

POVERTY OF WOMEN : A MAJOR DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

POVERTY in general, and the poverty of women and children in particular, remains a major development challenge. Women play a central role in producing food, generating income, bearing and raising children, and in overall household production. They are a key force in reducing hunger and poverty, promoting family welfare and contributing to overall economic development in the developing world. As labourers for hire and on the family farm, women play a major role in food production.

They produce more than half the food in the developing countries and as much as three fourths in Africa; they probably account for more than 90 per cent of all time spent processing and preparing it. They play a substantial part in storing, processing and making food and cash crops, and they often take care of small livestock. In India, for example, women provide 75 per cent of the labour for transplanting and weeding rice, 60 per cent for harvesting and 33 per cent for threshing. In Bangladesh, apart from harvesting activities, they are responsible for the post-harvest work, including the processing of rice. In addition, women are the primary collectors of fuel and water, which poor people generally must provide for themselves in the absence of public services.

Moreover, women bear the major responsibility for

ensuring the nutrition, health and cognitive development of children during their crucial pre-school years.

In spite of their economic contribution, the weight of poverty falls heavily on women. They are often the poorest of the poor. Female members of a poor household are usually worse off than male members because of gender-based differences in the distribution of food and other entitlements within the family. In poor households they often shoulder more of the workload than men, are less educated and have no access to remunerative activities.

Poverty in the developing countries has been aggravated and often caused by wars and social unrest. In Africa, Central America and the Middle East, conflicts have led to the death and displacement of millions of people, destroyed infrastructure, disrupted agriculture and damaged the environment.

Those directly affected by armed conflicts — those killed or wounded — are largely men. But most refugees are widowed or abandoned women with children who have been forced to flee their communities.

Without the means to support themselves, many survive in refugee camps in their own or neighbouring countries, with the help of international relief agencies. The office of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees has estimated the global refugee population at about 15 million, approximately 80 per cent of whom are women and children. Inadequate food rations cause health problems for refugee women and children, who are particularly susceptible to nutritional deficiencies, particularly lack of iron, calcium iodine and vitamin C. Water-borne diseases tend to afflict refugees and displaced people especially women, who are the primary collectors of water. Overcrowding and poor sanitation compound the problems.

Over the past decade, the search for durable solutions to help refugees achieve self-reliance has become increasingly urgent because of the enormous growth in the number of refugees in Africa and West Asia. However, aid has not been tailored to the characteristics, skills or needs of the majority of the adult refugee population. Most refugee assistance intended to solve the problems of dependency has been directed towards men, who play a secondary role in the organization and support of refugee families. A new approach is needed to reach the bulk of adult refugees and their families and to design major training and employment-generating programs based on the existing or potential productive abilities of women.

A rapidly rising minority of women have become the sole support for their families, a phenomenon that occurs in both developing and developed countries. About one third of all households in the developing world are headed by women. In some regions, such as in rural Africa and the urban slums of Latin America, the number is closer to half. A large proportion are landless, unskilled, illiterate, unemployed or underemployed. One of the problems confronting the growing numbers of rural women workers in their limited access to land. In nearly all of the regions of the developing world, women face legal restrictions against inheriting land. Furthermore, poor rural women are denied capital, short-term credit, technical assistance and training because they are not officially categorized as "productive". Women's farm work is seen as a natural extension of rural household work, and it often goes unrecorded statistically.

Households headed by women in the developed countries are also poorer than those headed by men. In the United States, 53 per cent of poor families are supported by a woman with no spouse present, and nearly one in every four children under the age of six is currently brought up in poverty. Yet, gender inequality is more pronounced in the developing societies, particularly in rural areas. This inequality is evident in the female-male disparities in the share of women in the labour force, in literacy rates and educational levels, and in health and nutrition. (UNIC Dhaka)

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There has been no lack of trying at Oxfam to improve conditions in developing countries. The agency began its work in 1942 as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief. Its main concern then was starvation in Nazi-occupied Greece where famine had killed 400,000 people during the Allied blockade of Europe.

Later the committee began the work for which it has become famous — appealing for contributions to tackle poverty in the South. Today the agency operates in 71 countries; last year it had a budget of £43 million.

Oxfam's current projects range from disaster relief programmes to innovative sex-education clinics, from hospitals for African women mutilated by circumcision to a national park in the Amazon and services for the disabled of Lebanon.

For 20 years Oxfam has promoted fair trade by bringing handicrafts from the South and selling them in shops and by mail-order in the North. Producers are guaranteed a share of the profits.

