WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS: WHAT WORKS?

Introduction

The central purpose of this paper is to investigate non-traditional occupations (NTOs) and employment for women, explore failures, successes and remaining barriers for women in the workplace. Specifically it examines those barriers that have remained impervious to the idea that this area of employment has the potential to promote economic independence and equality of opportunities for women.

Definition of NTOs

The U.S. Department of Labor defines Non-Traditional Occupations (NTOs) as jobs in which 25% or less of the workforce is female. Non-traditional occupations include working in areas such as the construction industry, in mills, and in repair services.

Labor Market Data: Two Diverse Economies

A number of factors determine and affect not only the number of women who participate in technical and vocational training, but also the particular courses of training that they undertake. Many of these factors come in the form of barriers, obstacles and problems that severely limit female participation in technical and vocational training, especially in non-traditional training areas, and ultimately their participation in various sectors of the labour market.

- In the USA women represent less than 25 % of individuals employed in NTOs yet by the end of year 2000, skilled labor was expected to make up 65% of the job market

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- 762,000 women had careers in the construction industry from 1994-1995
- there has been a 171% increase in the number of construction companies owned by women since 1987
- more than 209,000 women were construction managers and owners in 1990
- women hold nine% of all NTOs such as equipment mechanics, millwrights, electricians, plumbers and toolmakers.

Career and Technical Education Fact Sheet
http://www.toolsfortomorrow.com/ctefactsheet.htm

A look at the Jamaican labor market reveals that women are disadvantaged in many respects. Women make up nearly half of the labor force (46.7%) but they are predominately found occupying the low-status, low-income jobs and are also more than twice as likely to be unemployed as males.

The fact that male–dominated industries are in dire need of trained labour, example, in the construction industry (Turner 1995) and that in others the prospects are still good, should support the further promotion of women into non-traditional occupations. However, vocational training has so far been very much gender-patterned along traditional lines.

Levitt (1991) posited women, especially poor women, encounter persistent and pervasive disadvantages in the labour market. Women have to contend with fewer job opportunities, obtaining adequate employment only within a narrow range of occupations. A great deal needs to be done to achieve equal opportunities both in training and in the labour market as women continue to be employed in a narrow range of occupations, in the lower-paying sales and administrative support jobs, while men are more likely to work in higher-paying machine operator, and repair jobs (Women’s Bureau, U.S.Department of Labor). Furthermore, their multiple roles combined with their unfavourable position in the labour market, make women particularly vulnerable to the impact of the adjustment policies generated by several governments in the Caribbean, to enter male-dominated domains.
What has to be borne in mind is that many women have had no vocational or any other training. The lack of marketable skills is, therefore, one factor, which makes female absorption into the active labour force more difficult. Obviously, a great deal needs to be done to achieve equal opportunities both in training and in the labour market. School –to- work programs can help young women develop the skills required for NTOs and show them that these careers are viable alternatives.

Nevertheless, “gender bias, as well as discrimination in the labor market,” continue to “depress both female employment rates and wage earnings” (GTZ/HEART Trust/NTA, 2000). These operate in a way to keep women out of the traditional ‘male’ jobs and deny them access to better positions in society. Undoubtedly, the gender imbalance in the work force needs to be corrected through a continuing process of scientific research, data collection and evaluation.

The Role of Social Pressures, Perceptions and Attitudes

Attitudes based on perceived differences in male and female roles, responsibilities and capabilities are inculcated through early socialization in the home. These attitudes are reinforced at school, perpetuated throughout society and affect subject choices and career options of both male and female students. It is clear that attitudinal change is crucial and will have to take place at a number of levels before women can receive the approval of the society, which will allow them to participate freely in non-traditional occupations.

Arguably, early unwillingness of female students to enter non-traditional areas is the direct result of overt and subtle social pressures that operate in the training institutions and pressures from society at large. Furthermore, participation in training is still largely along gender lines and the existence of a high degree of sex stereotyping within curricula and teaching materials not only limits students’ choices but forces them to choose subjects that reinforce rather than weaken the sexual stereotypes.

In trying to explain imbedded inequalities one has to examine the occupational choices that women make, and the restrictions to which they are subjected. Women’s subject choices reflect, to a certain extent, traditional patterns and attitudes. A gender pattern persists also at
the University level (Leo-Rhynie, 1989). It is well known that teachers’ attitude to gender in non-traditional subjects is conservative and that their own gender biases influence student choices and performance. “The relatively low enrolment of females in non-traditional skill programs can be attributed to a number of factors, including social expectations that deter women from entering male dominated fields and employers’ resistance to hiring women” (GTZ / HEART Trust/NTA, Proposed Policy Framework, 2000).

