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THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE: THE PLACE OF WOMEN

The history of development debates in national and international fora demonstrates that serious and concrete discussions rarely touch on women's issues in economy or society. This omission or neglect is not connected with their real economic and social contribution, which is just beginning to be reflected in some national development programmes, policies and plans. What is the place of women in the discussions on national development and how is their contribution related to international decisions? During the last three decades, the terminology (or the words) with which we describe "women and development" has become unrecognisable as the women's movement at the grass-roots level has grown. It has pushed aside the earlier legacy of ideas and notions which curtailed off the hidden assets and human resource potential of women. The transformation of terminology is linked to the "development debate" itself on how to eliminate "poverty" and inequalities among the rich and the poor countries.

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In 1951, in UN reports and studies, the then dependent and colonised countries, mostly poor, were placed in one general category entitled the "backward nations". In the 1960s, the term "backward nations" was replaced by another definition of "under-development", the world being neatly classified into the rich "developed" and the poor "developing" parts. Since then, the changes in the world economy and the emergence of the Third World as a concept gave the social scientists different categories such as "industrialised countries" or "newly industrialised countries". More recently, during the 1980s, the rich countries are simply referred to as the "North" - representing some 38 countries - and the poor countries as the "South" - covering about 120 countries. "Women and development" as a subject entered the international stage around 1970, when the "hidden" economic and social contribution of women began to be uncovered from under layers of social mythology. The Declaration of the International Year of the Woman by the United Nations General Assembly in 1975 could be considered a turning point in the history of current notions on the place, role and position of women in society at the international level. Within a decade since then, recognition of the connection of half of humanity in every country with development questions has profoundly changed economic and social reality and with that women's own perceptions on what are the social, political and economic issues.



Although there are only a few "enlightened enclaves" where awareness of equality of rights has made a dent in traditional thinking, a new "connection" that development and women go hand in hand has already come to the surface slowly and imperceptibly. The notion that there can be no development without women is making inroads into the inherited conscience of humankind. This introduction points to paths on which women form a mosaic without which no pattern of development could be understood in totality. The basic fact that women are the major food producers and food providers, but mostly remain hungry, is indicated in Part III. The point that in most modern economies women either work with their muscle power or with machines that increase their workload is stressed in Part IV. Part II shows clearly that women are not yet fully involved in decision making or decision taking on all matters of survival: basic needs or disarmament - the two basic questions of the century. Where do women fit in this range of issues concerning the survival of the family (their day-to-day lives) and of humanity threatened with destruction? In what way is the daily life of women influenced in rich and poor countries by decisions taken at the international level? In what way can women's voices be heard in the international assemblies which debate development and disarmament? In what way can women's initiatives be merged into a movement for their emancipation and self-reliance? These are some of the elements examined in this "development education kit". But how should we start making the connection between women and international issues? Let us take a brief and close look at the decisions, reports and resolutions of the UN family since 1975 and outline the important landmarks.

The interconnection

The distinction between economic and social factors in the analysis of development perspectives has always been uncertain and arbitrary. Similarly, the distinction between macro- and micro-economic theory has never been sharp enough where women workers' interests are involved, especially where the "economic dimension" merges into the social perception of their work and life. The dividing line between the growth theory, distribution of national income and international trade, on the one hand, and the supply of labour, wage determination and subsistence consumption, on the other, has never been definitive. Frequently, the casualty of this confusion in terminology has been the neglect of the "social dimension". Thus there are many missing links which need to be studied in the Declaration on the Establishment of the New International Economic Order adopted

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 for dev.

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by the UN General Assembly on 1 May 1974. 1/ How can we answer the following questions: what is the interconnection between redistribution of international income, assets and resources and how do these inequalities affect different social groups within nations? What is the nature and size of the impact of economic and social changes at the international level on women's work and welfare?