— GEMINI NEWS

Allan Thompson is a Canadian journalist with the Toronto Star newspaper on a one-year internship at Gemini sponsored by Canada's International Development Research Centre.

Bonded Labour is Widespread

SLAVERY is alive and well in India. It is called bonded labour. Gopal Fasale, 60, has worked as a bonded labourer for 50 years now — just to pay an initial loan of 25 rupees (now worth about US\$1). His father, too, was in bonded labour and so is his son.

Nakul Fasale, the son, was forced in to bonded labour to repay some of his father's debts. Gopal Fasale himself, after the initial 25 rupees, had to borrow some more from the money lenders to support his family and got deeper into debt.

Lakshman, another bonded labourer, has pawned all his wife's jewellery and an old wristwatch to gain freedom. But he had to borrow again and now finds himself still in bonded labour.

And Banarsi, 28, weeps bitterly in front of his hut, wanting to go home to Bihar state to see his ailing father. But the terms of his bonded labour do not allow workers to leave work. In debt, they have no choice.

Bonded labour is a blot on Indian society, representing the lowest relationship between a creditor and debtor. A debtor binds himself or his offspring to work on meagre wages to repay a loan taken to meet immediate needs.

Even after the debtor dies, the burden is automatically passed on to his son. The bonded labourer is also denied freedom of movement anywhere in India. And he cannot seek alternative employment to earn a reasonable wage.

The National Sample Survey Organisation estimates there

are 450,000 bonded labourers in India. But others, notably the National Labour Institute and the Gandhi Peace Foundation, put the number at around 2.6 million. Bihar State reportedly has the largest, with about 350,000 bonded labourers.

Parliament officially abolished bonded labour in 1976. But the practice continues and is widespread. There are still so many labourers living in perpetual bondage and so

Parliament officially abolished bonded labour in 1976. But there are about 450,000 to 2.6 million bonded labourers in India today. by Jagan Nath.

many more awaiting rehabilitation after their so-called release from bondage.

According to the Union Ministry of Labour, around 250,000 labourers have been mandatorily released from bonded labour, mostly in the states of Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Bonded labour toils on the fringes of the unemployment scale, seemingly employed but on starvation wages. It is the lot of the poor who, precisely because they are unskilled or have no opportunity to work, are forced to borrow then pay with labour.

It is an area where the transformation from traditional to modern patterns of economic organisation had little impact. Bonded labour is still pervasively rural and manual.

The number of bonded labour is high in areas where

there are more agricultural labourers than the total rural worker. And it is found in areas with little economic development, for example in areas with little irrigation.

Yet the transition from labour to capital-intensive economies has a profound impact on bonded labour, especially those released from this illegal work. No longer is the rural economy, for instance, able to absorb them upon release from bonded labour.

The persistent decline in labour-absorptive capacity of agriculture and the continuing growth of the labour force have put increasing pressures on those recently released from bonded labour. Chronic unemployment and underemployment of this unskilled and semi-skilled workforce has become a growing concern.

"The marginalisation of unskilled workers in the wake of technological change and industrialisation has created a sprawling informal sector characterised by minimal incomes in return for a life of drudgery with no hope of advancement," notes the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

In a background paper prepared for the Fourth Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Social Welfare and Social

Development (Manila, October 7-11), the ESCAP notes that "with limited access to education and skills training, and with equally limited information about job opportunities in the modern sector (unskilled workers) are being increasingly isolated, reinforcing the vicious circle of absolute poverty and striking socio-economic disparities."

— Depthnews

OXFAM, the British-based agency whose name is now almost synonymous with Third World aid, is entering its 50th year. The organisation's leaders are celebrating that half century and hope to use the occasion to drum up more donations.

Yet looking back they admit that despite their best efforts, not enough progress has been made in the battle against poverty. In the past decade poverty has deepened in much of the developing world, and the gap between North and South has widened, the agency says in a comprehensive report.

Said Oxfam Overseas Director David Bryer: "Poverty is increasing for one quarter of the world's people. One in six families are poorer than a decade ago... The sheer scale of poverty in developing countries is not only immoral but unnecessary and avoidable."

Oxfam's first half-century has taught us that poverty is not an inevitable fact of life. Most of it is man-made. More than one billion people, a fifth of the world's population, live in absolute poverty and must survive on £175 or less per year, the amount spent every year by atypical Briton on restaurant meals alone.

Most disturbing to Oxfam is the "lost decade" of the Eighties, when progress made in the two previous decades was eroded. In the Eighties many developing countries not only failed to keep up with industrialised ones but their incomes fell in real terms.

