

A Guiding Light for Tomorrow's Path

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

CHILDREN are the living buds of the future, the extensions of our dreams and the hope of any nation. Yet according to a UNICEF report, the average child in Bangladesh is one suffering from poverty, malnutrition, various health hazards, and poor access to education. The result is a disconcerting number of orphaned, homeless, destitute children and children living under very difficult circumstances. As for as literacy is concerned, among the 45 million children under 15 years of age, only about 24 per cent could read and write a letter — a 1981 census report. After ten years, with an unchecked population growth, this percentage has remained virtually unchanged. If these are the odds against the future of Bangladesh, it is no wonder that the face of our nation holds an expression of eternal despair. But amidst such discouraging statistics clouding our dreams there is a flame of hope blazing against all obstacles. This flame is Surovi — a long cherished dream of Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu.

Established in 1979, the main objective of this institution is enriching the lives of deprived children, a goal that complements the UN declaration of the rights of child in 1959. Surovi started with one student who used to work in Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu's household. Today Surovi offers education and training to over 3000 children. In the twelve years of constant struggle, the

institution has expanded to four branches in Dhanmondi, Mirpur, Kamrangir Char and Gulshan. It plans to increase this number to 10 this year and 25 next year.

Surovi's first priority is to provide children with free education from the elementary level to class eight. The syllabi corresponds with that of any public school. Along with free books, notebooks, stationery and occasionally lunch, the students also get a complete set of uniform to ensure that

deserving students have the opportunity to continue their education ever after class eight. Surovi gives stipends for high school, college and university education.

Surovi also believes in providing these children with permanent solutions with this objective in mind it provides extensive vocational training or book binding, candle making, chalk making, pot plants, tailoring, pottery and shoe making. Students who show an aptitude or interest for any of

these skills are given regular lessons after 12 o'clock when normal classes end. Each course carries on for three months during which a batch of 20 to 25 students is trained. The lessons are given within the school premises and the necessary equipment provided by the school itself. In the Dhanmondi branch for example, there are three rooms — one for sewing lessons with about seven to eight sewing machines, another for chalk making and a third for book binding. The idea behind such

vocational training is to give to these children, the necessary tools or skills to be self reliant and to be able to adjust to society.

These skills stay with the students for life and are as indispensable as any formal education.

To develop the students' spiritual and cultural thinking, Surovi emphasises a religious teaching and training in singing, dancing, painting, recitation and physical education or sports.

The teachers are very dedicated and judging from the results of such training, true perfectionists of their profession. This is reflected in the numerous awards and trophies that decorate the office of Surovi's head quarters in Dhanmondi. When the children sing their voices are perfectly synchronized. This set of cultural training has enabled them to take part in sports tournaments, television and radio programmes and various cultural shows.

Their performances have been praised by the Shishu Academy, Rotary Club and Shilpakala Academy to create enthusiasm among the students. Surovi celebrates its foundation ceremony every year whereby awards are given for class results, behaviour, music and overall performance.

Apart from its programmes to help children, Surovi has



'Surovi' kids getting their music lessons

also given shelter to poor families during floods and other natural disasters, arranged special emergency squads to supply relief materials to remote areas in Bangladesh, distributed warm clothes to the distressed during winter and rehabilitated hundreds of handicapped persons.

By now one may begin to wonder how are all these programmes financed. The answer is astonishing as the dedication behind such efforts.

Starting from maintenance costs of the school premises, payment of staff, books, stationery to giving the children free lunches — practically all expenses are paid from the

personal expense account of Surovi's founder — Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu. Besides selling her jewelry to initially establish the school, she has donated her own home in Dhanmondi to be used as so the school premises.

The saddest part, however is that Surovi has not received the support it deserves, from the government. Raising enough funds to initiate a project to help the children is a constant worry. Recently Surovi has been trying, with a modest degree of success, to get contributions from NGOs such as UNESCO and UCEP (Under Privileged Children's Education). The executive board of the school is also

thinking of marketing the products made by the children such as chalk, pottery etc. A cassette of songs dedicated to children has also been brought out to raise funds. The songs are sung by well known artists such as Sabina Yasmeen, Syed Abdul Hadi, Andrew Kishore and Kumar Biswasji.