Encouraging women into non-traditional jobs involves recognition that on the one hand external variables limiting the access to non-traditional careers are important, while on the other hand more individual factors such as the person’s self-image must be approached. Female students who enter into non-traditional areas of training experience a significant amount of pressure from their peers, who tease, heckle and ridicule them with myths such as:

1. **Certain jobs are “men's work”**
   Attitudes about which jobs are appropriate for men and which ones are appropriate for women are the result of tradition and socialization. The vast majority of job requirements are unrelated to gender.

2. **Heavy, physical labour is non-traditional for women.**
   Strength requirements for non-traditional jobs are often exaggerated. Many non-traditional jobs are less demanding than housework and many traditional women’s jobs are just as physically demanding as some non-traditional jobs.

   Women have performed many jobs now thought to be non-traditional for women in the past. Throughout history, women have done heavy labor on farms and in the fields alongside men, and during WW11 over 6M women entered the labor force to build ships, airplanes and factory goods.

3. **Non-traditional jobs are too dirty, noisy and dangerous for women**
   Non-traditional jobs are often dirty and sometimes dangerous. However, both men and women must weigh the hazards with the benefits of taking certain jobs. Women like men do not mind getting dirty when they are paid a good wage and with proper safety instruction, all workers can minimize the hazards they are likely to face on the job.
5 A woman’s place is the home, not on a construction site.
In 1994, women accounted for 46% of the total labour force. Nearly two thirds of all women age 16 and over were in the labor force in 1991. Projections are that two out of every three workers entering the labor force by 2005 will be women (Women’s Bureau. *Women Workers: Outlook to 2005*, U.S. Department of Labor, 1992)

6 Women won’t like trade work
On the contrary, many women enjoy working with their hands and outdoors. As a result, researchers have found that many tradeswomen have a high degree of job satisfaction

7 Women and men are represented equally in most occupations
Female workers are concentrated in traditionally female occupations. In 1994 women represented 78.9% of all administrative support (including clerical) workers and 66.1% of all retail and personnel services workers, but only 9.3% in non-traditional occupations.

8 Women on a job site make it difficult for men to concentrate; they are too distracting.
It will be different, at first, to have a woman on a work site if an employer has never hired one before. While sexual harassment can happen in any work environment, it can be particularly harsh for women working in non-traditional occupations. The problem that must be stopped is the harassing behavior, not women’s entrance into the workplace. Women are now more accepted on sites and many contractors are no longer so resistant to taking on women.

9 Women will lose their femininity if they work in a trade.
While women need to be physically prepared for NT jobs, there is nothing unfeminine about being physically fit.
10   Women do not have the mechanical or mathematical aptitude for skilled trade.

Occupations traditionally dominated by men require competency in higher-order math and science. However, there is no empirical evidence of differences in women and men’s innate skills potential to justify existing occupational segregation.

(Work4Women: Myths and Facts about NTOs  
http://www.work4women.org)

The weight of such peer pressure is often enough to prevent any but the bravest from crossing gender lines and venturing into non-traditional occupations. Women who persist through education and training face still more barriers on the job, including isolation from other women, lack of clean facilities, ill-fitting or wrong equipment and difficulties with childcare (WOW 1993; Eisenberg 1988). Women are at greater risk for sexual harassment in NTO jobs or training (WOW 1993)

Within the larger society females who dare to break into occupations considered as men’s work, are often subjected to pressures and social sanctions including ridicule, sexual harassment (WOW), undermining of their self esteem and confidence, and discrimination in the form of lower wages and few if any opportunity for promotion or mobility within their jobs. They realise that they face an uphill task, that the odds are stacked against them and that they will constantly have to prove themselves by performing better than their male counterparts.

Psychological factors play a role in women’s choice of non-traditional careers. “Resisting pressure to follow gender traditional career paths requires exceptional strength and self-reliance’ (Stephenson and Burge 1997). However, studies show women pursuing non-traditional occupations have a strong self-concept, internal locus of control, high motivation, higher self-efficacy, and perceive more opportunities (Stephenson and Burge 1997).

Breaking down barriers and removing obstacles are difficult tasks and can be fraught with serious negative repercussions especially if alternatives are not carefully, and thoroughly thought out, and if attempts to introduce alternatives are not handled with a high degree of sensitivity. The task of changing undesirable and unacceptable attitudes that still exist with respect to women’s role in society, and what activities and work are proper and appropriate for females to engage in are formidable ones.
Why Consider NTOs?