1. **WOMEN'S WORK AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ORDER (NIEO) (1974-80)**

The NIEO and its Prog.of Action were adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 1974, only two months before the UN Conference on the International Women's Year in Mexico, which concluded its proceedings in July 1975. 2/ The NIEO called attention to the need to restructure the international economy "to correct inequalities and redress existing injustices" in order to eliminate the "widening gap" between the developed and developing countries. The Mexico Conference, on the other hand, articulated the belief that changes in the social and economic structure of society, even though they are essential, cannot *by themselves* (italics added) ensure an immediate improvement in the status of a group which has long been "disadvantaged". 3/ In this group, women were placed on the list with youth and migrants.

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1/ UN: *Declaration of the Establishment of a New International Economic Order*, 6th Special Session of the General Assembly (New York, 9 May 1974), doc. No.A/RES/3201(S-VI).

2/ UN: *World Conference on the International Women's Year, Report and the World Plan of Action* (Mexico City, 19 June-2 July 1975), doc. No.E/CONF.66/34.

3/ Report of the World Conference, op.cit., p.11.

2. THE COPENHAGEN PROGRAMME OF ACTION (July 1980)

The second important step towards linking women's "problems" with international discussion was taken in the Copenhagen Programme of Action (July 1980). It was recognised that national policies have profound economic and social implications for women's work in the production process, and that the type of development strategy adopted at the national level affects them in many different ways not only in jobs, but also as individuals, and their status in the family. The review noted the adverse impact on women of current patterns of development and suggests appropriate policy measures which could protect women picking tea in Sri Lanka, milling rice in the Philippines or grinding coffee in Brazil; their work and wages being extremely low are affected by international price fluctuations. The protectionist policies of some countries and the impact of certain operations of the transnational corporations further make their labour cheaper and their incomes uncertain 1/ (and that continues to be the case at the time of writing).

The specific resolution which introduced the "international dimension" further states that international economic problems showed "more extensive impact on women" than on men, especially with regard to employment, working conditions, wage levels and job security. Examples cited on this point are taken from the textiles, clothing and electronics industries "which are more sensitive to price fluctuations and protectionist measures". This resolution also underlines that serious constraints on the economic participation of women are "'international in character' and derived from the *pattern of relationships between developing and developed countries*" (italics added).

1/ UN: *International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade*, Resolutions adopted on the reports of the Second Committee (New York, Dec. 1980), doc. No.A/35/592/Add.1



3. WOMEN AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

At the same time, in 1980 in New York, discussions were under way to prepare the drafts and discussions of the UN International Development Strategy (IDS) for the Third Decade. ^{1/} How to focus on the place of women in different sectors of the economy and at different levels of participation was an uphill struggle for those who negotiated this question in the UN system (the international secretariats, the delegations of some countries and a few decision makers among whom there were even fewer women). Should "women's dimension" be introduced only at the social level or are there any relationships which merit connections with such economic issues as industrialisation, trade or technology? After lengthy discussions, it was finally decided that the "women's dimension" could not be excluded from economic and political issues or from the ultimate goals and objectives of national development policies and plans. For this reason, when the final document for the Third UN Development Decade was adopted on 14 September 1980, "women's questions" were linked to five major subject-areas: industrialisation, trade, food and agriculture, participation and human resources development, and science and technology. While several paragraphs (8, 11, 42, 51, 82, 94 and 122 in particular) implicitly or explicitly refer to the role of women in the development process, the most significant paragraph reflecting decisions of the Copenhagen Programme of Action which needs to be underlined is the following. It was suggested that at the national level "... appropriate measures should be taken for profound social and economic changes and for the elimination of the structural imbalances which compound and perpetuate women's disadvantages. To this end, all countries will pursue the objective of securing women's equal participation both as *agents* and as *beneficiaries* (italics added) in all sectors and at all levels of the development process. This should include women's greater access to nutrition, health services, education and training, employment and financial resources and their greater participation in the analysis, planning, decision making, implementation and evaluation of development..." (paragraph 51).