To say that Surovi is just an institution for the needy would be a gross understatement with the help of her staff Syeda Iqbal Mand Banu has turned it into a powerful nucleus of dedication and commitment. Her perseverance and selflessness has made Surovi, in her own words, a faith, a belief and a way to make the dreams of so many children, come true.



An art class in session

India Tries to Tackle 'Anti-social Forestry'

DESPITE an attempt to learn from previous mistakes and find acceptable ways of forest management, a US\$56 million Indian project which breaks new ground by giving people a say has run into criticism — for ignoring forest dwellers, reports Steve Percy from Karnataka.

The Karnataka Forest Department's British government-backed conservation scheme divides the forest into two outer zones which will serve local fuel and fodder needs and be jointly managed by the people and the department; a zone for commercial logging; and a 6,000 square kilometre (2,300 square mile) core which will be left undisturbed.

The joint management innovation is welcomed by many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as a move away from India's 'anti-social forestry' policies based on encouraging wood-based industries and excluding the people.

Criticism focuses on the project outline description of the logging zone and the ecological park as "without dwellers". Retorts Dr Anant Kabbur, who heads a federation of NGOs working with Karnataka's rural poor: "There is not a square kilometre in the Western Ghats where 'tribals' don't live".

He and other critics are worried that the more than 30,000 tribal people who live in the Western Ghats, a mountain range in southern India, will lose their long-standing customary rights and be excluded from the central area of the forest, where they collect fruit, honey and other produce. Few people trust the Forest Department, which blames the people and their animals for deforestation. It recently evicted Solinga tribals from the project area by driving elephants through their huts.

Uganda Fights Cassava Virus

UGANDA is fighting the spread of a virus which Agriculture Ministry research officer Professor George Mukitibi says "is threatening the country's food security", reports David Musoke from Kampala.

Cassava output increased nine per cent to 3.5 million tonnes in 1989 because of additional hectareage, but Mukitibi warns that half the crop could be lost unless the cassava mosaic epidemic is halted.

First identified in Uganda two years ago, the disease is spread by white flies and by planting affected stems. There is no known cure, and the only way of eradicating the virus is to burn contaminated plants and plant only disease-free stems.

Says Mukitibi: "The problem is that most farmers in rural areas do not know that they can spread the disease further by planting infected stems."

The Agriculture Ministry has launched a drive to teach

For nearly all women, war has no connotations of glory or justice, only of misery. But armed conflict and its immediate aftermath can help to stir an awareness of inequity and a willingness to fight for women's rights

Women — the Forgotten Victims of All Wars

by Krishna Ahooja-Patel

GENEVA: Over the last two centuries, for every year of peace the world has known four years of war, and the leaders of nations engaged in those conflicts have almost invariably proclaimed that their cause was just and honourable.

The truth is that all wars are essentially unjust and uncivilised for their victims, whether they die in the fighting or survive it. The Gulf War, for example, has triggered immense upheavals in the lives of ordinary citizens, pushing them across national boundaries as refugees and migrants who become stateless, homeless and penniless.

Women are "special" victims of war. As casualties they suffer wounds different from, and additional to, those inflicted on men.

War costs them dearly in sheer physical hardship as the labour of managing even a minimum of family life is increased immeasurably. This sort of suffering was graphically summed up in the syndicated news photograph of an Ethiopian war refugee pleading with tears for the food rations desperately needed by her children.

Then there is the torment — mental and emotional as well as physical — which befalls many women as wartime victims of rape; such violations are beyond repair and reparation. What's more, even in these extreme conditions, the victims still bear the responsibility of nurturing the next generation.

Women pay multiple roles in both peacetime and wartime. But their roles as producers in economic sectors are multiplied and become more visible when war is declared. This fact, it seems, serves to screen the harsher effects of armed conflict.