In most of Africa and much of Latin America, average incomes fell by 10 to 25 per cent over the past decade; in countries such as Britain they rose by 20 per cent. In the same time, health spending per person in the world's 37 poorest countries has been slashed by 50 per cent.

In Zambia, child deaths caused by malnutrition more than doubled in the decade, while in Britain the number of people owning freezers has risen twofold.

By April 1991 commodity prices had fallen to their lowest point ever in real terms, according to the Oxfam report. This deterioration in terms of trade has cost developing countries an estimated \$33.3 billion year. Added to the \$34.3 billion paid out in interest on debts last year, the new burden represents more than twice the \$28.3 billion developing countries receive in aid every year.

The industrialised world bears most of the blame for this predicament, according to Oxfam: "Rich countries receive more than twice as much from the developing countries as they give in aid."

Restrictive trade practices used by industrialised countries to block the developing world's manufactured goods from entering their markets come in for heavy criticism in the report.

Rich countries, it points out, prefer to buy cheap raw materials, then sell the finished products back to the developing world. Such protectionist policies cost the developing world about \$34 billion in lost income last year.

The burden of unpayable debt also weighs heavily on developing countries. Through the Eighties their debt payments to rich nations ex-

Half a century Later Oxfam Faces Daunting Tasks

Born in 1942 as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, Oxfam entered its 50th year in October. Organisers plan to use the anniversary to raise more money for its hundreds of projects in 71 countries. Senior Oxfam officials are swift to extol the virtues of a half-century's effort, but they wonder aloud whether the odds are still stacked against them. As Gemini News Service reports, conditions in most of the developing world have worsened considerably over the past decade. by Allan Thompson

Time for a fairer world



ceeded their earning capacity, in most cases. The most indebted countries responded by cutting food subsidies, education and health spending.

Oxfam also assails policies that see nearly half all government aid go to better-off countries — such as Indonesia and Israel — for political reasons. Much of what remains is tied aid, disbursed on the condition it be spent on goods from the donor country.

Oxfam has called on rich countries to set themselves a five-year timetable to increase aid budgets to 0.7 per cent of their gross national products. The average for industrialised countries is now only 0.33 per cent.

But Oxfam also wants developing countries to be held partly accountable for the mess they are in. The agency points to lack of democracy, neglect of the environment and recurrent military conflict as key causes of deepening poverty.

At least half of the world's developing countries are under military control, it notes. Compared with nations governed by civilian leaders, countries under military rule have been dragged through twice as many wars since 1960, spent 83 per cent more on their respective militaries and now support armed forces more than twice as big, on a per-capita basis. Moreover, annual military spending in developing countries has shot up by an average of 7.5 per cent over the past 25 years.

Says Bryer: "A major key to development and to the fight against poverty is giving poor people a say in their own futures, a voice in their own government... The importance of a democratic system, especially one with freedom of press and other media, cannot be overestimated."

Left unsaid in the report is

BANGKOK: Klong Toey is a modern port which acts as a powerful magnet, attracting the poor who then settle on the surrounding swamp.

The swamp has grown into one of Bangkok's most crowded squatter settlements. It is where ferrocement — a new, but not-so-new building material — will make its debut on the mass housing scene.

Low-cost housing for slum dwellers is hard to come by. Wood, as a building material, is becoming scarce. And there are few lightweight materials that can replace wood.

Another problem in Klong Toey is that much of the slum area is swamp land where manual construction is difficult. A house in the squatter settlement must also be designed with a capacity for easy dismantling, for relocation or renovation purposes. And it should be affordable for poor people.

Enter ferrocement, a mix of cement plastered around steel (ferro) bars and wire mesh formed to whatever shape a builder has in mind. Ferrocement technology has long been widely known, but only recently has it come into intensive use as a way of combatting the housing shortage.

The Bangkok-based Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), which will oversee the Klong Toey ferrocement housing, has come up with a low-cost floating house designed with the squatter settlement much in mind.

The floating ferrocement houses are meant for a family of five with an average annual

A Way to Construct Cheap Floating Homes

For low-cost housing and for various other building purposes, ferrocement materials and techniques are more than proving their worth

income of 4,103 bath (US\$160).

The ferrocement house stands on a series of interconnected ferrocement pontoons which measure 4.5 metres by 7 metres. The pontoons are suitable for areas with a water depth of at least a metre. The ferrocement house on top measures 3.2 m by 4.2 m. The rest of the floor area is used for recreation or domestic chores.

