

# What do we do for women in the Third World?

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"WOMEN make up one third of the world's official labour force and do nearly two thirds of its work hours. But they receive only ten per cent of the world's income and own less than one per cent of its property." *International Labour Organisation Report.*

"Alim is from Turkana, North Kenya. She rises just before dawn in the dry season and sits in her day hut churning milk. This can take up to an hour. When the process is complete Alim, with the help of her teenage daughter goes into the kraal and milks the goats. The milk is taken to the day hut, stored and soured, ready for churning the next morning. Some is put aside to feed the family.

"At 9.30am Alim and her daughter leave home for the well — it is a goat-watering day — and they and their neighbours walk for an hour to lift water from the 15ft well..."

This account of the early morning of a North Kenyan woman's day may seem unremarkable but it represents a major step forward in the thinking around aid agencies work.

Prior to the UN Decade of Women, working with women was not a high priority. Indeed very little was being done to examine the role of women in communities and societies throughout the world.

The detailed research above of a woman's working day was funded by Oxfam and is the product of a dramatic shift in perception of how development works.

## Struggling for recognition

The assumption that economic growth in developing countries automatically benefits women has been blown apart. Time and time again women have been found to be the poorest of the poor with fewer educational oppor-



tunities, poorer nutrition levels and far less access to independent income than their male counterparts. Women worldwide have been largely excluded from development policy and decision-making. Their problems have been perceived as a cost to society rather than their role being seen as a contribution to be cared for and nurtured.

Today, in aid agencies, if not in official government bodies, the role of women has finally been recognised and acted upon. A healthy, educated woman means a healthy, educated family; the advancement of women goes further than the women themselves.

In some countries women have started organising collectively to improve their prospects. These women face a double burden. First there is the poverty. Not the sensational poverty viewed during times of famine but the grin-

ding exhaustion of a day to day existence dominated by the relentless search for enough food to keep body and soul and family together.

Second, they are women. Millions of women have felt unable to cry out against their fate which pushes them to the end of every queue and the bottom of every pile in a world dominated by men.

## From small beginnings

In Bangladesh a group of women on Hatia Island on the Bay of Bengal run an income-generating scheme. They each save 2 taka (1p) week and collectively buy a duck or a hen or a goat. The eggs or offspring are used to feed their families but also to earn more income to buy more livestock — some women had managed to buy and raise small herds of cattle.

The economic impact of the scheme, although there is not

a great deal of money involved, changed the status of the women in the village. At first they were treated with great suspicion, regarded almost as a threat, by some of the men and women not in the group, but as the effects of their organisation were felt — more food to eat and a little more money — the women gained the respect of the community.

In the same group (and there are many like them) the women are also coming to terms with the violence they often suffer. But they find their own solutions. Podna, from the group took up their story. "One of the group members had an argument with her father-in-law's brother. He became angry and beat her on the head ... the women in the group joined together and went to the local Upazila Council (a locally elected arbitration body usually made up of local elites) and demanded judgement. We then went to the council members and the police.

Because of this action the man who hit the woman had to pay 2500 taka in compensation and beg for forgiveness. He himself was one of the local elites."

And the reason for the violence? "The woman's son accidentally splashed the man with water. He was a religious leader and a high-caste Brahmin."

## A change of light

There, as here, the task these women have of improving their lives is difficult and slow. Women have to tackle their oppression before they can hope to challenge their poverty. They must be able to operate freely before they can change the system which condemns them to such abject subsistence.

Aid agencies like Oxfam, Christian Aid and War on Want share the same objectives in their work with women: a desire to have women's work recognised and providing help to women to open the doors of their own potential.