NTOs pay 20-30% more than jobs traditionally held by women and offer excellent benefits and career advancement potential. Against this reality, women are being encouraged to consider, train for and remain in NTO careers because these can lead to their economic self-sufficiency, help support their families and build their assets to obtain a home or to pursue higher education.

Benefits and Challenges of Working in NTOs

Non-traditional employment offers several benefits that enable women to become economically self-sufficient. Moreover, the benefits of non-traditional employment for women far outweigh the real and perceived challenges to working in non-traditional occupations, which can be trounced if appropriate support systems are put in place.

Benefits Include:

- higher wages…..women who choose non-traditional careers can expect to have lifetime earnings that are 150% more than that of women who choose traditional careers. The majority of women work because of economic necessity, and non-traditional jobs better enable women to support themselves and their families.

- better benefits….non-traditional jobs in the trades and technical fields tend to be unionised, with greater health benefits, sick leave, life insurance, and pension/retirement plans than traditional female jobs.

- opportunities for advancement…..NTOs tend to have more established career ladders than traditionally female jobs. This translates directly into salary and job upgrades as a worker achieves higher skill levels on the job.

- job satisfaction……by expanding the number of jobs women enter, women are more likely to find closer ‘occupational fit’ with their skills, interest and personalities.
Challenges

There are many misconceptions about women working in NT jobs. However, many real challenges remain for women working in NTOs. Women may be exposed to discrimination and/or harassment in NT jobs. Non-traditional workplaces can be hazardous, requiring safety protocols, special equipment and protective clothing, and work related injuries. Sometimes, being the only woman on the job, she may experience isolation. Family and friends may not be supportive of a woman who is breaking their stereotypes about women and work. Transportation and childcare can also be significant challenges for women seeking and entering non-traditional jobs.

For women to penetrate many of the barriers afore-mentioned we cannot over-emphasize the importance of building bridges between education, employment and economic development, against the background of the historical gender segregated patterns of enrolment in vocational training. We need to prepare employers and unions for assessing students for work experience, and they have to be sensitised about gender issues, isolation, sexual harassment, and the need to prepare the workplace. Training on issues such as how to present NTO options to women and how to help students deal with sexual harassment and discrimination is important. Stress must be placed on the importance of an integrated community-based network of educators, service providers and employers in channelling women into NTOs, thus expanding opportunities for women through career development services, education and advocacy.

Contribution of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs rather than government institutions have pioneered initiatives in the field. A gradual recognition of the need for special programmes within which to address gender imbalance in NTOs, has led to several NGO initiatives, and to a lesser extent government involvement. Within these programmes/projects, it has been possible to concentrate attention on the specific needs of women and to experiment with new and innovative ways of helping women to gain self-confidence and to acquire new knowledge and a wider range of skills. Unfortunately, these initiatives are undertaken largely on an ad hoc basis, with each country in the region doing something different.
While the non-formal education programmes and small-scale projects initiated by NGOs have succeeded in increasing the participation of girls and women in technical/vocational training in non-traditional occupations, women need more information about all possible careers and training opportunities.

**Good News**

There are several programs in the USA that have succeeded in helping women enter a wider range of occupations.

These include WOW (Wider Opportunities for Women) and the US Non-traditional Employment Training (NET) Project which has become a model for implementing the Non-traditional Employment for Women ACT. Eisenberg (1998) documents the accomplishment of many women in construction. Under the Manufacturing Technology Partnership (MTP) in Flint, Michigan, employers participate in workshops to help them recognize gender issues and discuss ways of adapting to the inclusion of women, in non-traditional roles, in their workplaces. Additionally, women are equipped with strategies to help them cope with any obstacles they might come up against, such as sexual harassment or isolation.

In the Caribbean, there is a long tradition of NGO involvement and some initiatives have begun to be taken for providing women with training in non-traditional skills. Many organizations and groups with a special focus on equality and rights of women have sprung up during the last decade. Women and Development (WAND), Caribbean Women’s Association (CARIWA), UNESCO Skills training program for women -- Grenada Women's Bureaus, the Women's Construction Collective (WCC), Jamaica, United Women’s Woodworking and Welding Project, Jamaica, Women’s revolutionary Socialist Movement (WRSM) Guyana, the St. Andres Woodwork Project, Grenada, (CARICOM, 1990).

