

WOMEN HOLD UP HALF THE SKY

Chinese Proverb

In developing countries around the world:

- Women head $\frac{1}{3}$ of all households; they are the chief rearers of young children, instilling values, ideas, beliefs.
- Women account for $\frac{2}{3}$ of all productive work hours; they are food producers, processors, storers, preparers; they tend livestock, procure water and fuel.
- Women furnish $\frac{1}{2}$ the family income; they tend and harvest crops and market surplus produce; many spend their free time doing crafts work for sale or barter.

And yet, this life-sustaining labor, central to the economies of agrarian societies, goes uncounted in the official statistics of dozens of Third World countries.



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They are often ignored by economists, neglected by development planners. But they don't need specialists to tell them how important they are. "We are up at daybreak and we don't get to our beds till late at night," landless women in India's Punjab state told an interviewer in 1980. "We are on our feet all day... Cooking the food, tending the cattle, fetching firewood...it's all on our shoulders, and it's twice as much work as a man does...There's not a moment's respite all day."

Typically, Third World women bear a double burden: managing their households and labouring to support their families. And typically, they work longer and for less income than men. Yet, many modernization and development schemes have overlooked women or even made their lives harder. In much of Africa, for example, men took over cash-crop cultivation while women remained subsistence farmers.

Clearly, millions of Third World women are caught in a vicious cycle. Illiterate and without property, they can't get train-

ing or bank credit. Yet for their families to survive, they must work—often in lowpaying, undervalued jobs which aren't reflected in official economic data and which bankers and bureaucrats are inclined to overlook.

The question remains: What kinds of development programs best address the needs of Third World women? "In the past there were the paternalistic, charity approaches," said Marty Chen, Oxfam America projects officer for India and Bangladesh. "And that included seeing women largely as mothers. So you have programs for nutrition, family planning, etc.—completely overlooking the fact that women were doing other work as well."

Of the 165 projects in 29 countries funded by Oxfam last year, 45 had an exclusive focus on women. The goal isn't simply to improve women's lot economically, but to encourage them to organize so that they can take more control over their lives. This can be a painstaking process; progress comes slowly, sometimes subtly.