



A Columbian woman selling food on a Bogota street.

By Dorothy Steffens, WILPF Executive Director

In this age of instant communication, rapid transportation and global corporations, the world is economically interdependent. Government, industry and finance know this. We, the people, are learning it. Women have a special stake in the global economic order and in the current struggle to change it. Whether we live in the industrialized, "overdeveloped" world or in developing nations, women are among the first to feel the impact of the rapid changes going on in world economic relationships.

Mary P. Burke of the Center of Concern in Washington, DC, has written a fine paper about women and world development.* She points out that the ability of the Third World (low-income, largely nonwhite, formerly colonial nations) to speak with a unified voice--particularly through the United Nations and the establishment of new institutions, conferences and forums--gives these nations new power. This was demonstrated at the Sixth Special Session of the U.N. General Assembly (April 1974), called at the insistence of the developing nations for the purpose of laying "the foundations for a worldwide economic system founded in equity and justice." It was made clear to the developed nations at the Special Session that the less developed countries have about 80-90 percent of the raw materials needed by the developed world and intend to get a larger share of the benefits of their resources. It is clear that if the new international economic order is to be achieved we of the developed nations will need to pay more for materials we get from the developing nations and changes in our consuming patterns will be necessary.

The New International Economic Order:

Does Women's Work Count?

In the United States and other industrialized nations, women will bear much of the responsibility for changing family consumption patterns (from high-priced coffee to cheaper, healthier beverages, for example) and for dealing with the psychological impact that a changing economy will have on families.

Job opportunities for women are also changing as the world economy changes. About 28 percent of all the women in the world work for wages. They are among the most poorly paid workers and are the first to suffer from unemployment. In the United States in 1976, women made up over 46 percent of the total labor force, and about 35 percent of all married women in this country work outside the home. Changes in job opportunities as well as changes in food and other production and consumption patterns affect women deeply.

How much will industrialization and "development" help our Third World sisters and their families? Burke points out that their governments' struggles for larger shares of the economic pie may not raise the general standard of living. In many countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa, the so-called economic miracle of urbanization and industrialization has brought more wealth to the already wealthy and enlarged the middle class at the same time that it has increased the gap between "the rich few and the poor many." The vast majority of people in Brazil, for example, are even worse off than they were before development capital began to pour into their country.

Development as defined by the investors, bankers and most economists of the industrialized world is the increase in amount and value of "productive" goods and services (gross national product or GNP) of a country. An increase in measurable goods and services requires introduction of high-technology machinery for farms and factories in order to produce cheap goods for export. Such expensive equipment can be financed only with foreign capital; that means increased dependency, and many of the fruits of the increased productivity go to foreign banks and investors in the form of profits and interest. This emphasis on development as increased GNP--goods and services that are *paid for*--leaves the women of developing countries out in the cold, since women's work--raising the family food supply, caring for children and livestock, weaving and sewing--is not counted in GNP. Burke says:

...The consequences of this exclusion of women's work are common everywhere. But they are particularly oppressive to women of the Third World where rapid changes are eroding old rights and protections without providing effective replacements..."

Burke also points out that women who had traditionally powerful roles--such as the Ghanaian and Nigerian market women, who controlled much of the daily commerce and had considerable wealth and political power--have now been supplanted by retail stores where standardized manufactured goods are sold by male clerks under male managers who are responsible to absentee owners.

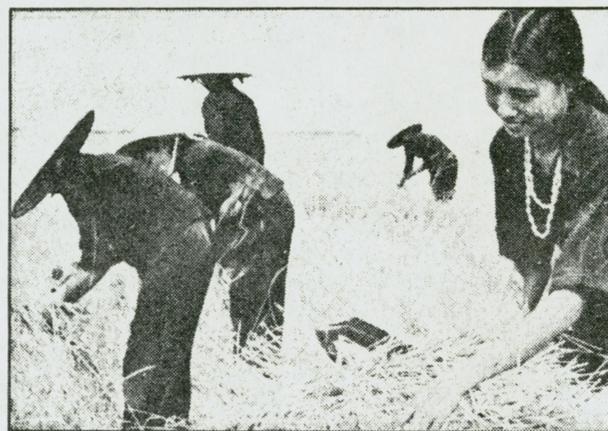
The situation of women in the developing world has actually been worsening. Burke quotes a recent UNESCO report that says, "there are now almost a half-billion illiterate women in the world, 62 percent of all illiterates." This is an increase from 1960 when women accounted for "only" 58 percent of the adult illiterates. Burke describes the plight of many women in the developing world:

...Cut off from education, credit and access to new market systems, the moderate standard of living they and their children once enjoyed is now reduced to subsistence level. And as they lose their ability to contribute economically to the family, the women lose their status and sense of self-worth.

The effects of the development practices of the two U.N. Development Decades have been disastrous economically, ecologically and socially--especially for women. Burke explains what happened to women who were farmers:

...development economists, agricultural experts and rural development specialists did not "see" that in many parts of Africa, most farmers were women. Training programs, modern technology in the form of seeds, fertilizer, irrigation and machinery, and credit and access to markets were all made available to men but not to women farmers. The goal of this attention to agriculture was development of an export-oriented agriculture--coffee, cocoa, fibers, for example. The results: 1) a modern agricultural sector geared to an export market alongside a domestic subsistence agricultural sector--for the women continued to produce food for their family and to market the surplus; and

Vietnam News Agency



Vietnamese women harvesting rice.

2) growing dependence on foreign food supplies as subsistence farmers, the women, were unable to meet food needs of expanding urban centers. It was not until 1974, when famine threatened the world, that men came to "see" the role women have in food production.

The solution to the world's growing food shortages offered by the same experts responsible for the misguided development programs has been to push population control programs, focussed, of course, primarily on women. These programs do not take into account that the only societal status left to women in the poorest countries is derived from their children or the economic facts that living sons are often the only security most couples have for old age and children's labor relieves some of a woman's burdens on the farm.

Burke suggests needed changes to realize a new, more just international economic order, including new U.S. policies that will help restructure global economic relationships and "accommodate to Third World demands." While one would devoutly hope such policies will be adopted (and we should certainly express our citizen opinion to that effect), it is highly unlikely that profitable foreign investment and aid that increases dependence will be given up by the Rockefeller-backed Trilateral Commission members who determine foreign policy.

A growing segment of the formerly colonial, underdeveloped world has chosen a different path than "development aid" and foreign capital investment and is as a result achieving a far different kind of development. Cuba, for example, has made women partners in development, has invested heavily in education and day care and health, has eschewed Western-style consumerism and dependence on foreign imports and has improved the quality of life for the many at the expense of the wealthy few.

It is important for women to understand the new international economic forces, but we of the overdeveloped world are not needed to lead the way. The women and men in China, in Cuba, in Algeria, in Mozambique, are blazing their own trails toward their own solutions of their own unique problems in their own countries in their own time. Our responsibility is to deal with our own government's role, our own military economy and our own consumption patterns. We will be helping our sisters and brothers in the developing world in the process.