

According to statistics, she's not working



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Improving statistics and indicators on women

INSTRAW

Carrying firewood for the daily cooking in Kathmandu, Nepal. UN PHOTO/John Isaac.



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Overburdened but undervalued

More than half the world's active female population is living in Asia. This means that 350 million Asian women are considered to be in the labour force, according to a joint ILO/INSTRAW Global Statistical Survey*. Yet, the study warns, current figures often mask women's economic contribution to society. Although four-fifths of the "economically active" women from developing countries live in Asia, there are still a number of activities performed by women which are not taken into account. A woman might work hard from dawn to dusk... she might even earn a small income out of it, but this doesn't mean she is considered to be a worker or has employment status. Why? Because many of the economic activities usually performed by women (such as subsistence agriculture, handicrafts, petty trading, family chores and other informal activities) lack official visibility in statistics. Women overwhelmingly dominate the informal sector. But many activities in the informal sector are not quantified because they are considered to be an extension of family and domestic functions.

One of the major concerns of INSTRAW is improving the collection and analysis of statistics and data so they will adequately reflect women's often invisible productive work. Accurate and reliable statistics are a prerequisite for effective development planning. INSTRAW programme in this field is divided into three closely interlinked areas of work. The first one is *research*: how can concepts be modified, how to refine the methodology of data collection, how to measure women's work in the informal sector and to improve household surveys. The second area is *training* users and producers of statistics. INSTRAW has organized national and regional workshops world-wide (for instance in Asia: in Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and China). The third area is *information*: by its newsletter, flyers and brochures, INSTRAW helps make women's reality visible.

The ILO/INSTRAW Survey reveals some key figures. Asia has a relatively higher activity rate for women than Africa and Latin America. According to ILO projections, the world female labour force should reach

around 880 million women workers by the year 2000, of which over 500 million will be in Asia. For instance, the active female population in China will be almost a quarter of the female labour force of the entire world, and in India there will be 50 million more women workers in 2000 than in 1975. Yet, India has one of the lowest rates of employment of women in Asia (around 11 per cent compared to one of the highest, Thailand, with around 45 per cent). Over the past years, the proportion of women working in the three major sectors — agriculture, industry and services — has grown more rapidly than the proportion of men. In most Asian countries, the percentage of women in the total labour force is higher in agriculture: in some countries it reaches more than 40 per cent (China, Thailand, Turkey and Viet Nam) while in others it is less than 5 per cent (Iraq, Jordan and Yemen). The participation of women in the industrial sector is higher only in a small number of countries, including Hong Kong, Japan and India. In the service sector, the percentage of women is generally increasing and is already high in countries such as the Philippines, Burma, Japan and Viet Nam. Research findings also show that the traditional putting-out system in which women are engaged in home-based industries, where they are paid at piece rates by private contractors who provide raw materials and collect the finished product, is expanding. Unpaid family workers is the largest group in some countries, such as the Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand and Turkey, where it accounts for about 50 per cent of women workers. Unpaid family workers play a particularly important role in the agricultural sector.

However, we must not forget that these figures still do not reflect quite adequately the work women actually perform, especially in the informal sector of the economy. Asian women are overburdened in their daily chores, yet their full potential has been underutilized by development plans and technical co-operation programmes that do not view women as agents of change. Women's specific needs and contributions must be taken into account to ensure their full integration to development.

* *Women in Economic Activity: a Global Statistical Survey (1950-200)*. International Labour Organisation (ILO)/International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), Santo Domingo, 1985.