Some preliminary inquiries relating to major topics selected above have been examined in this kit. But a few pertinent questions remain:

^{1/} UN: *International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade*, Resolutions adopted on the reports of the Second Committee (New York, Dec. 1980), doc. No.A/35/592/Add.1.

(a) Food and agriculture

The International Development Strategy for the Third UN Decade makes no direct reference to women under this heading, except to emphasise the need to "promote interaction between expansion of food production and socio-economic reforms, with a view to achieving an integrated rural development" (section C, paragraph 95). Thus, it addresses itself to wider problems of the "rural poor" without specifically examining the plight of women in rural areas of the developing world, despite increased agricultural output, land reform and policy changes. If agriculture and food policies continue to keep women in the subsistence and non-monetary sector of the economy, how can existing rural development policies increase food output, increase women's income and enhance their participation or improve their status?

(b) Industrialisation

Due to the fact that there exist high wage differentials between developed and developing countries, industries which are predominantly labour intensive are less competitive internationally and also happen to be typically female-employing industries such as textiles, clothing, electronics, etc. There is a tendency to transfer such industries from developed to developing countries that essentially employ women. In some economic sectors, these industries close down or cause high rates of unemployment of women, or they are physically transferred to developing countries where women are recruited at low wages in poor conditions without the protection of labour law or trade unions. How does this transition affect women's jobs and at what levels?

(c) Trade and technology

It is now recognised that the improvement of "terms of trade", better and stable prices for export crops of developing countries such as tea, coffee and rubber, has an impact on women's wages - which in real terms have declined in recent years. Lifting of certain restrictions on the manufactured products of developing countries into the markets of the developed countries should also provide more employment opportunities in some export industries. But how do international price fluctuations of various primary commodities affect women's jobs and wages? For instance, when one eats a banana, drinks a cup of coffee

or buys a soft cotton dress in the rich countries, somewhere in the remote areas of the world the purchasing power or income of women may have been depleted and foregone.

The statement in the International Development Strategy mentioned above that "scientific and technological development should involve and benefit men and women equally" and that there should be "equal access for men and women to scientific and technical training and to the respective professional careers" requires that action be taken at three levels: first, technological research and innovations should reduce women's heavy manual work; secondly, the introduction of new agricultural varieties should decrease rather than increase their workload; and thirdly, new technologies, often labour saving, if indiscriminately applied, will affect their working conditions and cause new types of health hazards, which are currently being studied. How can women benefit from and contribute to technological and scientific breakthroughs? How can their technical levels be raised, if they do not participate in the decisions or the choice of technology applied to an inappropriate product not connected with basic needs?

(d) Participation and human resources development

The inadequate representation of women at the political level and their non-participation in national decision-making bodies and agencies have been the subject of attention in documentary material published inside and outside the UN system. It is now increasingly recognised that the non-participation of women at the industrial level, such as collective bargaining and negotiation, or supervisory committees/councils, or trade union structures, adversely affects their conditions of work and life. ^{1/} How can the skill profiles of women in developing countries be upgraded to contribute to development processes? What policy measures would result in enhancing their participation at all national levels to contribute to development?

^{1/} See in particular, UN: *ILO and women workers: Activities in 1982-83*, Commission on the Status of Women, Thirtieth Session, Vienna, 15-24 February 1984 (28 November 1983), doc. No. E/CN.6/1984/5.



Women have been and are permanently working in life-size roles not properly accounted for. Their creative capacities are underutilised by society due to economic systems which undervalue their efforts towards economic and social change. In these rapidly changing times women are the catalyst of transformation of societies. Their work performance needs to be recognised; their work effort needs to be rewarded; and their voices need to be heard. Elimination of poverty and survival of humanity are the two main issues of the century - but the hidden issue is to open up the barriers to women's full and equal contribution to these causes.

