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08422



Distr.
LIMITED

ID/WG.283/3
2 October 1978

ENGLISH

United Nations Industrial Development Organization

Preparatory Meeting on the Role of Women
in Industrialization in Developing
Countries

Vienna, Austria, 6 - 10 November 1978

NOTE ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN
IN INDUSTRIALIZATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES *

prepared by

United Nations Development Programme

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id.78-5896

Introduction

1. As noted in the invitation to the Preparatory Meeting on the Role of Women in Industrialization in Developing Countries, there is an urgent need for improved understanding of the constraints to and potentials for increased participation of women in industrial development. UNDP therefore welcomes UNIDO's initiative to convene a meeting on the subject.
2. In presenting this Note, at the request of UNIDO, UNDP lays no claim to any special mandate or competence in the area of women's participation in industrial development but merely hopes that a few observations may contribute to a useful discussion by the Preparatory Committee. The outline of the Note follows suggestions made by UNIDO.
3. Because of the difficulties faced by women in industry and their limited participation in industrial development, UNDP's experience in technical co-operation in this area of work is also very limited. For example, a few vocational training projects may facilitate industrial employment but whether, in fact, they do so is not known and would require a special investigation. Most vocational training programmes for girls (there are very few) do not seem to aim at the industrial labour market. In Latin America, with a relatively large number of women working in industry, two regional projects, the Inter-American Centre for Labour Administration (CIAT) and the Inter-American Centre of Research and Documentation on Vocational Training (CINTERFOR), have in recent years addressed themselves to problems of special interest to women in industrial as well as other employment.

Constraints to women's participation in industrial development

4. In seeking an effective role in industrial development, women are faced with a number of serious constraints of different kinds. While closely inter-related, they may for the sake of convenience be divided into two main categories: social and cultural constraints and lack of training and education.

5. Social and cultural constraints refer to women's role as mothers and to the common traditional reluctance to allow women to associate with strange men, as is often required in manufacturing employment. As mothers, women have great difficulties absenting themselves from their children for a full working day and they cannot, without serious consequences, mingle with strange men if this is not socially acceptable.

6. Women's relative lack of education and training is well-known. For industrial employment, which at all levels puts a premium on education and training, this is a severe handicap. At the lowest level, literacy and numeracy are highly desirable, if not necessary; at higher levels, technical and professional competence becomes mandatory. Women are at a disadvantage at all levels. Even at primary school level, girls' school attendance continues to lag behind that of boys, though the difference is now generally diminishing. At higher levels, particularly as concerns vocational training and technical and professional education of interest to industrial enterprises, girls' and women's educational level is usually substantially below that of boys and men. Many kinds of vocational training and technical education are often closed to girls. Additionally, even if they are formally open to girls, the attendance of girls may be very limited due to the anticipated difficulties of actually utilizing such education in industrial employment.

7. In spite of these rather severe constraints on women's industrial employment, women are not totally absent from the industrial scene. In most countries there is some female employment in manufacturing production; in some, such employment is rather substantial. A closer look will usually reveal that the bulk of female industrial employment is in unskilled, low-paying work in certain specific sectors of manufacturing. Traditionally, the industries primarily involved have been the textile, food-processing and pharmaceutical industries. More recently, certain branches of the electrical and electronics industry may be added to the list, possibly others as well. The point is merely to indicate that female industrial employment is not non-existent in spite of the serious constraints just mentioned; it is, however,

highly selective. It is also worth noting that industrial employment tends to remain sex-segregated even in highly industrial countries. Because of the greater industrial diversification, the situation in the developed countries may, however, need to be analysed on the basis of occupational classification rather than on the basis of industrial sub-sector only.

8. The explanation for the apparent anomaly of relatively high levels of female employment in certain manufacturing branches in spite of the general constraints on such employment appears to be a combination of economic factors - low wages - and women's greater aptitude for certain types of work - female workers are, for example, preferred for tasks that require manual dexterity and patient attention to monotonous detail. Another characteristic of women's work is that it must not require a great deal of physical strength. Unskilled heavy work will be performed by men.

9. The typical low level of pay for women workers is motivated, among other things, by the assumption that women's work is supplementary to that of male members of the family. Employers may, for example, mainly recruit young unmarried women, who are expected to leave when they marry and have children. The employment, or need for employment, of female heads of families is not a factor taken into account on the industrial labour market. Nevertheless, if necessary as a means of assuring a female supply of workers, employers will often provide certain special services and facilities, such as lodging and day-care facilities. On the other hand, even when such services are legally prescribed, as they often are nowadays, many employers will evade their responsibilities if supervision is slack. In industries where large numbers of women are employed, low-level supervisory functions may also be assigned to women, although high management positions generally remain the preserve of men. Women may be employed as professional workers in lines of work that do not involve major decision-making responsibilities, such as research.

