N the early 18th century, the estimated total population of the globe was around one billion - the same number of people who now, at the end of the 20th century, live in the dark shadow of chronic poverty and undernutrition. Some 550 million of them are rural women in the Third World And not only do women constitute a disproportionate percentage of the rural poor, but their numbers are increasing at an alarming rate: 50% in the past two decades.

Over three-fifths of all poor rural women live in Asia: 363 million, more than the entire population of Western Europe.

Why this Increase?

The reasons for this dramatic increase in the number of poor rural women are many. Aside from the fact that, as the population explosion continues, the ranks of the rural poor in general grow, women in most of Asia and other regions of the developing world are far more vulnerable than men to poverty and to the adverse effects of structural adjustment programmes; they also face greater obstacles in their efforts to grow food and earn income. The advent of new technologies has led to increased harvests and income for the farm family, but at the same time it has increased the workload for the female unpaid

KUALA LUMPUR : In the early 18th century, the estimated global population was around one billion — the same number of people who now, at the end of the 20th century, live in the dark shadow of chronic poverty and undernutrition. Some 550 million of them are rural women in the Third World.

Not only do women constitute a disproportionate percentage of the rural poor, but their numbers are increasing at an alarming rate: by 50 per cent in the past two decades.

Of these poor women, over three-fifths or 363 million live in Asia. This is more than the entire population of Western Europe.

The reasons for this dramatic increase in the number of poor rural women are many. As the population explosion continues, the ranks of the rural poor in general grow. It is the women who are far more vulnerable than men to poverty and to the adverse affects of structural adjustment programmes.

Women also face greater obstacles in their efforts to grow food and earn income. The advent of new technologies has led to increased harvests and income for the farm family, but has also added to the workload of the female unpaid family helper.

In some case demand for female agricultural wage-labour has increased. But in others it is reduced, depending on the extent of mechanisation. And as more men migrate to urban centres in search of jobs, more women are left behind to head the household and run the family farm alone.

In addition to constraints faced by the rural poor - lack of resources, fragmentation of landholdings and mounting landlessness, environmental deterioration, inadequate financial and technical support services, among others - rural women confront a host of others.

Much of their time and energy must be devoted to essential but economically unproductive domestie chores. In many regions, women may be denied legal title to their land and may not be considered eligible for credit. In some Asian countries, women have actually lost their traditional matrilineal inheritance rights and their right to use common

Often women are neglected by extension services, as these agencies are normally geared toward the interests and needs of male farmers. Customs that hinder women from associating with men or participating as equals in the rural economy, together with the higher incidence of female illiteracy, are further obstacles.

Economic Advancement of Rural family helper. As for female Women in Asia agricultural wage-labour, the effect has been mixed : in some cases demand has in-

extension staff are women. Custom that hinders women mechanization. In addition, the from associating with males or participating as equals in the rural economy, together with the higher incidence of female illiteracy, are further obstacles:

Far too often, development programmes and projects, governmental agencies and financial institutions ignore rural women's actual and potential contributions to family food security and income and to the rural economy in general. At best, they tend to give them no more than token attention.

However, it is now being increasingly realized by people at all levels - in national governments, international agencies, NGOs, universities, etc that no development effort is likely to succeed if it bypasses half the population. Consequently more attention is being paid to the economic contribution of women in terms of labour, food production and income. It is also being recognized that poor women face gender-specific constraints in their access to such resources as land, inputs, credit, agricultural extension and marketing outlets. As a re-

sult, governments are starting to incorporate some of the concerns in their development efforts. IFAD, the Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development, has been among the first of the international agencies to recognize that aiding women in gaining access to resources is not just a matter of equity, but efficiency as well.

Rural Women's Contributions

The traditional view of rural women in Asia and elsewhere has been that they are primarily or even exclusively mothers and homemakers. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Asian women grow at least half of all the food eaten by their families, either in family fields or small home gardens. They plant, weed and harvest crops, process and sell them at the market. They are often in charge of raising livestock and poultry. The poorer the family, the more likely it is that women will spend long hours every day in the fields. And, of course, women heads of household are full-fledged farmers in their own right.

(US\$3) to buy a beehive and

the other of 3,000 rupees

(US\$71) for a carpet loom. She

not only earned enough to

house and feed her family and

repay the loan, but also to set

Equally important, especially for families that have small plots or are landless, is the income women earn from wage labour or off-farm enterprises such as trading, weaving, basket-making, dressmaking and other home industries.

