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United Nations Commission on the Status of Women: International Labour Organization Activities; United Nations Commission on the Status of Women: Repercussions of Scientific and Technological Progress on the Conditions of Work and Employment of Women Book Review

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## BOOK REVIEWS

THE UNITED NATIONS REPORTS ON WOMEN'S PROGRESS  
DURING THE PAST DECADE

Reviewed by Arthur S. Leonard\*

United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. "International Labour Organization Activities." Report by the International Labour Office. 1969.

United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. "Repercussions of Scientific and Technological Progress on the Conditions of Work and Employment of Women." Report by the International Labour Office 1970.

These two United Nations publications are official reports on current U. N. activities involving the status of working women around the world. The first is mainly concerned with describing the structure of those United Nations Agencies that deal with the subject, and recounting their activities in recent years. The second deals with a survey of United Nations member states on how women are coping with the various stages of technological development in the different countries.

Of more interest than the reports themselves are the appendices, as is often the case with United Nations bulletins, for here can be found the heart of the data from which the organization has built its report.

The subject of the appendices of the first report is a progress report on convention ratifications. The International Labour Office has undertaken the sponsorship of the international conventions (policy agreements) on working conditions for women that have been accumulating on legislative dockets around the world since World War I. These include conventions on maternity protection, night work, underground work, equal pay, social security, discrimination, and equality of treatment and opportunity. Main problems barring the ratification of these conventions by member states have been their rather broad range of implications for national policy, and the obvious need for enabling legislation to make official government policies conform to the letter and the spirit of the conventions -- legislation

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that has proved very difficult of passage in some national legislatures. The appendix to the organizational report takes several of these major conventions and describes the difficulties encountered in ratification and compliance in those countries where the subject has come up for legislative action in recent years.

Of particular significance is the obvious haste with which underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia have taken up these conventions. The important implication is that as these countries industrialize, they will have a stated policy of equality, and their women may not be subjected to the heavy burdens of low pay and long hours which were imposed by custom and prejudice in many of the current industrial powers when they were developing, even in the United States (see Mark Goldstein's article in this issue for details.).

Also included in the appendices of this report is a bibliography that should prove invaluable to researchers into the activities of the ILO, as it describes bulletins and reports on recent ILO activities.

The second report listed above is the more interesting and informative of the two, mainly because it has a longer appendix! Because many member nations of the U. N. have not had a chance to conduct surveys in recent years on the specific topic of technological change and the woman worker, the reports excerpted in this appendix are of a more general nature, and provide, country by country, descriptions of the general status of women workers in twenty-three member states.

These excerpted reports differ in content, some being quite detailed and broken down into sections on child care, job training and the like, while others merely give a general statement of the trends isolated by government observers in recent years. The countries are treated in alphabetical order, which is unfortunate, as it makes a comparison of policies and conditions in one geographical area rather more difficult than it should; however, a rather interesting, and disturbing, picture emerges from a quick read-through of these reports.

It appears that, while officially calling for equal status and equal pay for women workers, the governments of many states are letting a situation develop in which there is the appearance, rather than the reality, of equality. An international trend has appeared, as evidenced by these government-prepared reports, of giving equal pay for equal work, but of seeing to it that the women are not given, or trained for, the equal work that will entitle them to that equal pay. Thus women workers are in the main relegated to lower-paying jobs with less chance of promotion. Some

countries report this phenomenon with the naive rationalization that women are unsuited to technical and mechanical jobs which are higher-paying, the old "men's work" and "women's work" prejudice which has been shown to be mistaken by research on aptitudes and preferences among female school-children (see once more Mark Goldstein's paper). Others concede that the cause might be unequal educational opportunities; that is, technical training programs geared to male students and rather exclusively limited to them. Still others, perhaps cutting down to the core of the problem, state that it is a cultural phenomenon for women to reject this type of work, because it has become a general paradigm of employment thinking that such jobs are just not "women's work." The British go even further with a study that indicates that English women don't mind low-paying jobs and non-technical work, an interesting illustration of what may well be extreme cultural conditioning. Thus the problem may well be one for which a solution must evolve gradually. As world-wide society becomes more heavily industrialized, and as the various governments establish official policies of non-discrimination and equal employment opportunities for women, cultural biases may gradually fade away and women may come to be accepted, by themselves and by society at large, as equally qualified for high-paying technical and managerial positions. Certainly, the whole rationale behind the Women's Liberation Movement in America today is that women have to demonstrate their interest in equality by asserting their legal rights, and such assertions, if vigorously publicized, may contribute to such a change in attitudes.

To hasten along that day of reason and enlightenment when all will be equal, the ILO has undertaken many educational projects, for this is the sort of problem that can best be solved by education. Continual publicity for these programs, and cooperation of the member states in the institution of day-care centers and training programs geared to female needs, may combine to bring about the desired results. Perhaps the progress reports of the Commission on the Status of Women will have more substantial changes to report in 1980.