

ON March 17 and 18, 1983, the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, held a workshop on Women and Poverty. Sreelekha Batliwala presented a paper entitled "Women in poverty: the energy, health and nutrition syndrome", in which she tried to show that women bear an additional burden of ill health and malnutrition. We present here a summary of this paper.

Sreelekha points out that most nutrition programmes try to increase food intake, but few attempt to reduce the overwhelming drudgery which consumes the energy of the poor, particularly of poor women. She suggests that such energy saving can improve women's health and give them more free time.

In 1981, ASTRA, a cell of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, published a report of their three year field study of rural energy consumption patterns. The study was conducted in rural Karnataka with a sample of six villages comprising 560 households and a population of 3,452. The survey showed that men, women and children contribute 31, 53 and 16 percent of human energy respectively for doing all the work in the village. Most of this energy is spent not on production activities but on survival tasks like gathering firewood, fetching water, and cooking.

While women spend an average of six hours a day on survival related and agricultural tasks, men spend an average of only four hours a day on these tasks. Other domestic work like cleaning, sweeping, washing clothes and utensils, and child-care, was not taken into account by the survey. These tasks are all calorie intensive and are all performed almost exclusively by women.

There have been many studies calculating how many calories are expended in various tasks. However, these studies are heavily urban biased. They estimate energy cost for only 10 agricultural as against 70 industrial and military activities. Further, there are no female equivalents for these agricultural tasks, even though women have been participating in agriculture for several

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millenia. The most ironical aspect of these studies is that only 10 tasks measuring women's energy expenditure are included in the list and those are placed in the category of sedentary occupations. Some of the tasks associated with women are typewriting, piano playing and singing, sewing and knitting !

Sreelekha goes on to give evidence for



her conclusion that the calorie (energy) expenditure of women is higher than that of men. Most of the energy expenditure of women is on daily life supporting tasks which must be performed regardless of season and which are generally not shared

by men. Women have to expend much more energy because of the non-availability of other energy resources. If cooking fuel and water were readily available close to the user, and the efficiency of stoves was improved, a saving of nearly 500 calories per day per woman could be affected.

If food intake more or less matched energy output, there would be no cause for concern. The ASTRA nutrition survey in the village Ungra found that the average individual intake per day was around 2,300 calories. But this, like all other nutrition surveys in the country, assumes an equal distribution of food between and within families—an assumption clearly contrary to the facts. The staple diet in this area is *ragi* which is cooked and separated into balls for eating. When local women were questioned as to how they distribute the balls, they answered that a man gets two balls, a woman one and a half and a child one. This gives a rough idea, of intra-familial inequalities in food distribution. Even assuming for the moment that all families consume the same amount of calories, the vast majority of villagers have worms which steal as much as one fourth of the total food intake, and the intake level for women makes no allowance for the additional 500 or so calories needed during pregnancy and lactation, and Kamala Jayarao has shown that one third of adult Indian women are in that condition at any point in time.

Further, Sreelekha analyses the fallaciousness of the growing school of thought which uses clever statistical gymnastics to show that thin small people are neither stunted nor underweight, but have merely "adapted" to efficiently use

the little food available to them.

Sreelekha suggests that such "adaptation" over a lifetime may have disastrous consequences on health, and may well be linked to women's high mortality rates, shorter life expectancy, and high maternal mortality rate. She points out that not only do health services fail to reach women—surveys reveal that for every three men who avail of medical facilities only one woman does so—but

also health programmes are all oriented to mothers, thus ignoring the large number of women who need health care even though they are not pregnant or lactating. She suggests that a health care system which is not institution based but reaches out to the doorstep, and which is staffed by better paid women workers would be more successful in safeguarding women's health. So far, even the community health worker scheme has 80 percent men

workers.

She concludes by tentatively suggesting a three pronged strategy - erosion of the rigid patriarchal system through the power of women's movements, improving resources available to women for their tasks such as cooking and water fetching, and expanding the scope of existing programmes reach out to women and to draw them into the health care network.

Women Students Protest Molestation

ON April 10, students of the Government Polytechnic for Women, Chandigarh, held an angry demonstration on the campus, demanding immediate action against Mr S. P. Gambhir, a teacher of the interior decoration department, who had allegedly misbehaved with a student the previous day. When the student went to the teacher's room in connection with her internal assessment, he tried to molest her and threatened to give her low marks if she did not submit to his wishes. While she was arguing with him, four of her classmates came and gave him a sound thrashing.

The students submitted a memorandum to the home secretary. Official sources stated that Gambhir was involved in another incident of molestation a few years ago. He was suspended and an enquiry instituted but no woman student came forward to give evidence. However the enquiry committee recommended that he be transferred immediately since he was not fit to remain in a women's institution. Yet the Chandigarh administration took no action. Last year, Gambhir was involved in yet another incident with a woman student who later lost her mental balance. Again no action was taken against him.

Following the students' protest a three member committee consisting of members of the staff has been set up to look into

the charge that Gambhir is a compulsive eve teaser. He was also arrested, and suspended from the institution. Since the victim and her four women classmates are willing to testify, it is hoped that the enquiry will lead to some action against Gambhir.

(summarized from The Tribune)



Errata

In "A School Teacher's Fight For Justice And Dignity" on page 21 of **Manushi** No.14, the sentence "The committee consisted of justices Grover and Sikri, both ex members of the management..." should have read: "The committee consisted of ex justices Grover and Sikri, both members of the management." We regret the mistake.

An Educational Camp For Women in Calcutta

From March 16 to 20, the Women's Research Centre, with the help of the Workers' Education Center organized a camp for women belonging to the unorganized low income sector. The camp was financed by the department of labour.

The camp was attended by 56 women from the lake colony in south Calcutta and the Panchanantal, a large slum. The women were mainly from the unorganized working classes of rice sellers and domestic workers, though one seamstress and several housewives were also present. The camp's main purpose, as the government spokesperson said, was to stimulate awareness about the need for women to be organized to form a union, for their own benefit and for the improvement of work performance which would benefit employers too.

The participants' response revealed a deep need to speak their problems. One woman described how she was forced to carry on an "illegal" trade in rice, and bribe the police because she had to feed three children. Another described her desperate situation after her husband died leaving her with five children. A third described how she was able at one time to carry 50 kilos of rice on her head, but now can manage only 30 because her health has deteriorated.

It is significant that the government agency did not recognize "mere housewives" as part of the "unorganized working women" sector. These highly productive women do not fit into the "low income" category either, and are perhaps the most unorganized women in the world. □