

The Unrecorded Economic Contribution of Women

Guy Standing, ILO Department of Employment

In many countries the economic contribution of women has been systematically under-recorded by official statistics and this in itself has encouraged the relative neglect of women as workers and as major contributors to the growth of national income. It has also encouraged the process, typically associated with the growth of wage labour employment, whereby the majority of women are relegated to little more than a labour reserve, compressed into a relatively narrow range of low-income, low-skilled jobs or eased out of the labour force, both statistically and in fact.

Correspondingly, as and where this has occurred there has been a widening of wage and earning differentials between male and female workers, which has been both a cause and an effect of the widespread tendency to deny women and girls equal access as men to educational and training

facilities. Having been denied access, they have generally been unable to develop the requisite skills to enter the labour force or to fully participate in "economic activity". And the barriers to their entry have been strengthened by the cumulative nature of this process.

Without acquiring modern skills the majority of women are not able to enter most occupations and are not expected to continue in employment. This encourages discrimination against women workers in general, even where individual women possess the requisite skills. Moreover, the unrealistic assumption that women will not earn an income as workers frequently encourages families to give priority to the education and training of boys.

Once these reinforcements have produced a divergence in work opportunities and incomes, they induce a fairly rigid division of labour within

families, whereby women concentrate on their maternal and domestic roles, while men assume the role of "primary" income earners.

As far as the number of women in the labour force is concerned, there are several current myths which neatly put a lid on social reality. These relate to the definition of "economically active" and the methodology of counting them: who works at which jobs in what numbers?

When counting women as economically active, several methodological problems suddenly emerge. For a woman to be counted as a "worker" she must produce "economic" or "marketable" goods or services. In some countries census using varying criteria to include "unpaid family workers" who are predominantly women in the labour force. Others, however, exclude them, concluding that the majority of women do not satisfy "the international standard for the minimum

amount of work performed." Another reason sometimes given for this omission is that "women do not report actual hours worked". The results of using this type of methodology are obvious—some unrealistic conclusions and statistics emerge. For example, according to certain estimates, the "participation rate" of women in the labour force in Northern Africa is 3.9 per cent, while in West Africa it is 32.3 per cent.

Profile of a Woman Worker

An interview by Dr. Rosa Cisneros Aguilar of the El Salvador FPA (Association Demografica Salvadorena) with an agricultural worker at a rural training centre:

"Have you many children?" she asked.

"God has not been good to me. Of 16 born, only nine live", he answered.

"Does your wife work?"

"No, she stays at home".

"I see. How does she spend her day?"

"Well, she gets up at four in the morning, fetches water and wood, makes the fire and cooks the breakfast. Then she goes to the river and washes the clothes. After that she goes to town to get the corn ground and buys what we need in the market. Then she cooks the midday meal".

"You come home at midday?"

"No, no, she brings the meal to me in the fields—about three kilometres from home".

"And after that?"

"Well, she takes care of the hens and pigs..... and of course she looks after the children all day..... then she prepares supper so it is ready when I come home"

"Does she go to bed after supper?"

"No, I do. She has things to do around the house until about nine o'clock".

"But you say your wife doesn't work?"

"Of course she doesn't work. I told you she stay at home".

IPPF News (International Planned Parenthood Federation).