



**Message by Juan Somavia
Director-General of the International Labour Office
on the occasion of
International Women's Day**

8 March 2009

On this International Women's Day we recognize, celebrate and preserve the progress achieved on the road to gender equality.

This year's observance takes place at a time of profound economic turmoil accompanied by a deepening social crisis. Now more than ever we must focus on issues of equity, equality and non-discrimination.

As the recession spreads and deepens in the global economy, both women and men will suffer the labour market consequences. According to the ILO's *Global Employment Trends for Women 2009*, the number of unemployed women is expected to rise by as much as 22 million this year as a result of the current crisis.

Gender inequality risks being exacerbated by the crisis. In times of economic upheaval, women often experience the negative consequences more rapidly and are slower to enjoy the benefits of recovery. And already before the crisis, the majority of working women were in the informal economy with lower earnings and less social protection.

As economies shrink, cuts in social spending may be a first reaction. They are likely to place further strains on families and heavier burdens on women. Yet it is encouraging that many national responses are recognizing the vital role of social protection in weathering and going beyond the crisis. And fiscal recovery packages that include the voice of women stand a better chance of achieving what they set out to.

In addressing the challenges ahead, unpaid care work remains a big barrier to equality for women. Caring for children, for the elderly and for the home, is still heavily the responsibility of women. More equitable sharing of this work between women and men as well as supportive policy measures would be instrumental in advancing women's overall empowerment through the world of work.

Experience shows that progress for women also yields immediate benefits for families and societies. It is time for creative policy measures to support women's efforts to access opportunities for productive work, upgrade skills and progressively secure a better life for themselves and their families. This means sustainable and quality jobs open to both men and women, social protection that helps to overcome the particular challenges women face in the labour market, and social dialogue with the active inclusion of women in decision-making processes.

The ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization emphasizes that the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda – fundamental principles and rights at work, employment and enterprise creation, social protection and social dialogue are “inseparable, interrelated and mutually supportive”.

Gender is a cross-cutting theme of Decent Work and this Agenda is essential in finding new paths out of the current economic and social turmoil and in transcending the pre-existing imbalances.

On this International Women’s Day, and in these uncertain economic times, let us strive to strengthen economies and families by advancing the Decent Work Agenda for all women and men.

* * *