Getting the Support They

No less than poor male farmers and fishermen, poor rural women must have access to essential resources and support, for without them, they are trapped in a vicious and often downward cycle of poverty and declining productivity. Like men, they need technological advice and assistance, and training to develop new skills. Like men, they need the means to purchase essential materials and equipment and to make improvements on their land.

One of the keys to helping the poor escape the poverty trap is credit. Not loans from moneylenders, who so often charge exorbitant interest and thus drive the poor ever deeper into debt, but credit from responsible financial in-

stitutions. Yet throughout much of Asia, women have limited access to credit. Lacking collateral, they are seen as poor credit risks; normally seeking small loans, they are not as attractive as large borrowers. Often illiterate and ignorant of the ways of banks, they shy away from approaching them.

However, experience has proved that poor rural women are excellent credit risks. often better than men. The IFAD supported Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, that has provided loans to over half a million destitute and often landless women, has repayment rate of over 95% and a female clientele of over 85%. The Production Credit for Rural Women Project in Nepal, designed and financed by IFAD has a 95% repayment rate. And these are not exceptions.

Even more important than the high repayment rate is the fact that in the hands of a woman, even a very small loan can make an enormous difference in family income and well being. Just one example among hundreds of thousands. Santamaya, an abandoned mother of two in a Nepalese village north of Kathmandu, took out two loans - one of 120 rupees (US\$3) to buy a beehive and

the other of 3,000 rupees (US\$71) for a carpet loom. Selling her honey and carpets, she not only carned enough to provide housing and food for her family and repay the loan, but has been able to set up a savings account.

Devising ways to bring

credit to poor rural women in

Asia and the Pacific is just one of the concerns that brought over 50 policy makers, Women in Development experts, representatives of NGOs and international development agencies, and IFAD project staff together for a ground breaking meeting held on 15-20 September of this year in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Organized by IFAD, in collaboration with the Asia and Pacific Development Centre and the Malaysian Ministry of Welfare and National Unity, the Regional Consultation for the Economic Advancement of Rural Women is the last of a series of four regional meetings - in Cyprus for the Near East, North and Anglophone Africa, in Costa Rica for Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Senegal for Francophone Africa — devoted to the issue.

Like the previous meetings, the Consultation in Kuala Lumpur provided a unique opportunity for key people in the region to share experiences and ideas related to assisting rural women become more productive and self-reliant. But the process will not

stop there. In November, a high level Consultation of experts will meet in Rome to consolidate the findings of the four regional meetings for the purpose of drafting a Declaration and Guidelines for Action. These, in turn, will be submitted to a Women's Summit scheduled for 25 February 1992 in Brussels. The Summit, initiated by a number of deeply concerned and committed First Ladies from different regions of the world. will be held under the High Patronage of Queen Fabiola of the Belgians.

Poverty — the suffering, despair and not infrequent anger it brings - must be eradicated. A world in which one-fifth of the entire population - far, far more in many regions - do not have enough to cat, enough clothes to wear and inadequate shelter is both a disgrace and a time bomb. Efforts are being made to ensure that all people have the chance to live productive lives of dignity. Rural women in Asia and all other regions of the globe have a crucial role to play in eliminating hunger and poverty. But unless they are given the attention and support they need, the grim shadow of poverty will continue to spread, blighting more and more bodies and souls, and darkening the future

Courtesy: IFAD.

-Star photo

(UNDP) and who is in charge

of UNFPA activities in Nepal.

said that despite the poor in-

frastructure in the country, re-

sults of the population pro-

gramme have been generally

is time for Nepal, one of the

world's poorest countries, to

critically "evaluate past per-

formance and revise its popu-

lation strategy" in order to

make it better scientifically

"In the coming two years, a

main task will be to work out a

well articulated proposal for

the next country programme,"

The United States Agency

for International Development

(USAID) is complementing

UNFPA's efforts. So far, it has

spent US \$36.8 million for

contraceptive supplies, wages

and child survival programmes.

and pragmatically.

Mr. Berke said.

