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**WOMEN IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZILIAN LABOR  
MARKET IN THE 2000s:**  
growth, post-crisis scenarios and gendered job  
precariousness

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## WOMEN IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET IN THE 2000s: growth, post-crisis scenarios and gendered job precariousness

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.

## WOMEN IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET IN THE 2000s: growth, post-crisis scenarios and gendered job precariousness

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.

## 'FEMINIZATION' OF BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET': impacts on persistent gender inequality

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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. However, inequality remains and is much expressed in wage differentials and in the permanence of relative positions: women as 'gendered' labor force.

“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 levels and possible careers, simultaneously. The same logic 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).

## 'FEMINIZATION' OF BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET': impacts on persistent gender inequality

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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 (Lombardi, 2010).

Data provided by Lombardi (op. cit.) 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).

## 'FEMINIZATION' OF BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET': impacts on persistent gender inequality

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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' (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.

## 'FEMINIZATION' OF BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET': impacts on persistent gender inequality

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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) **by sector**, since economic activities reveal themselves as if they were gendered, and women are more present in some and excluded from others, according 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).

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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).



## 'FEMINIZATION' OF BRAZILIAN LABOR MARKET': impacts on persistent gender inequality

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 - % of employed population by monthly earnings in Brazil, 2006**

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

## FEMALE JOBS AND WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL TRENDS IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL IN THE 2000S (2000-2007)

The consulted database was the Annual Report on Social Information, 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. It covers 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.

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).

## FEMALE JOBS AND WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL TRENDS IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL IN THE 2000S (2000-2007)

**Table 2 - Northeastern Brazil: Formal employment by sector and gender,  
2000-2007 (selected years)**

	2000	2003	2006	2007
<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

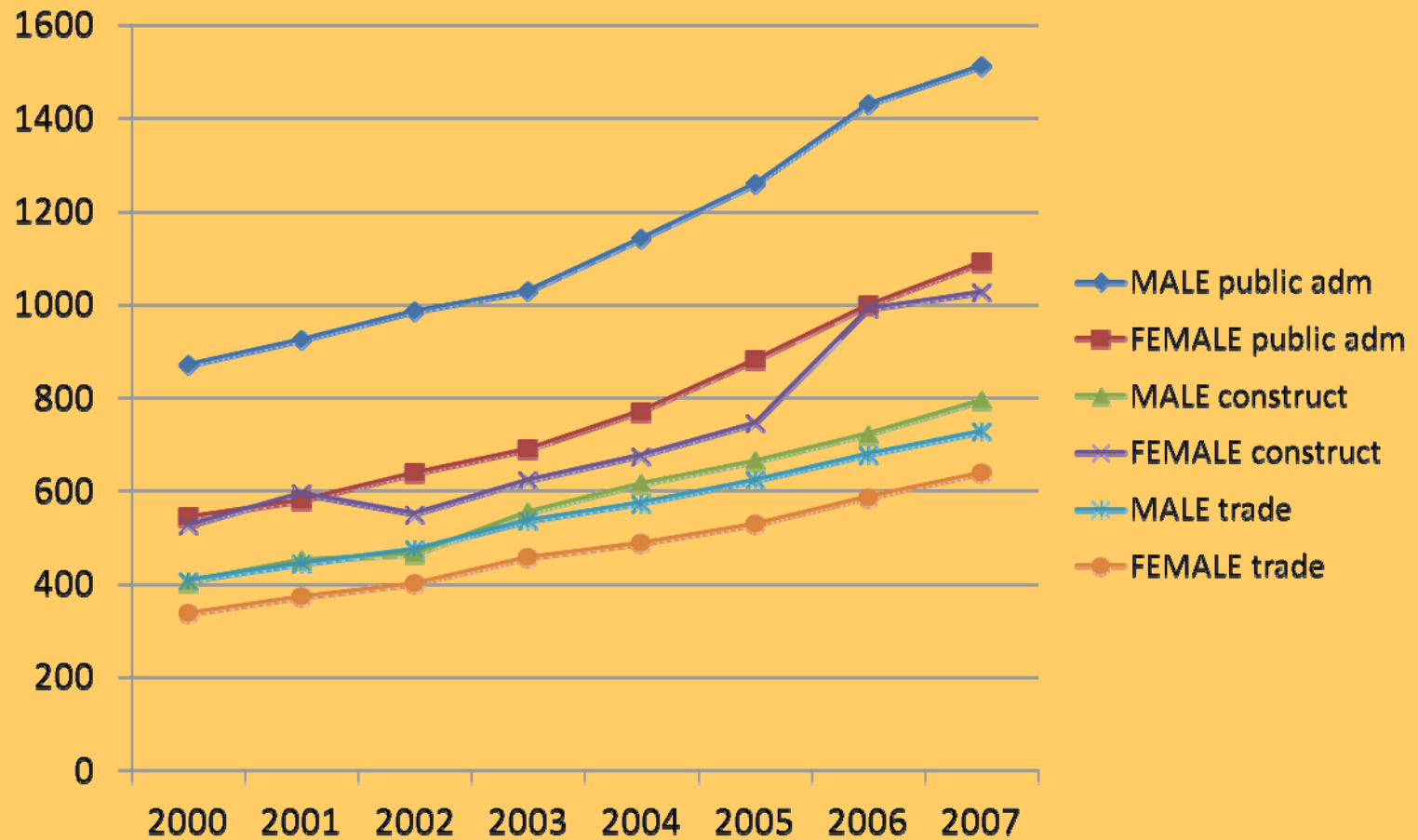
## FEMALE JOBS AND WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL TRENDS IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL IN THE 2000S (2000-2007)

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. It 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).

