

NEVA MAKGETLA: Industrial policy overlooks employment of women in certain sectors

Downplaying women's work is a long-standing tradition in SA

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by NEVA MAGKETLA



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Women's formal employment still varies hugely by industry. Women are concentrated in services and retail, with limited opportunities in manufacturing and even less in mining and construction. Yet SA's industrial policy at best downplays services. In the process, it essentially excludes most of the industries that provide decent work for women.

Despite progress since 1994, women are still underrepresented in formal private employment. Official labour force surveys find that women hold just 38% of formal

private jobs, though they are 51% of the adult population. In government, women have more than 60% of jobs, mostly as teachers, healthcare workers, administrators and cleaners. But the private sector comprises 80% of all formal employment, so women still make up only 44% of the total formal workforce.

The picture is worse for African women. They are 42% of the working-aged population but get just 25% of formal private jobs. In contrast, 6% of formal private workers are white women, twice their share in the adult population. White men, who also make up 3% of the working-age population, hold 9% of formal private jobs.

SA's industrial policy has long focused primarily on goods production and construction – where women are particularly poorly represented. Women held only a quarter of formal jobs in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, construction and utilities. Taken together, in 2023 these sectors provided 16% of formal employment for women and 35% for men.

By itself, manufacturing generated 8% of women's formal work and 12% of men's. But clothing and textiles employed a quarter of all women workers in formal manufacturing. If it is excluded, manufacturing provided only 6% of women's formal jobs, compared with 11% for men.

Community and personal services plus retail were far more important for women. In these sectors they held 39% of jobs. Taken together, care work and retail provided 45% of women's formal work, but only 22% of men's. In the private formal sector alone they contributed 68% of women's employment, compared with 12% for men.

In SA's industrial policy, however, community and personal services plus retail barely exist, and public services such as health and education are entirely invisible. In theory, services may be included when they directly support goods production. In practice, they are represented almost exclusively by business process services – effectively call centres.

No industrial policy document has ever attempted a systematic understanding of the economic effects of the public and private services. Yet besides generating the bulk of decent work for women, those services provide critical investments in social and human capital.

Writing off women's work means ignoring some of the most dynamic and productive industries in the modern economy. Consider the auto industry compared with private healthcare. Auto is by far the largest beneficiary of SA's industrial policy, with support estimated by the Treasury at R30bn a year, or more than three times the department of

trade, industry & competition's entire budget. It generates just more than 100,000 jobs and is one of SA's top five export industries, but hasn't grown substantially in the past decade. And it employs only 36% women.

In contrast, private healthcare services employ almost 200,000 people, of whom three-quarters are women; generate substantial exports through services to foreign patients that are not captured in national trade data; and are critical for maintaining worker productivity. Judging by SA's industrial policy documents, however, private healthcare services simply don't exist. Pharmaceuticals manufacturing gets some attention, but not providers of healthcare.

Downplaying women's work is a long-standing tradition in SA. Many industrial policy boffins seem to equate industrialisation with heavy industry, where men in hard hats use big machines to produce serious products, rather than consumer goods and services. But that approach neglects fast-growing parts of SA's economy that play a central role in improving lives and building social cohesion, and in the process provide the bulk of decent jobs for women.

- *Makgetla is a senior researcher with Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies.*

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