

Overpopulation

Mrs. Irene Spry, ACWW Representative, tells about the happenings at the Bucharest World Population Conference. Although the Conference was held over a year ago, the members will find this article helpful for a branch meeting.

Editor's Note.

Are there too many people in the world? Or, at the rate at which people are multiplying, will there be too many by 2000? By then — if our numbers keep on doubling every 35 years — there will be 7 billion of us on our little planet. Has it the carrying capacity to support so many?

The United Nations and its family of organizations has been getting more and more worried about this "population explosion". It designated 1974 "World Population Year", and the first UN World Population Conference was held in Bucharest, Rumania, with 137 nations represented at it.

Some of these nations do not consider that they have too many inhabitants. A few even think that they do not have enough. A number think that the grinding poverty so many people in the world today endure is caused, not by the pressure of an increasing population, but by the unequal and unfair way in which the resources of the earth are shared out amongst its peoples, and by an inefficient and out-of-date economic and social system.

Others are convinced that overpopulation is a great and growing problem. This difference in point of view (and a number of other disagreements) lasted right to the end of the Conference, but the delegations' discussions brought many of them a long stride forward towards understanding the issues at stake in the quick increase in recent years in the number of people in the World. They reached agreement on some important ideas and made decisions that are of deep concern to the members of ACWW, as well as all the people of the world.

1. A key point on which everyone agreed was that population problems cannot be separated from problems of health services and social welfare; food production and economic development; education and employment opportunities; and the status of women. Progress will have to be made — if it is to be achieved at all — in all these aspects of human life as an integrated whole.

2. There was agreement, too, that consideration must be given to "... the supplies and characteristics of natural resources and to the quality of the environment and particularly to all aspects of food supply including productivity of rural areas. The demand for vital resources increases not only with growing population but also with growing per capita consumption; attention must be directed to the just distribution of resources and to the minimization of wasteful aspects of their use throughout the world; ...". The problem of how the world's resources can be more justly shared was implicit in the theme of the ACWW Conference at Perth: "A World to Share".

3. The position of women in the community affects the rate of population growth and is affected by it. If women work outside their homes and take an active part in public affairs they usually have fewer and more widely spaced children, and if women have smaller families they have a better chance to work at paid jobs and professions and to undertake public responsibilities. If women have an equal share with men, in each family, in deciding how many babies are to be brought into the world and at what intervals, they will give thought — realistically — to the practical problems of bringing up their children well: Will there be enough food for all the babies born? Will there be enough land or sufficient job opportunities to let them have a good life? Can they be properly educated? Will the mother be strong and well enough to look after her children, or will she die of anaemia after three or four babies are born?

Representatives of a number of women's organizations (including ACWW) met together to draw up a submission in the hope that the Plan of Action might be strengthened in its references to the role and status of women. Several official delegations approved of the ideas put forward and submitted them to the Conference. They were embodied in the amended Plan of Action that was finally agreed on: "Women have the right to complete integration in the development process particularly by means of an equal access to education and equal participation in social, economic, cultural and political life. In addition, the necessary measures should be taken to facilitate this integration with family responsibilities, which should be fully shared by both partners." It is therefore urgent to "remove obstacles to the education, training, employment and career advancement opportunities for women; ...". The economic contribution of women in households and farming should be recognized in national economies;" and: "Women should be actively involved both as individuals and through political and non-governmental organizations, at every stage and every level in the planning and implementation of development programmes, including population policies; ...".

4. The special problems and needs of rural people in relation to population problems and policies were also stressed, especially the loss of young people to the cities which distorts the age distribution of country populations in a way unfavourable to economic development. Revitalization of the countryside is a priority goal. "Intensive programmes of economic and social improvement should be carried out in the rural areas through balanced agricultural development which will provide increased income to the agricultural population, permit an effective expansion of social services and include measures to protect the environment and conserve and increase agricultural resources;" while new employment opportunities should be developed in rural areas, systems of land tenure improved, and social amenities brought to the people. Even so, by the year 2000 it is expected that more than half of the people of the world will be living in urban areas.