However, he stressed that it

Rural Poverty is Doubly Cruel for Women

by Farhana Haque Rahman

programmes and projects. governmental agencies and financial institutions ignore, or give no more than token attention to, rural women's actual and potential contributions to family food security and income and to the rural economy in general.

creased, in others reduced,

depending on the extent of

accelerating migration of

males to urban centres in

search of work has left more

women as heads of households,

compelling them to run their

Facing all the constraints

that poor rural men do - lack

of resources, fragmentation of

land holdings and mounting

landlessness, environmental

deterioration, inadequate fi-

nancial and technical support

services, and the like - rural

women confront a host of

others. Much of their time and

energy must be devoted to

essential but economically un-

productive domestic chores. In

many regions, women may be

denied legal title to their land

and may not be considered eli-

gible for credit. In some Asian

countries, women have actually

lost their traditional matrilin-

eal inheritance rights and

their right to use common

land. They are often neglected

by extension services, as these

agencies are usually run by

men and geared toward the

interests and needs of male

farmers. In Asia only 15% of

family farms alone.

However, the awareness is growing that no development effort can succeed if it bypasses half the population. Consequently more attention is being paid to the economic contribution of women in terms of labour, food production and income.

It is also being recognised that poor women, owing to their gender, face difficulties in their access to such resources as land, inputs, credit, agricultural extension and marketing outlets. As a result, governments are starting to incorporate some of the concerns in their development

Among international agencies, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has been among the first to recognise that aiding women in gaining access to resources is to promote not only equity, but also efficiency.

The traditional view of rural women in Asia and elsewhere has been that they are primarily or even exclusively mothers and homemakers. Nothing could be farther from the

Asian women grow at least half of all the food eaten by their families, either in family fields or small home gardens. They plant, weed and harvest crops, process and sell them in the market. They are often in charge of raising livestock and poultry. And of course, women heads of households are full-fledged farmers in their won right.

Equally important is the income women earn from waged labour or off-farm enterprises such as trading, weaving, basket-making, dressmaking and other home industries.

Thus, just like poor male farmers and fishermen, poor rural women must be supported to help them get out of the cycle of poverty and declining productivity in which they are entrapped. Like men, they need technological advice Far too often, development and assistance, and training to

Women Oppose Supply of Condoms to Their Husbands

KAMPALA: Women in Uganda are angry at organisation which supply condoms free of charge to their husbands as part of the drive to stop the spread of AIDS. Uganda has more confirmed AIDS victims than any other African country.

The daily New Vision reported that women in Jinja discovered condoms in their husband's pockets, and they castigated the British American Tobacco company, where their husbands work. for having supplied the con-

A few months ago the Federation of Ugandan employers encouraged its mcmbers to run educational programmes and supply condoms to married men.

Many people, including President Yoweri Museveni were at first vehemently opposed to the encouragement of condom use, believing they encouraged promiscuity. But the President changed his mind after seeing a computerised projection which said that Uganda's population by 2000 would be 20 million instead of 31 million if AIDS was not stopped.

The "lost" 12 million people would be a combination of those who would die of AIDS and those who would never be born. There would be five to six million orphans.

The national AIDS control programme estimates that about 1.2 million people in Uganda are HIV positive. - GEMINI NEWS

up a savings account. Devising ways to bring credit to poor rural women in Asia and the Pacific is just one of the concerns that will bring together 50 policy-makers,

women in development (WID) experts, representatives of non-governmental and international development agencies, develop new skills. Like men, and IFAD project staff for a they need the means to purground-breaking meeting in chase essential materials and Kuala Lumpur September 15equipment and to make improvements on their land. Organised by IFAD with the One such vital assistance is Asia and Pacific Development

credit, not from informal Centre and the Malaysian moneylenders but from re-Ministry of Welfare and sponsible financial institutions National Unity, the regional which can offer liberal credit consultation for the economic advancement of rural women is Contrary to the common the last of a series of four rethinking that women are poor gional meetings devoted to the credit risks especially since they cannot secure a loan with The process will not stop collateral, experience has

there. In November, experts proved poor rural women to be will meet in a high level conexcellent payers, often better sultation to consolidate the than men. findings of the four regional For example, the IFAD-supmeetings and to draft a declaported Grameen Bank has proration and guidelines for acvided loans to over half a miltion. These in turn will be lion destitute and often landsubmitted to a women's sumless women, who make up over mit scheduled for February 85 per cent of its clientele. 1992 in Brussels. The summit, The bank has a repayment rate exceeding 95 per cent. initiated by a number of wives of heads of state from different A project in Nepal, deregions, will be held under the signed and financed by IFAD, patronage of Queen Fabiola of which gives production credit to rural women, also has a 95

per cent repayment rate. And

these cases are not exceptions.