The Women’s Construction Collective (WCC), founded in 1983, provides training in construction skills to women who are from low-income communities and who have limitations in educational attainment and skills.
Through the advocacy of these agencies, women in the region are now better able to understand themselves, are now better able to understand and appreciate the links between gender and the economic and social development of the region, and the situation of women. These organizations continue to advocate and agitate for changes in the law, in government policy, and in attitudes toward women, and for the reduction of barriers that limit women’s participation in all aspects of work and life in their countries.

The recently implemented HEART Trust/NTA /IADB Regional Project in Non-Traditional Skills Training for Women, which aims to train 1150 women in Belize, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, is an example of a partnership effort between an international agency and government agencies targeting women as a special group.

The HEART Trust/NTA 1990-1995 Five-Year Development Plan placed great emphasis on vocational training for women and espoused that it would, eliminate sex stereotyping and its effects; increase enrolment of females in non-traditional areas; reactivate women’ woodworking and welding projects and promote teacher-training emphasising non-traditional and vocational skills. Recognizing that women in Jamaica suffer from inequalities in the social and economic systems that place them at a disadvantage in achieving self-sufficiency and reaching their human potential, HEART Trust/NTA “supports the integration of women into vocational skills training programmes and has been actively recruiting women into traditionally male dominated fields” (HEART Trust/NTA, Comprehensive Plan, 1999).

The Best of Intentions

The efforts of the last 30 years have been largely add-ons; they have not been institutionalised, and cultural/structural change has not happened. Rather than opening doors to more women “pioneering’ has become a permanent condition.

Kerfa (1999) opined “We’ve come a long way…maybe”, but questioned whether the concept of ‘non-traditional occupations’ is disappearing, and if women are making inroads into fields in which they have traditionally been under-represented, after more than a quarter century of federal legislation and public and private sector initiatives.

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Profile of Women Who Have Been Successful in NTOs: The Jamaican Experience

We need to highlight the achievement of women who have succeeded in non-traditional occupations. At the same time, such women need to become more aware of the important role they have to play and of the valuable contribution they can make by motivating and encouraging other women to expand their horizons and career aspirations.

Barriers are not gender specific and information about the few women who have succeeded in these fields is either non-existent or unavailable. Hence the opportunity for these women, who have made a break-through in male dominated fields, to serve as role models and to motivate other women is often lost.

The Superintendent of Pilotage charged with the responsibility of guiding a ship safely into Jamaican harbours is a woman. She sees her biggest challenge as getting the full cooperation of all entities which impact on the pilotage service to increase efficiency and reduce delays. Working in a male-dominated field offers no limitation for women who excel. “You have to demonstrate that you know what you are about, and once have done that, you gain respect of your colleagues.”

On the port of Kingston, Jamaica, there are three women matching skills and knowledge with men, driving straddle carriers from shipsides to storage areas. Traditionally only men would be found in these ‘high seats’ on the port as it was thought that this was not the kind of affair for the faint hearted, but for the brave and daring - usually men.

“Being a woman and driving one of these machines will seem awesome to some persons, but to me, it is exciting and above all it is something I love and enjoy doing” said one of the longest serving female operators in a recent interview. Even with occasional low moments, they would not trade their profession with any other in the world, and they aspire to driving even larger locomotives such as cranes on the port.

Commenting on the working relations with their mostly male co-workers they stated that the relationship was good as the men accepted their female colleagues as equals and treated them with respect. “I get no resistance from the men with whom I work. My supervisors do not treat me differently and I do not expect any special treatment,” observed one of the interviewees.
The company emphasized “sex is not a factor when they recruit workers. “We look for skills, knowledge and ability” “The female workers have worked extremely well, so much so that we are looking to having more women workers, we want people with the necessary skills and who are willing to work.”

Policies and Legislation

In spite of legislation against discrimination on the basis of sex and for equality of rights of women there are several examples throughout the region of subtle as well as obvious ways in which both laws and policies are being violated and ignored.

All territories in the region have enacted legislation designed to regulate conditions and to guarantee health and safety of workers. In each territory women have the same rights as men to work; discrimination on the grounds of sex is unconstitutional.

The Government of Jamaica has issued a Policy statement, which recognizes that in policy planning, special consideration must be given to women’s multiple responsibilities in the household and as income earners. Issues identified include that of women continuing to be streamed into ‘female-typed’ education and training, and the attitude of employers toward women who have non-traditional skills.