For example, there are comprehensive statistics on the numbers of women in the United States and Britain who supported the war effort in the period 1939-45 by taking jobs in munitions factories. But it is impossible to find similar hard data on the number of women who were victims of sexual assault in both "friendly" and "enemy" countries.

Literature about the Second World War has given us a fairly detailed picture of women's working conditions in factories, hospitals and civil defence units. What is not stressed is that when the men return from the war, women are usually displaced from such jobs.

In the aftermath of wars, revolutions and struggles for independence, may women have been keenly aware of be-

ing pushed back into the narrow confines of domesticity and reproduction.

The fact that the Gulf War was fought with "high-tech" weapons and provided us with daily glimpses of destruction on our television screens made the conflict seem, to some, like an unreal electronic game.

But beyond the bombardment of buildings and cities and behind the television presentation lay the realities of mutilation and death.

Among the victims, too, were thousands of women — blocked out of the media and out of our consciences. Men killed in battle can become heroes. Women who die behind the lines, some of them the humiliated victims of rape or torture, expire anonymously and without dignity.

Like other wars, the Gulf War sent great tides of refugees flooding across several borders. The suffering caused to the women among them has been immeasurable.

Experience from refugee camps in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon and Jordan underlines one conspicuous fact: being a women refugee is a thousand times worse than being an adult male one. There is an intensification of all the forms of discrimination and disadvantage which women undergo in peacetime.

The lack of information about the fate of many refugees, despite the marvels of our so-called information revolution, is astonishing. For example, little or nothing has been heard about what happened to thousands of women who left their home countries to earn a living in Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. How many young Asian women migrants were promptly airlifted to safety by their home governments?

The answer, we fear, is: very few.

Finally, although women now serve in combat or near-combat roles in various armies, they are conspicuous by their absence from the peace-making process — as from political decision-making in general.

The sole consolation which carries some hope for the future is that war, and the immediate aftermath of war, can undoubtedly stir women's awareness of the inequities under which they labour. Not surprisingly, many become active in peace movements. And, no less surprisingly, an even larger number begin to campaign for their rights.

