

Opinion

Betsey A Stevenson

# Manly Men Need to Do More Girly Jobs

Trump needs to recognize that metal-bashing isn't the future.



Occupation of the future. *Photographer: Joe Raedle/Getty Images*

By Betsey A Stevenson

December 7, 2016 at 6:00 AM EST

Donald Trump wants America to make things. On the campaign trail, he promised to bring iPhone assembly to the U.S. More recently, he has threatened to retaliate against any company that moves jobs offshore.

If he really wants to help his supporters, though, he should think twice about what kinds of jobs to promote.

Trump's generation has watched manufacturing dwindle to a small sliver of the American economy. Nearly half the private-sector jobs in the 1940s and '50s were in the goods-producing sector. Today

less than one in six are.

The service sector has more than made up for the losses. A wealthier, better-educated and older population has allowed professional and business services to flourish, and boosted demand for various kinds of care and help. Over the last 20 years, the education and health services sector have added 9 million jobs, while the manufacturing sector has shrunk by 5 million.

Problem is, the new jobs are in occupations held disproportionately by women. As of 2015, men held just 23 percent of private-sector jobs in education and health services, compared with 73 percent in manufacturing. Lower-skilled men don't seem to want service jobs. As the goods sector has declined, so has the labor-force participation of men without a college degree. Today only 83 percent of prime-age men with a high school degree or less are employed or actively seeking work. In 1964, 97 percent were.

Those who have adapted by seeking more education have done well. The unemployment rate of college graduates is a mere 2.3 percent, and 94 percent of college-educated prime age men are in the labor force. They also earn a lot more: The difference between the wages of college and high school graduates has never been larger.

Policy wonks like me have wondered why more lower-skilled men aren't adapting. Why don't they take care of their children when they are out of work? Why don't they take jobs as home health aides? Or sign up for degrees in nursing? One problem is that these occupations conflict with traditional notions of masculinity. They require sitting, caring and communicating, as opposed to working with big machines.

Trump represents a vision of masculinity that those who embrace the modern economy have readily abandoned. He appeals to people who want to return to a world in which men could be men. He didn't win because the economy is weak (it isn't). He won in part because he promised to return us to a time when men are strong and work in manly jobs.

The challenge for men is much greater than what women faced in the 1960s through the 1980s, when the latter entered the workforce in greater numbers. Women's new role clashed with social norms around femininity, but they were able to merge the two. (Remember "I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in the pan?") By contrast, men are being asked to embrace traditionally feminine roles at work and at home, including helping with the cooking and laundry.

Our economy has evolved, and will keep evolving toward work that requires less strength and more kindness. Despite Trump's promises, it isn't possible to roll back time. Trade isn't the only reason we make less stuff; technological development has also eliminated many of the old goods-making jobs.

By encouraging men to cling to work that isn't coming back, Trump is doing them a disservice. The more important and difficult task is figuring out how to change the culture in ways that will allow them to do the jobs of the future. In other words, if Trump really wants to get more Americans working, he'll have to do something out of his comfort zone: make girly jobs appeal to manly men.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

To contact the author of this story:

Betsey A Stevenson at [betseys@umich.edu](mailto:betseys@umich.edu)

To contact the editor responsible for this story:

Mark Whitehouse at [mwhitehouse1@bloomberg.net](mailto:mwhitehouse1@bloomberg.net)