Policies are often not well developed and regional approach towards introducing women to non-traditional occupations has been peripheral. It is not uncommon for many policies, especially those concerning fuller participation of women as beneficiaries of national development, to remain at the level of rhetoric. One must, however, be mindful of constraints or out-dated legislation.

In the 1970s, the imbalance in gender distribution across occupations came to be recognized as a socio-economic problem. Federal legislation aimed at education, training and employment began to address the issue over the next two decades in the USA.
In 1990, Congress passed legislation to increase opportunities for women in non-traditional fields, including the Non-Traditional Employment for Women (NEW) 1991, the Women in Apprenticeship and Non-Traditional Occupations (WANTO) Act 1992, and to provide job training and technical assistance for women.

Have These Combined Efforts Made a Difference?

Estimates suggest that ‘to reach equity in gender representation across occupations, 77% of the U.S. labor force would have to change jobs” (Beyer and Finnegan 1997, p.4.) Both male and female tend to believe that gender equity has been achieved. In education and training, vocational enrolment is still largely segregated with 90% girls remaining clustered in traditional areas (Milgrim and Watkins 1994)

Policy measures assume that removal of barriers through legislation ensures a climate of equal access and institutions behave as if males and females have equal social and financial resources (Turner 1995)

Apparently, some barriers remain impervious to the legislative and education remedies attempted over the last 3 decades. Channelling into tradition gender paths persists in the family and school (Stephenson and Burge 1997). Career counselling should broaden choices for all students, but “few counsellors are actually trained to deal specifically with the vocational needs of non-traditional students” (Schnieder (1993) found that ‘impetus from school, guidance counsellors or other adults’ to encourage interest in NTOs ‘was conspicuously absent’.

What is needed are corrective approaches that address the wider socio-cultural issues that constitute the greatest barriers still limiting women’s participation in NTOs. These include gender-role socialization and workplace and school cultures that use male experience, knowledge, and cognitive/interactive styles as the norm (Turner 1995) Another limiting socio-cultural factor is women’s awareness that, rightly or wrongly, they still have primary responsibility for the family, which serves to moderate or limit their career choices (Olson 1999)
The Way Forward

“Clearly the picture of female participation in technical and vocational education and training programmes is incomplete if it does not reflect the existence of an increasing number of women with training and technical skills in non-traditional male dominated fields” (Kerfa, 1999).

While it may be true that many of the skills acquired are at the technician level in occupations which are at the lower level of the ladder in the industrial sectors, they are directly linked to employment opportunities and create possibilities for the women to earn an income in male dominated occupations.

Technical and vocation training programmes should be part of any comprehensive plan aimed at creating opportunities for employment and job creation. Public education programmes should be developed and implemented to sensitize the public and to focus attention on existing negative attitudes to female participation in non-traditional work. In addition, special campaigns need to be mounted to encourage employers to accept and employ more women in non-traditional areas. Extensive use must be made of the media to project women employed in non-traditional fields.

What Can Be Done Now: Key Strategies

Approaches to be employed to motivate and interest large numbers of women in non-traditional careers include:

- providing information about non-traditional career options
- providing opportunities for training
- encouragement to take a non-traditional route
- integration into the labour force and continuing support
- increasing career options by offering a variety of male and female role models.
- encouraging exploration of non-traditional fields of work and introducing girls to dynamic women who have successfully combined paid work with family and community involvement.
- dispelling some of the common myths about women working in NTOs
- encouraging self-reliance by supporting all that interests, excites and challenges girls.
- training educators to recruit and retain young women in non-traditional occupation programs.

Experience has shown that women are interested in NTOs when they are actively recruited. Career information showing women in a wide variety of NTOs can support recruitment of young women. Most young women do not picture themselves working in NT fields and need consistent exposure to materials and career exploration activities (such as talking with a female role model) to stimulate their interest.

Special career showcases should be organized with the purpose of promoting non-traditional careers for women, highlighting women who have been successful in obtaining or creating employment in non-traditional areas. Women are most likely to succeed when prepared for challenges they may encounter when they pursue non-traditional career tracks. Young women also benefit from the presence of women role models in math and science and other adults who have high expectations for their achievement in these fields.

Conclusion

Evidently, much work needs to be done before women can become a regular feature of the non-traditional occupational landscape of countries in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the world. However, successes so far prove that this is a promising path with great potential. I do not know if we are phenomenal, but we have done a lot and will continue to encourage women along this path.
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Promote non-traditional employment opportunities what a girl needs
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Work 4 Women, a project for WOW: *non-traditional occupations* [http://www.work4women.org](http://www.work4women.org)