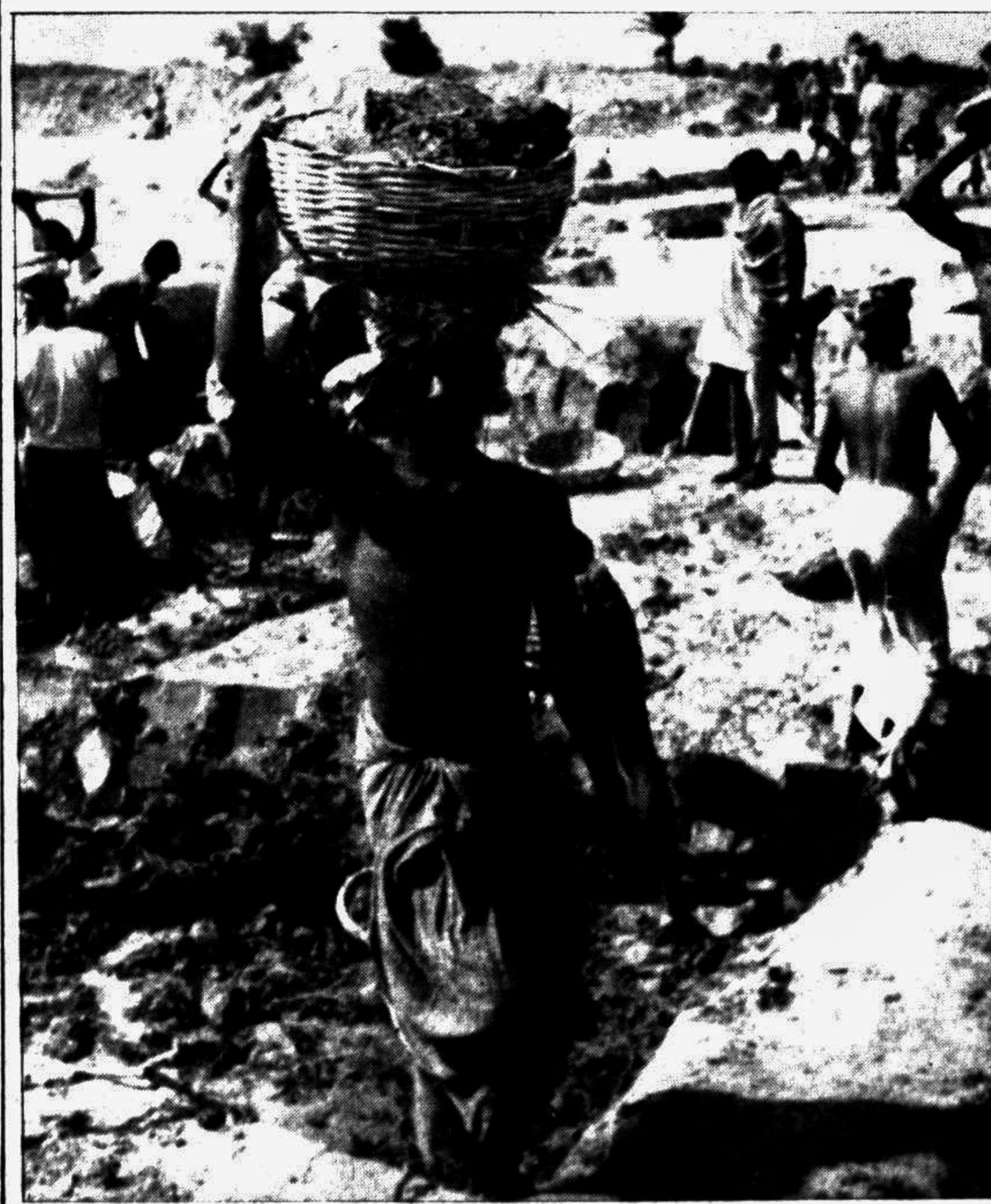
MANILA: Somewhere in the rural dwelling one sees a loom, a sewing machine or a potter's wheel, with one of the women of the household hard at work at the equipment. Such is a typical setting for the activity of a home-based worker — a scene replicated in millions of homes in South East Asia.

Only a tiny proportion of such workers enjoy the protection of any labour laws. But some of them are now beginning to want to stand up and be counted, and be recognised for what they are — productive members of a worldwide workforce.

The unprotected status of home-based workers, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) points out, is now getting attention at the international level. The issue now calls for attention, and action, by national governments.

In the Philippines, the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) may have to revise 30 per cent upwards its figure for the size of the national labour force. Surveys have established that there are close to eight million uncounted but highly productive home-based workers, 90 per cent of them women.

The latest official data put the country's labour force at 23.1 million. If home-based workers — who have been termed an "invisible" army of labourers, working without contracts and without protection from the law — are counted in, the force may well exceed 30 million.



The invisible work force in Bangladesh

The 'Invisible Army' of Home Workers

by Nati Nuguid

The Social Weather Station, a non-stock, non-profit research organisation which regularly samples public opinion on many aspects of social conditions, has estimated that "homeworkers constitute the plurality of the working population." This includes 25.8 per cent who are completely housebound and 13.7 per cent who combine home with ambulant activity, or a total of 39.5 per cent of the workforce. Factory and office workers constitute 35 per cent.

Standard labour statistics, the SWS report says, tend to under-report and under-value women's work, including homework which is a predominantly woman dominated activity.

Bangkok-based Lucita Lazo of the ILO has described home-based workers as an unseen mass that, for all its invisibility, accounts for a significant proportion of production in developing countries. They work long hours but are the lowest paid of workers; and, in a situation of high unemployment and labour surplus, they can be badly exploited.

