

The “Manly” Jobs Problem

By Susan Chira

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- 1 Insults, groping—even assault. That kind of sexual harassment came along with being one of the very few women on a construction site, in a mine, or in a shipyard. Those professions remain male-dominated and the harassment can seem, for countless women, to be intractable.
- 2 But what if the problem isn’t simply how their male co-workers behave? What if the problem is the very way society has come to see the jobs themselves? Some jobs are “male”—not just men’s work, but also a core definition of masculinity itself. Threatening that status quo is not just uppity—it can be dangerous.
- 3 This dynamic plays out in workplaces of all classes and crosses partisan political lines. But it is particularly stark in the blue-collar jobs that once scored a kind of manly trifecta: They paid a breadwinner’s wage, embodied strength and formed the backbone of the American economy.
- 4 As Christine Williams, a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, pungently put it, women in so-called men’s jobs are labeled either “sluts or dykes,” each abused in their own ways. Although statistics are spotty, some studies have concluded that sexual harassment is more regular and severe in traditionally male occupations. And a Times Upshot analysis of blue-collar occupations showed that women’s presence in these jobs stayed static or shrank between 2000 and 2016.
- 5 Women are so scarce in these trades that some men refuse to see them as women. The only woman in a repair crew at wind-farm sites charged in a lawsuit that her co-workers called her by male nicknames, from common to obscene, because they thought only a man could handle the job. Men suggested she must have a penis or be a lesbian.
- 6 In interviews with more than 60 women in male-dominated trades like construction, Amy Denissen, an associate professor of sociology at California State University at Northridge and Abigail Saguy, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, found countless similar examples. While lesbians are also harassed, “in some ways women who are lesbian are seen as less threatening,” Professor Saguy said. “They’re seen as not fully women.”
- 7 Women who try to go along with the sexual banter, or who act feminine, are seen as either coming on to men or less competent in a workplace culture where proficiency is defined in masculine terms. “Sexual harassment is often a way in which the men reaffirm women’s femininity, say this is who you are, back in your place,” Professor Saguy said. “At the same time, women will play up their femininity and flirt a little bit, and play along with some of the stereotypes of femininity to be accepted.”
- 8 Women as well as men can wield the weapon of sexuality in the workplace—as I saw in months of interviews about sexual harassment at two Ford plants in Chicago. In that case, in addition to persistent abuse by men, several women were also accused of trading sex for better, less physically demanding jobs. Whether women were coerced into sex or gaming a

system, one constant has been that in most cases, men are supervisors and have the power to dispense threats or favors.

- 9 Power has been entwined with the evolution of male manufacturing jobs since the industrial revolution, said Alice Kessler-Harris, a professor emerita of history at Columbia University. Although many of the earliest factory jobs in places like textile mills were held by women who could be spared from the farm, men reserved many of the highest-status, highest-paying jobs. “It isn’t new,” Professor Kessler-Harris said of sexual harassment and male resentment. “It’s as old as male culture. The men assumed the best jobs, the skilled jobs, were theirs. If a woman dared to enter them, God help her.”
- 10 Jobs took on specifically male or female characteristics—and society valued them accordingly. Nurses, often men in the early days of the profession, were redefined as nurturers when women swelled their ranks; secretaries, once exclusively men, yielded to the dexterous fingers of women who typed and were recast as “the sunshine of the office,” Professor Kessler-Harris said.
- 11 These jobs often paid less, while the ones requiring physical strength paid more. When women were needed during World War II, cutting sheet metal was likened to cutting a pattern through cloth, and welding to opening an orange juice can, she said. Then after the war, men reclaimed these jobs and most women were exiled back to the kitchen.
- 12 After 1964, as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was gradually used to pry open industries once largely closed to women like construction, mining and shipbuilding, some men’s rage swelled, Professor Kessler-Harris said.
- 13 “I don’t think you can understand this notion of sexual harassment and men’s anger with women, their willingness to take out on them all this sexual hostility, unless you imagine that sense of entitlement in the job,” she said.
- 14 Professor Saguy said that employers played on this sense that manliness was intertwined with such jobs. “Even if they have to tolerate bad working conditions, the compensation is they were real men,” she said. “Then women were moving into these occupations, so what does that mean? If women can do the job, maybe it’s not so masculine after all.”
- 15 Already, some fear a backlash to the intense focus on sexual harassment. And there are worries that many of the prescribed remedies, from training to promoting women to stiffening penalties, could fall short, generate more resentment or perpetuate stereotypes that women are always victims. Lawsuits abound but seldom force upheavals in entire systems, Professor Williams said.
- 16 Many scholars I interviewed argued that fundamental changes are necessary, such as restructuring organizations to be less hierarchical and re-examining pay scales for men’s and women’s work. “I would like to think there will be permanent changes that come out of this,” Professor Saguy said. “I don’t see them yet.”

- 17 But some who have observed or trained once-recalcitrant men cite small successes in changing perceptions about the nature of “male” jobs. Ellen Bravo, a director of Family Values at Work, found that male firefighters in Kansas City, Mo., had adapted to changes they once dismissed as unmanly, such as wearing masks to protect against lung cancer or talking about grief after witnessing death and suffering.
- 18 Jessica Smith, an associate professor at the Colorado School of Mines, studied the successful experience of women in a Wyoming mine in the 2000s during a time of hiring expansion, when women were not perceived as taking jobs from men. “They redefined what it was to be a good miner away from this very hyperbolic masculine image,” she said. “A good miner was someone who cared for their co-workers. They were responsible. These were issues that women could also embody.”
- 19 Now that leaders of some organizations are toppling, Professor Kessler-Harris surveyed this moment with a historian’s eye. “After 50 years when women swallowed hard and put up with it, or quit, finally women are saying this is not acceptable anymore,” she said. “What we’re seeing now is an attack on male power and the possibility at least of change.”

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