

Introduction

A WIFE OF NOBLE CHARACTER

What do women do? When do they actually “work”; when performing their productive or reproductive role or both? How is their work quantified by economists and valued by society?

These questions have been answered differently, at different times and in different environments. The Proverbs of the Old Testament describes a “wife of noble character” as follows:

- *“A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.*
- *Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.*
- *She gets up while it is still dark, she provides food for her family...*
- *She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.*
- *She sees that her trading is profitable and her lamp does not go out at night.*
- *When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.*
- *She makes linen garments and sells them...*
- *Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.*

That outstanding woman, described above, is obviously hard to come by. She is depicted as the provider of the family. But once encountered, she is given all the credit she deserves:

- *Her children arise and call her blessed, her husband also, and he praises her...*
- *... Give her the reward she has earned and let her works bring her praise at the city gate”*

Since then, very many women, performing as well, have been taken for granted in many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries, where their work outside the household is considered an extension of their reproductive role, while the Old Testament, when talking about woman’s work, refers to it in the plural (“her works”).

In fact, the issue of women and work has always been a controversial one, basically because of the restricted economic definition given to work which centers essentially on its remunerated aspect, on participation in the labor force. Women work more within the household and do not get paid for it, while men work primarily for wages. One historical reason for this market/non market division of labor along gender lines stems basically from the fact that “only women can get pregnant and breast feed babies”. With no economic value attached to women’s reproductive activities, men are usually considered to “work” more than women, particularly in developing countries where men receive the lion’s share of income and recognition for their economic activity since more than three-quarters of their work entails market activities².

However, data on time use by women and men for a sample of thirty-one countries indicate that women work more than men in nearly every country. Women carry an average of 53% of the total burden of work in developing countries and 51% in industrial ones. If we, therefore, adopt a wider definition of work which takes into account how women spend their time

and monetize their non-market activities, we will obviously be improving their economic status in society. The UNDP Human Development Report of 1995 estimates that non-monetized, invisible contribution of women to \$11 trillion a year³.

The status of women in the labor force is not much rosier:

- Women’s participation in the labor force has risen by only 4% between 1970 and 1990, compared to a two-third increase in female adult literacy and school enrollment⁴.
- Women hold usually low-paying jobs or work in the informal sector. They are concentrated in jobs that present shorter working hours or allow greater flexibility⁵. They consequently receive a much lower average wage than men. The average female wage is only three-fourth of the male wage in the non-agricultural sector in 55 countries that have comparable data.⁶
- The rate of unemployment is higher among women than men in all regions.
- Women make up 70% of those living today in absolute poverty⁷. It is only if we adopt the appropriate means to alleviate this poverty that we will be able to achieve “a decent worldwide standard of living” and “assure human dignity to all human beings”⁸.

Improving women’s lot is, however, not only linked to increasing their participation in the labor force, but also to raising the value of their time. Our concern should be primarily to broaden the value of opportunities women have. If women are free to choose what to do, “time spent in the household must be at least as valuable as in the best alternative salaried job”⁹.

The file in this issue of *Al-Raida* deals with the monetized aspect of women’s work. It essentially includes the executive summary of the study undertaken by IWSAW and financed by AID on the Female labor Force in Lebanon, and a résumé of the study on Women and Men Home-Based Workers in the Informal Sector in the West Bank Textile Industry, along with a series of interviews with working women.

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ENDNOTES

1. Alejandra Cox Edwards, “The Market, Legislation and Employment for Women”, paper presented at the Special Session on Women in the Economy, Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995, p.3
2. UNDP, Human Development Report, 1995, Oxford University Press, 1995, p.6
3. Ibid
4. UNDP, op.cit., p.4
5. Alejandra Cox Edward, op.cit., p.5
6. UNDP, op.cit., p.4
7. Frederick Mayor, “Preface by the Director - General”, Gender Equality Information Kit, March 8, 1998.
8. Ibid.
9. Alejandra Cox Edward, op.cit., p.3