

Statistical Realities About Women

QUANTIFICATION of the economic activities of women is an important issue in the current discussion among economists and social scientists regarding the contribution made by different agents to the development process. The work of women is ignored in the accounts of the world economy when it is done in the confines of the family rather than the market-place. This invisible part of the world economy is slowly gaining recognition, although it is hard to assess because it does not have a market value.

Child-rearing is an undeniably essential activity in all societies, and it is a serious anomaly that the rearing of children is excluded from national accounts. Likewise, meal preparation and caring for the elderly are excluded from gross domestic product estimates. The activities of the informal sector, where women's work accounts for a considerable share, are often not reflected in statistical data. Indeed, the contribution of women—and for that matter also of children—to agricultural activities in developing countries is largely unrecorded or underrecorded, except when it materializes in sales of the household in a somewhat organized market or when rewards for agricultural work are of a monetary nature.

The published data give the impression that in developing countries the majority of women play no role in the economy. Part of the reason for the deficiencies in the data can perhaps be attributed to a lack of understanding of the role of women in economic activity—it being considered, for instance, that a woman tending the family vegetable plot or collecting firewood is simply engaged in housework. Yet, an understanding of how an economy functions is vital for successful government policy, and without a knowledge of it and how much different members of society produce, and how they use it, economic management is less than adequate.

In the developing countries, according to recently compiled UN statistics, women constituted a small share of the recorded economically

active population than in the industrialized countries. However, this could be a reflection of the statistical deficiencies mentioned earlier. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, women in agriculture made up 33.5 per cent of the economically active population in 1980, compared to 42.7 per cent for men. However, in North Africa the comparable figures were 6 per cent and 41.5 per cent. This does not appear to be a realistic picture of the differences in the actual contribution of women to agriculture between the two parts of the continent.

The reported figures do, however, show that women play an essential role in agriculture, which is the largest sector throughout the developing countries. The importance of this sector to the successful performance of these countries (particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where women's role is comparatively the greatest) requires that countries examine the role of women in agriculture so as to enhance their contribution.

In Africa, men and women have separate roles in the production of household food and cash crops. They also have different managerial and financial control over the production, storage and sale of surplus food and crops. Women are primarily responsible for the cultivation of traditional food crops, providing specific nutrients for the diet. They also process food, especially for family consumption, but also for the market. Men usually work in the cash crop economy, either in plantations or on their own land, normally producing goods for export and not for local consumption. On the basis of sample surveys, it has recently been estimated that often more than 60 per cent of all agricultural work is done by women.

Education

It may be true that women continue to lag behind men in most departments, education is an area where there has been measurable progress during the past three decades. At the global level, illiteracy among adults has dropped from 32.0 per cent in 1970 to 27.7 per cent in 1985, whereas during the same period

the world adult population rose from 2.3 billion to 3.2 billion. According to the estimates of the Office of Statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, however, there were still about 890 million illiterate persons aged 15 years and above, that is, 129 million more than in 1970; 63 per cent of these were women.

Illiteracy remains a problem in the developing countries: the illiteracy rate is 54 per cent in Africa, 36.3 per cent in Asia and 17.3 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. The proportion of adult women who are illiterate in these regions is 34.9 per cent, as compared with 20.5 per cent of men. The highest illiteracy rates are to be found among rural populations and in the poorer suburbs of large cities.

Gaps in the education process are also found in the developed countries. In these countries, functional illiteracy—that is, the level inadequate to cope with the complex and rapidly changing requirements of economic life—is not as easily measured as absolute illiteracy but is perceived to be an obstacle to long-term growth in many countries. In the developing countries, increases in enrolment rates are themselves measures of educational improvements for men and women. Though improvements have been made, much remains to be done to eliminate the considerable disparity in the provision of education at all levels.

At the primary and secondary levels, there has been an overall but steady lessening of the traditional bias against women, as measured by their percentage of participation in total enrolment. A major change has been the sharp increase in relative female participation at the tertiary level in the developed countries—from 41 per cent in 1970 to 49 per cent in 1985.

In the developing countries, female enrolment at the primary level in 1985 was 44 per cent of total enrolment, at the secondary level 37 per cent compared with 42 per cent, 34 and 29 per cent in 1970. This improvement suggests that in the future the literacy rate for women will be fairly close to

that for men. In the developing countries the female enrolment rate declines with an increase in age, with the decline being greatest from the primary to the secondary levels.

During the 1980s, school enrolment of boys and girls between the age 6 and 11 in the industrialized countries is almost 100 per cent, and secondary education between the ages 12 and 17 shows a high participation rate for girls. As one goes higher up the ladder to advanced education at university level, the percentage rate for females increases significantly over time. These data indicate that more females have been participating in advanced education, and equality at the university level has almost been achieved in Europe. In North America, female participation at the university level has gone beyond parity, surpassing male enrolment ratios in 1985. In Oceania, female enrolment has risen substantially over the years, yet proportionately fewer younger women than men—19.1 per cent versus 21.8 per cent—between the ages 18 and 23 were studying in 1985.

In Asia and Africa wide differences between the sexes appear at the first two educational levels. The provision of education in the developing countries roughly matches income levels. Thus, in 1985, in Latin America, secondary enrolment for males was 71.2 per cent and for females 69.6 per cent, whereas in Africa the comparable figures were 59.6 per cent for males 41.8 per cent for females. In Asia, only 48.2 per cent of boys and 35.6 per cent of girls were in secondary education. Although school enrolment in developing countries is low between the ages 18 and 23 both males and females, a comparatively higher number of women, particularly in Africa and Asia, are affected by inadequate educational resources and opportunities.

In developing countries, young girls in rural and sometimes in urban areas drop out of school because of low family incomes and demanding households. Additional reasons include early marriage and traditional attitudes inhibiting them from acquiring or upgrading skills. —(UNIC feature)