10. A final common constraint to women's employment in industry on an equal footing with men is women's reluctance or inability to actively participate in trade unions and, through the unions, press for more favourable treatment by employers. Whether male resistance to women's participation in union management or women's lack of initiative and persistence in these matters

(prompted by the social problems they face), is the explanation for this state of affairs would seem to be a moot question. Most likely the two factors are mutually reinforcing. While formal organization may not occur among professional workers, one may presume that women at the professional level in principle encounter the same kind of problems as women at the lower levels, i.e., a combination of male and female attitudinal problems and social constraints. As noted, women very rarely attain high positions.

Specific areas where women can contribute to the industrial development of developing countries

11. In a growing number of developed and a few developing countries, women are already employed in a large number of manufacturing industries. This may well become the future pattern for all countries. In the meantime, it would seem that those developing countries where women's role in industrial development is minor, that is, the majority, may as a strategy for changing this situation to advantage commence with those industrial sectors where women workers are already employed. The general goal should be to increase the productivity and pay of women's work and to improve working conditions, i.e., through the provision of special services for working mothers.
12. Additionally, the potential for women's contribution to industrial development through the establishment of manufacturing enterprises in areas of production where women's role traditionally is strong and where technological advance calls for a shift from small-scale artisan production to larger-scale industrial production may be considered. Such development may be facilitated by an intermediary stage of more specialized but still basically non-industrial production. A general principle should be to build upon and utilize whatever relevant experience women already have. As circumstances permit, women's participation may be expanded to include entirely new areas of activity.

Ways and means of developing national programmes for women's participation in industrial development

13. Any significant change in women's role in industrial development will as a rule depend on a change in Government policies and plans. This will require analysis of women's current and potential contribution to industrial development, taking into account the specific features of the economy of each country and cultural and social norms governing men's and women's interaction with each other.

14. As the general experience in deliberate planning for women's participation in industrial development is very limited, new and innovative approaches are called for. Additionally, to ensure that women's interests are properly understood and taken into account, women with appropriate training and experience should be active participants in the planning.

15. In any attempt to analyze women's participation in industrial development, there is a need to approach existing statistics on women's share of the economically active population with some caution. For a large number of developing countries, existing figures are grossly misleading because unpaid family labour is not counted as an economic activity. The resultant distortion is most obvious for rural areas but also affects urban areas where women may do unpaid work in family enterprises of different kinds. To obtain a reasonably accurate estimate of the relative importance of women's employment in manufacturing industries, it will generally be advisable to compute such employment as a share of total non-agricultural employment rather than of total female employment.

16. For detailed planning, it will generally also be advisable to undertake special surveys concerning women's needs and demand for employment, taking into account the implications of women's role as mothers. Problems demanding special attention would include the possibility of providing part-time work for married women. While women's incomes may in many instances be complementary to those of men, they may all the same be an absolute necessity if the family is to escape the multiple and debilitating problems of severe poverty. Additionally, there is a need to study the relationship between the provision of such services as health care, crèches and kindergartens and the common problems of low work productivity and absenteeism. In general, the combination of women's work as mothers and homemakers with a meaningful working career outside the home needs to be given careful and systematic attention. In traditional, basically agricultural societies, women have always played a very important role as economic producers although the economic and social importance of this fact has until recently been largely neglected. In the modern world, with