the high repayment rate is the

fact that in the hands of a

woman, even a very small loan

can make an enormous differ-

ence in family income and

hundreds of thousands is the

cause of Santamaya, and aban-

doned mother of two in a

Nepalese village north of

mother in film portrayals, a

stereotype administering to

the needs of the male ego and

the demands of a feudal soci-

But happily, times are

changing. The new woman,

says film critic Soma

Chatterjee, is "still hazy, amor-

phous, not clearly defined. But

(she) is there and can be

films were the likes of Charno

ki Dassi or "slave of the hus-

band." Then there was Dahez

(Dowry) and Mother India

which extolled the image of

the mother goddess, the

Indian woman as pure, virtu-

ous, and representing all that

having voted in elections after

elections, and even elected to

state legislatures and

Parliament, the trend was

director Aparna Sen, who has

produced films on women's

themes, asserts: "We have to

awaken to the fact that some of

today's women will refuse to

take things lying down. Some

of us will go one step forward

and voice our own choices.

And a few bold ones will exer-

heroine in the recent film Ek

Baar Phir (Once Is Not

Enough). A typical small town

girl, she is married to a small

town boy who succeeds as a

screen idol and takes her to

An example is Neha, the

Internationally known film

But with millions of women

is good in Hindu society.

bound to change.

cise that choice."

Some 30 years ago, popular

recognised for what (she) is."

Just one example among

well-being.

Even more important than

Rural women in Asia and all other regions of the globe have a crucial role to play in eliminating hunger and poverty. But they must be given the attention and support they need. Otherwise, the grim shadow will continue to spread, blighting more bodies and souls, and darkening the future for all. -Depthnews Asia

Ms Rahman is an official in the information and communi-

T EPAL will have to bring its fertility rate down to replacement level in order to protect its fragile mountain environment.

Experts have pointed out that the Himalayan kingdom's population, placed at 17.6 million in 1987 and growing at the rate of 2.7 per cent annually, is extracting a heavy environmental cost.

A recent government study identified population explosion as the main cause of the lack of sufficient vegetation in the 10,000 square kilometres in Dolpa and Mustang districts bordering Tibet in the north.

Furthermore, "brown cancer," as descrification is often called, is already spreading to other parts of the kingdom. Population explosion and the resulting demand for more agricultural land have resulted in the felling of trees which worsened siltation and caused floods and soil erosion.

The government has been telling illiterate villagers that bigger families will require an increase in cultivated land or more livestock, both of which will exert further pressure on the already delicate environ-

But despite such reminders, most Nepalis in rural areas still prefer large families. They look at children as a source of income and old age support. A variety of cultural reasons also make children highly desirable in rural Nepal. However, it appears that a critical stage has already been

reached in terms of supporting livestock. Shortages of fodder may soon drastically limit the size of livestock the country can support, thus, affecting the general well being of the popuation. Nepal's high growth rate is

attributed to high and stable fertility and declining mortality. Increasing internal migration is responsible for the greater population pressure felt in some areas.

More Land Needed To Support Nepal's **Growing Population**

by Jan Sharma

progress of this initiative has been very disappointing and has resulted in the delay of assistance for population activities from several donors.

Even agencies generally sympathetic to the Himalayan kingdom, like the United Nations population Fund (UNFPA), have delayed the grant of financial and technical assistance because such help appears to have resulted only in the creation of glamorous

UNFPA's first country programme was launched in 1980 with US \$26.5 million in assistance. The second programme

should have been launched in 1986 but had to be delayed until January this year. The level of UNFPA assis-

Hand tilling without using animals is still in vogue in the northern part of the country.

tance this year was expected to be double that of the initial programme. However, because of a lack of good project proposals, the recent UNFPA assistance was kept at just US \$9 million.

1991.

representative of the UN

A major share of this new funding is expected to be spent on the preparation of the population census for

Jerrold Berke, resident

Development Programme

In the past, Nepal's population activities have also reccived US \$16.6 million from the World Health Organisation (WIIO) and US \$37.1 million from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). The funds were used mainly to pay wages and benefits of population project

Experts are of the opinion that the country should give more emphasis to population activities in its development projects instead of just making them more attractive to foreign donors.