In the Philippines they contribute heavily to an underground economy that may not

show in official statistics but is accepted by economists as what keeps the nation breathing when the indicators say that its lifeline is in bad shape.

Although there are currently no estimates of how much home-working contributes to the Gross National Product, it is believed that 25 to 35 per cent of the income of a family engaged in home-working comes from this activity.

If they have acquiesced in being an invisible labour force, says the Pambansang Tagapag-ugnay ng Manggagawa sa Bahay or PATAMABA (National Coordinating Organisation for Home-based Workers), it is for fear of having to pay taxes. Their earnings are very irregular and very low compared with regular workers' wages.

However, they would be only too happy to pay taxes if legislation were enacted to give them due recognition, due rights as labourers, better wages and better working

conditions.

A subregional workshop on rural women home workers sponsored by the ILO was held recently at the Occupational Health and Safety Centre in Quezon City to try to upgrade homeworkers' welfare and employment status.

Recognised as issues of concern were: discriminatory practices which handicap women; very low remuneration; lack of control of, and information on, the whole process of production; irregular and insecure demand; long hours; health and safety hazards; and child labour.

The question was also posed whether the workers, who do not have to punch bundy clocks or work with a supervisor breathing down their necks, would be better off with their rights assured but with lost work opportunities as a result. Getting protection under the law, it was pointed out, would reduce the advantages they have over factory workers in getting employment — in that contractors don't have to pay for their social security or offer

minimum wages.

The participants tackled a basic point: how does one define the term home based worker? Unfortunately, no consensus was reached before the workshop ended.

Agreement on a definition is important, it was pointed out, because the ball has been set rolling to give home-based workers benefits under the law and make training programmes and soft loans available to them.

The ILO definition is that the home-based worker is one who processes goods or materials in whole or in part furnished directly or indirectly by an employer and thereafter to be returned to the latter.

The PATAMABA wants the ILO definition changed to include self-employed home-based workers who are taking on the role of "micro-entrepreneurs" and are not necessarily doing subcontracted work.

As the result of the conference, a National Steering Committee composed of governmental and non-governmental members has been set up to pursue the home working issue in the following areas: research, awareness-raising and advocacy, policy and legal concerns, micro-enterprise development and training and support services.

A survey of homeworkers is also being planned by the National Statistics Office.

— Depthnews Asia

New Germany's Gender Bias

Women from the former German Democratic Republic lose some of their rights in a united Germany. Roberto Ampuero Espinoza reports.

WOMEN of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) have been the biggest losers in German unification, according to the latest statistics.

Unification has produced massive unemployment and the loss of social advantages which women living in the western part of Germany are only now demanding.

"West Germany is a developing country as far as its policy towards women is concerned by comparison with the extinct German Democratic Republic," Kristina Schenke, a parliamentarian belonging to the opposition left-wing Alliance '90 party, told IPS.

"Our achievement in this field is one of the few things which should be integrated into the life of united Germany because it represented a superior level of development," declared the deputy from eastern Germany.

The GDR government's policy on women rested on two pillars which many West Germans are now studying with interest and demanding from Bonn.

According to the official Federal Bureau of Statistics, in 1990 about 85.7 per cent of East German women were integrated into the labour force, while in the western part the

percentage was 60.3 per cent. Unemployment, which is now affecting 9.5 per cent of the East German population (16.6 million), is hitting women and men above 45 the hardest.

Integration of women into the labour force, the guarantee of public nurseries for children of all women workers, and the material incentives to procure were some of the advantages enjoyed by the GDR working women.

By contrast, women workers in the former West Germany did not have a system of guaranteed nursery schools, so thousands of women could only work if they hired baby-sitters.

East German women also had one paid year off from work after the birth of a child, as well as the right to return to the same job.

For Ingrid Hesse, a member of the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD), "It is unquestionable that women in the GDR had made more social conquests than those in the West, and that society as such favoured their full integration into the labour force."

Schenke believes that only 25 per cent of women in the eastern part of Germany will find work once the economic situation returns to normal.