The house is made of ferrocement walls and wooden roof trusses, with prefabricated asbestos sheets to keep it lightweight. In Thailand, strong winds cause a building to "bend," a problem more pronounced in Klong Toey as it is in an exposed area near the harbour. One way to build the floating house is to have the walls as the main structural support for the upper structure. This provides good resistance to strong winds.

Floating houses are particularly vulnerable to winds. To make it more stable, the house is tied by cable to fixed piles or anchored to the ground.

While a single pontoon is more buoyant, a series of rectangular ferrocement

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Islands of Hunger in a Sea of Food

The role of agriculture should be seen as improving livelihoods and nutrition, not simply producing crops and commodities

MORE than half of the world's undernourished people live in countries where adequate supplies of food are available.

But lack of money, poor diets and feeding practices and inadequate distribution systems keep the food out of the reach of many people.

So much so that despite advances made in recent years in improving food availability and nutrition, hunger and under-nutrition continue to exist in many countries.

At the same time, types of malnutrition associated with over-consumption — like obesity — are increasing in both developed and developing nations.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) says that malnutrition, in all its forms, persists today in virtually every country of the world.

There are indications that

about 15-20 per cent of the developing world's population (excluding China) do not have continued access to enough food to meet their minimum needs for a healthy, productive life and could be classified as chronically energy deficient," according to the FAO report, *Nutrition and Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development*.

The report says that in some instances, "about 50 per cent are also affected by some type of nutrient deficiency... In addition, chronic diet-related non-communicable diseases, such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases and some cancers, are increasing dramatically and iodine deficiency disorders continue to affect millions worldwide."

This situation persists despite impressive gains in food production in recent years. FAO estimates indicate that the average daily per caput dietary energy supply worldwide

Ferrocement Information Network-Philippines, or FIN-Philippines.

The Ferrocement Information Network was established by AIT's International Ferrocement Information Centre. Its members include ferrocement users in developing countries: China, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, Vietnam and the Virgin Islands.

FIN-Vietnam is involved in research and design of ferrocement structures: boats, pontoons, barges, fish breeding tanks, gates for dams, floor slabs, prefabricated floor slabs and floating homes.

All designs are included in a primer on ferrocement which FIN-Vietnam distributes.

In Cuba, more than 1,400 passenger and cargo boats have been built using ferrocement.

The first ferrocement swimming pool — 25 metres long — was built in 1982. Many others followed as the cost was eight times less than a concrete swimming pool.

In Santiago de Cuba city, a theme park features a Prehistoric Valley complete with dinosaur figures up to 12 metres high — made of ferrocement. The first ferrocement house was built in Santiago de Cuba province in 1986.

It led to a little village of 42 ferrocement houses constructed in just three months by unskilled local labour.

— Depthnews Asia

increased from 2,320 calories in 1961-1963 to 2,660 calories in 1983-1985.

However, these gains have been unevenly distributed. In some low-income countries according to the FAO report, per caput food availability is even lower now than 15 years ago.

The FAO report stresses the importance of ensuring the "provision of an adequate, stable, and secure food supply" as a basic requirement for the nutritional well-being of all populations.

"Food security means that all people at all times should have both the physical and economic access to the basic food they need. This implies that every household should have the opportunity of producing or procuring food in sufficient quantity and of sufficient quality for all its members to lead an active and healthy life," says the report.

While food supply is a critical component of food security, the ultimate issue is access to food. Even where adequate food is available at the national level, it is clearly not available to the entire population simply because many lack the economic means to procure it.

The FAO report underscores the need to ensure that the food supply is safe, in addition to being stable and secure. "This means ensuring that the desirable characteristics of food are retained during its production, handling, processing and packaging," it says.

The FAO report calls attention to the importance of agriculture in ensuring that populations get the right kind of food.

"Agriculture (including the fisheries, forestry and livestock sectors) is the major source of income and livelihood for many of the world's poor. Consequently, agriculture policies and programmes have a great potential for improving nutritional status," the report says.

It points out that the multiple causes of malnutrition may all be significantly affected, directly or indirectly, by agricultural policies and programmes.

These causes include poverty, social discrimination, inequality in the distribution of food and resources, infectious diseases, inadequate care and feeding practices, environmental degradation and a lack of opportunity for betterment.

"Agricultural policies which incorporate nutrition objectives can have pronounced beneficial effects through their impact on the level and fluctuation of income of nutritionally at-risk households, food prices, women's labour demands and time allocation and the nutrient content of food," the FAO report says.

The report stresses that the effects of the agriculture sector on nutrition go far beyond food production and supply. The role of the agriculture sector should be seen as improving livelihoods and nutrition, not simply producing crops and commodities.

— Depthnews