Dr Raghav Pant, a member of the National Commission on population, said Nepal's population is expected to therease by six million between 1981 and 2000 even if the fertility rate is brought down to replacement level.

This increase would mean greater demand for food, fuelwood and other basic needs, straining the country's already limited resources and flagging economy.

If the population continues to grow at the present rate of 2.7 per cent, some two million hectares more of land will be needed to support the additional people. This means that the country will lose all of its forests.

Forest land in the southern plains bordering India will decline by 87 per cent. The loss of these forests will mean severe flooding in India and Bangladesh. The fuelwood deficit will double from the present level of four million

While more agricultural land will be needed, Nepal will also have to increase its forest land to meet the needs of its burgeoning population.

what they are traditionally expected to do, and standing by these decisions

Indian Cinema Stops Stereotyping Women

live in England where his film company is based.

Having grown a terrific ego, the husband become insensitive to his wife's feelings and openly has extra-marital affairs. Neha joins a painting class to divert herself, but is drawn into a relationship with another man.

Then the husband has to go to Bombay for a family reunion and asks Neha to join him. But she replies that she has outgrown him and is not sure that she still wants to be part of his

The film was a near-box office success although for the wrong reasons - namely intimate, suggestive bedroom scenes. Yet the message of woman's newfound strength also comes out clearly.

· Another film, Subeh (Morning), has the female lead in an unconventional role that of an urban educated woman who was more committed to her profession that to her family.

Even less of a stereotype is

the heroine of 36 chowringhee

Land, Aparna Sen's first film as

director. An Anglo-Indian

forced migration to Australia

late in her life, she hates the idea of going away because India has been her home ever since she can remember. She copes, adjusts and finally chooses to live with her loneliness, her cat and her old age rather than migrate to a materially affluent foreign land.

The character is unique in having crossed the stereotypical boundaries of youth, genetic Indianness, ethnicity of language and custom and an expected marital status. Ms. Sen says of the film:

That a woman was the protagonist in (the) film is incidental. I am aware that the problems of loneliness and old age, the alienation of a minority community could have come across as well with a male school teacher.

"But I had my own experience to fall back on. I studied in an exclusively girls' school where all the teachers were women. It was easier for me to project the inner feelings of a woman school teacher than those of a man."

In Ms. Sen's second direcschoolteacher threatened with torial venture, Parama, a middle-aged wife falls for a much

younger family friend with whom she has an affair. The affair has long been over when it was exposed, but

just the same. Shocked and hurt, she attempts suicide but is thwarted by her family. In the end, she gathers courage and realises that she must live for herself, on her own terms. The only person

her loved ones abandon her

grownup daughter. That the woman's search or independence had to be made in this manner shocked the sensibilities of middle-class audiences. Nevertheless, Parama stands out as a strong indictment of the double standards of feudal society that

persist even in a so-called ur-

ban and progressive setting.

who understands her is her

"The people who have reacted harshly to the film, I am afraid, are those who consider it a threat to the male-dominated system," says Director

Women's strength is also explored by the award-winning film Arth (Meaning). Directed by Mahesh Bhatt, a rising star

in Indian cinema, it deals with the cracks within a marriage. These cracks are not so visible, but suddenly the couple discover they had changed.

The husband wants out of the marriage to be with another

Abandoned, the wife learns to live by herself and to be strong enough to develop another relationship. Inevitably the husband comes back but, untypically of the Indian housewife, she refuses to accept him because she has learned to live without him.

Similarly, the other woman's eyes get opened to the weaknesses of the man. Also projecting strength in the film is a prostitute who finds nothing wrong with offering her body to a man who can pay her price.

A new woman director. Kalpana Lajmi, is undoubtedly adventurous with her film called Ek Pal (One Moment) which shows the exercise of sexual freedom by a married woman. The woman gets pregnant from an extra-marital affair but refuses to abort her unborn child or to pretend that her baby is by her absent husband. To her intense desire for motherhood, everything else is secondary.

When the husband returns from London, she tells him the truth. He accepts the child as his own, respecting her decision and honesty. The film was acclaimed as one of the boldest films dealing with the sexual rights of a woman. Depthnews

Kathmandu. She took out two Although Nepal has initiated cations division of IFAD. loans, one of 120 rupees a population programme, the N emancipated Indian Indian films dare to show women as making choices other than woman, no longer chained to the feudal past, is emerging on cinema for all to see. Until recently, she was a typically submissive wife and