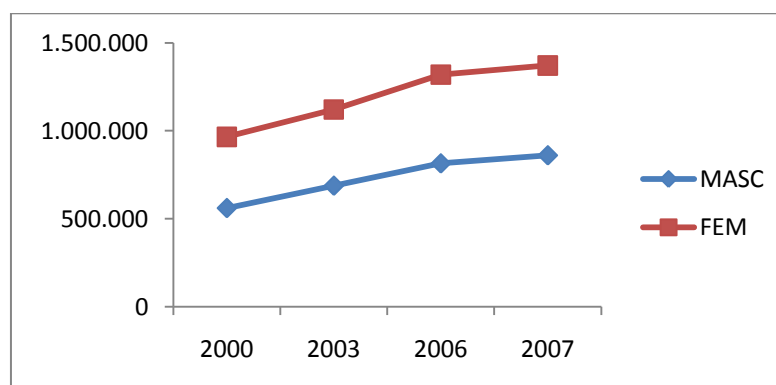
Public Administration has been the greatest formal employer, accounting alone for 35 per cent of the employed in 2000. Such relative importance has been almost the same for the whole 2000-2007 interregnum, with slight decreases in 2003 and 2006. Public Administration is also the only sector where women are more represented than men (63,2 and 61,4 per cent of the employed in the sector in 2000 and 2007 respectively – Chart 1 below).

Table 2

| <b>Northeastern Brazil: Formal employment by sector and gender, 2000-2007 (selected years)</b> |                  |                  |                  |                  |
|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|  | <b>2000</b>      | <b>2003</b>      | <b>2006</b>      | <b>2007</b>      |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>4.374.850</b> | <b>5.095.390</b> | <b>6.185.903</b> | <b>6.567.837</b> |
| <b>Industry</b>  | <b>585.147</b>   | <b>659.487</b>   | <b>838.265</b>   | <b>904.371</b>   |
| MALE   | 425.599          | 481.253          | 623.373          | 673.128          |
| FEMALE   | 159.548          | 178.234          | 214.892          | 231.243          |
| <b>Trade</b>   | <b>628.678</b>   | <b>756.623</b>   | <b>974.741</b>   | <b>1.056.809</b> |
| MALE   | 401.310          | 477.983          | 607.802          | 657.384          |
| FEMALE   | 227.368          | 278.640          | 366.939          | 399.425          |
| <b>Services</b>  | <b>1.177.402</b> | <b>1.369.109</b> | <b>1.638.441</b> | <b>1.741.721</b> |
| MALE   | 709.979          | 809.367          | 955.870          | 1.008.895        |
| FEMALE   | 467.423          | 559.742          | 682.571          | 732.826          |
| <b>Public Adm.</b>   | <b>1.526.055</b> | <b>1.808.908</b> | <b>2.133.748</b> | <b>2.232.049</b> |
| MALE   | 560.924          | 688.157          | 814.999          | 861.000          |
| FEMALE   | 965.131          | 1.120.751        | 1.318.749        | 1.371.049        |

RAIS-MTE data.

Chart 1  
Northeast: Persons Employed in Public Administration,  
by gender, 2000-2007



RAIS-MTE data.

On the opposite situation is the Industrial sector in the Northeast. Its growing importance (from 10 to 13 per cent of total regional, formal employment from 2000 to 2007) has not increased the ratio of female jobs (35 per cent of male jobs, in average).

Not surprisingly, in both extreme cases, male wages were higher. In Public Administration, differentials (that is, female's as related to male's paycheck) were 62 per cent in 2000 and 72 per cent in 2007. More detailed assessments would possibly reveal the

importance of the above-mentioned **hierarchical** dimension of gendered inequality in this sector, as much as the importance of the **sector** (or territorial) component of gendered inequality in the case of Industry. But both are there, for sure.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS: some post-Crisis scenarios**

One of the main outcomes of the current degree of production internationalization has been the dismantling of a mainly male 'working aristocracy' employed at large plants, gradually replaced by a low-paid proletariat, largely represented by feminine contingents, and working in growing industrial sectors out of the Global North (Sassen, 2003; Lombardi, op. cit.). Economic crises highlight the gender dimension of those displacements, thus revealing the conflicts that are in the essence of the theory of the sexual division of labor – a social, historical, and cultural construction of masculine-feminine categories, with gender itself being a system that organizes hierarchical differences, in which domination and oppression are very much present (Kergoat, 1998).

The 2008 financial-economic crisis that emerged in the American subprime mortgage market hit some Brazilian sectors harder than others – namely, agriculture and (especially) industry rather than the service sector. For those it meant a reversal of a tendency, as far as the creation of jobs is considered. The figure for job openings (salaried, formal) in October 2008 was 61,000 against the October 2004 to 2007 average of 146,000 openings. Seen from a gender perspective, these figures have made some analysts point out an ongoing process of 'de-feminization' – through the growth of male positions in some branches. Nevertheless, the process of displacement of male construction workers went on during the harder months of the crisis, with no observed reversal: while men's positions fell by 3 per cent, the hiring of women at this specific branch was higher than 15% (Lombardi, op. cit., p. 51)...

Far from that, we believe that, besides the fact that the structural transformations of the labor market dating to the 1990-2000s are still valid, the present conjuncture has managed to reinforce gendered vulnerabilities. Women keep on having the more precarious jobs. Regionally, in the case of Northeastern Brazil, this means not only that a niche like domestic, paid work – which is of great importance for absorbing working women in the metropolitan areas of Recife and Salvador<sup>9</sup> – remains segregated as it always used to be; but also, that, mostly on the countryside (where wages are typically lower), the growing entry of female labor force in manufacturing has been through the subcontracting of domestic production<sup>10</sup>, under the aegis of an institutional discourse on 'empowerment' that has made lots of working women begin to consider themselves emancipated entrepreneurs rather than dependant informal proletarians.

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<sup>9</sup> In the metropolitan areas of those capitals, where gender issues interact more clearly with racial issues, in 2008 18,2 per cent (Recife) and 16,7 per cent (Salvador) of the employed women were domestic, paid workers, according to DIEESE data (DIEESE, 2009). In a society like Brazilian, of which a lot has been said about the contemporary abolishing of rigid societal, rigid norms, the almost ubiquitous presence of maids – the absolute majority of them being women, frequently black women – makes 1930s Gilberto Freyre's writings on the sad fate of freed Brazilian slaves up-to-date.

<sup>10</sup> Commonly in the garment industry.



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