

Today's Women

Women and girls are half the world's population, do two-thirds of the world's work hours, receive a tenth of the world's income, and own less than a hundredth of the world's property. It was to attack this world-wide "apartheid of sex" that the U.N. launched the Decade for Women back in 1975. At the World Conference of the U.N. Decade for Women which ended on July 31 at Copenhagen, delegates from almost every nation assembled to take stock of what had been achieved in the five-year period starting from 1975. The conference organisers, working under former Jamaican Ambassador to the U.N., Lucille Mair, had earlier analysed questionnaires, filled in by 86 governments in an attempt to find out exactly what progress women are making towards equality.

Some of the results are: Two out of three of the world's illiterates are women. Faced with high costs of schooling and limited job opportunity for the educated, many parents tend to invest only in boys. The importance of girls' work in the home and the high incidence of teenage pregnancy are also cited as barriers to female enrolment. But some countries are trying harder than others – Nepal is now giving cash rewards to schools which have more girls in their classroom and Kenya is offering more scholarships and lower fees to women students.

Women are inching forward in politics – a move seen by the U.N. as essential for every kind of progress. In the last five years, women's movements have emerged in almost every nation. One result is that most countries are reporting a steady rise in the percentage of women exercising their right to vote.

There is also a slight but world-wide increase in the number of women being elected to public office. Egypt has reserved 30 seats in Parliament for women; Guinea Bissau has at least 2 women on every 5 person Revolutionary Council; and the U.S.S.R., a leader of female emancipation, has near equality of the sexes in its local Soviets and a 34 per cent female stake in the Supreme Soviet.

There is also some evidence that women's involvement in decision making might change priorities – in a survey covering three villages in India both men and women were asked to choose what the village most needed; the men voted for a new road and the women for a primary health care centre.

The idea that families are invariably headed by a man turns out to be one of the myths of the modern world, actually a third of all families are now headed by a woman. One cause is divorce, which has more than doubled in both the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. in the last 15 years. And in the developing countries, nearly half of the single women over 15 years of age are now mothers.

New figures from the International Labour Organisation nail another myth that men are the farmers and the food growers. In the developing world today women are responsible for 50 per cent of total food production. A recent survey in Tanzania, for example, shows that women work an average of 2600 hours a year in agriculture as opposed to only 1800 hours a year for men. In Africa as a whole, 60 per cent of all agricultural work, 50 per cent of animal husbandry, and 100 per cent of food processing is done by women.

Women are continuing to get a raw deal from the health services. Three quarters of the health problems of the developing world could be prevented by better nutrition, water, sanitation, education and immunization, all of which are usually the responsibility of women. But 80 per cent of medical and health budgets are devoted to doctors and hospitals promoting curative medicine to a small proportion of the population. In the rural areas only about 15 per cent of the population have access to modern health care centres during pregnancy and child birth, more than half of the world's women have no trained help. Only a third have access to family planning.

Overall, a woman's double burden of bearing and bringing up of children as well as working outside the home remains the heaviest milestone around the neck of female emancipation. For millions of women in the Third World – who cook and clean, sew and wash, plant and weed, care for the old and bring up the young a 16-hour day is not uncommon. For these women, there is neither the time nor the energy nor the opportunity to invest in training, careers, or self-development.

In the industrialized world, pay differentials have narrowed considerably since 1975 but, on average, a woman is still paid one-half to three-quarters of the money that a man can earn for doing the same job.

Most damning of all the findings is the fact that economic development itself can be bad news for women. Improving educational opportunities can mean a worsening of inequalities if it means that the opportunity only goes to boys. Improved agricultural techniques like tractors can shorten the working week of men who do the ploughing and lengthen the working hours of the women who do the weeding.

Throughout the developing world, says the Conference Secretariat, a major problem is that women's work is often invisible – a man laying a water pipe in a city is part of the statistics of development. A woman carrying a days supply of water from a well to a village is not. Her work, though vital to the task of meeting the daily needs of the family, goes unrecorded and unrewarded.