Not surprisingly, in both cases, male wages were higher. In Public Administration, differentials 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.

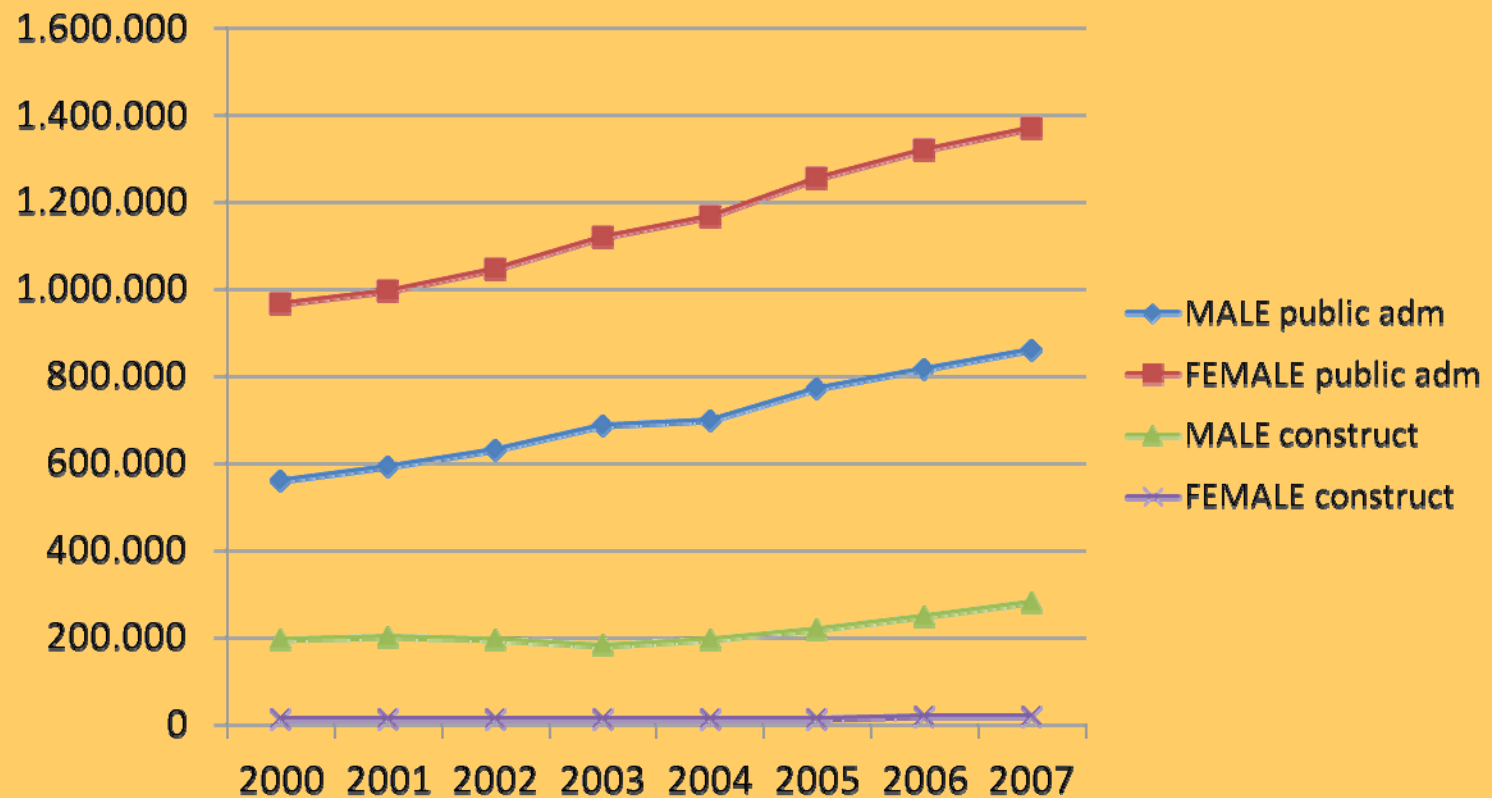
## FEMALE JOBS AND WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL TRENDS IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL IN THE 2000S (2000-2007)

Chart 1 – Northeastern Brazilian formal labor market: sectors with the highest wage growth rates, by gender, 2000-2007



## FEMALE JOBS AND WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL TRENDS IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL IN THE 2000S (2000-2007)

**Chart 1 – Northeastern Brazilian formal labor market: employment growth in Public Adm and Construction, by gender, 2000-2007**



## CONCLUDING REMARKS: some post-Crisis scenarios

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)...

## CONCLUDING REMARKS: some post-Crisis scenarios

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.

This has meant not only that a niche like domestic, paid work – which is of great importance for absorbing working women in the Northeastern metropolitan areas of Recife and Salvador – 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, 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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***OBRIGADO!***

***THANK YOU!***

***DANKE!***

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