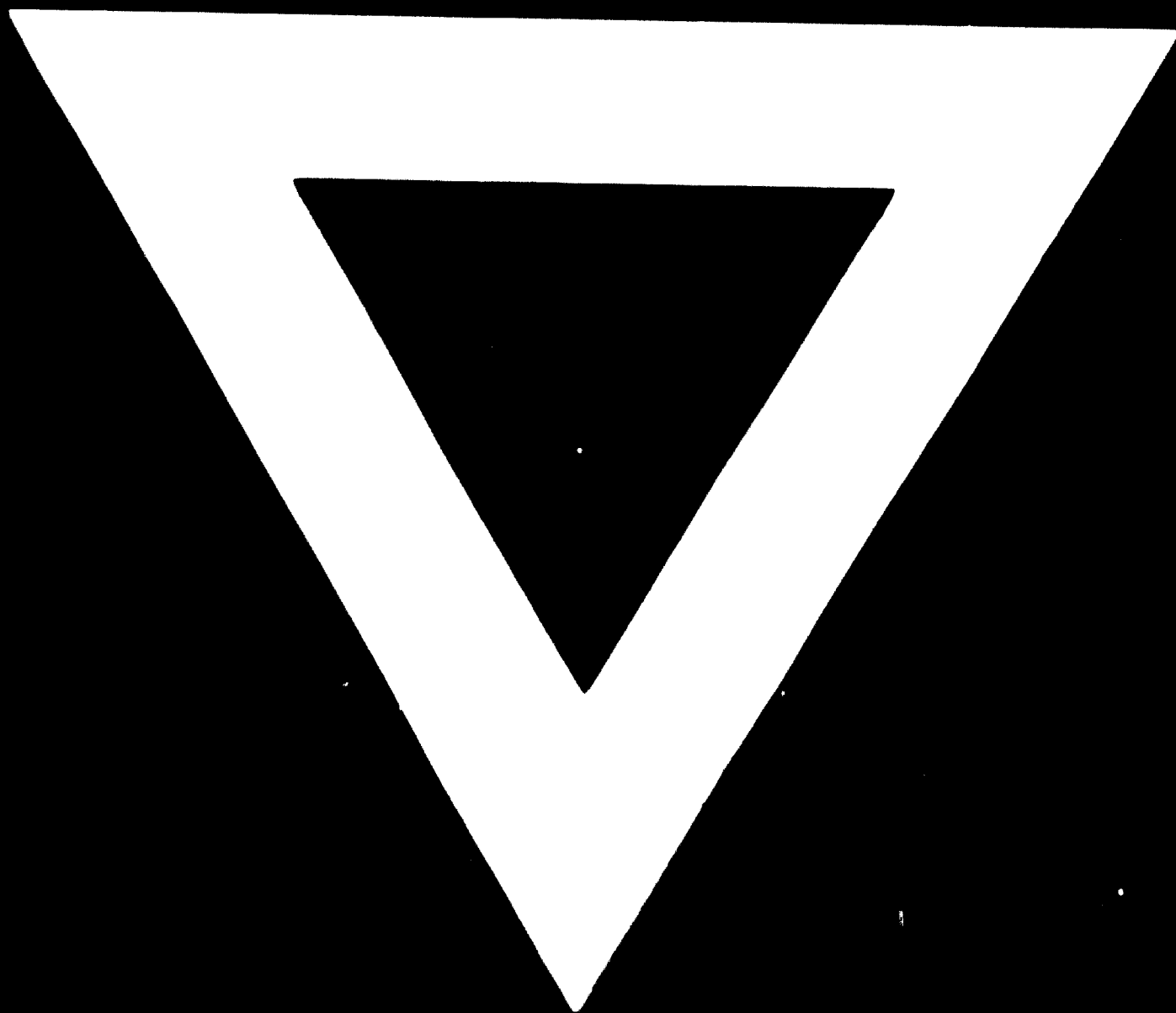
its increasing dependence on industrial and other non-agricultural production, there is an urgent need to devise new ways and means for women to maintain their productive role without serious hardships for themselves and their families. In the absence of a solution to this problem, women cannot contribute their full share of development and society as a whole is held back.

17. As the more direct means of enabling women to play a more active role in industrial development, women must be given improved and increased opportunities for education and training. Currently, to the extent that vocational and technical schools for girls exist at all, the types of training offered are very often limited to typically female occupations, such as health care, secretarial work, teaching, beautician's work, sewing and cooking. Even agricultural training, for which rural women have such an obvious need, is often closed to women. Vocational and technical education and training, including on-the-job training, aimed at industrial employment appears to be the most rare of the scarce educational facilities for girls and women. Until and unless this situation is changed, it is difficult to see how women's position in industry can change in any significant way. It may be added that training in such subjects as accounting, planning, business administration and economics, co-operative organization, marketing and finance are of special importance if women are to play an active role in industrial development. Last but not least, credit facilities must be provided to women. Initially, it may be most constructive to provide women with the necessary training and credit facilities for establishing small-scale industrial enterprises.

18. Finally, there is a need to educate the public about the benefits to be derived from increased participation of women in industrial development (as well as other areas of development) and what needs to be done to facilitate such a course of action.



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