

11th African Regional Meeting
Addis Ababa

Information Note

Lunchtime Debate: ILO Working towards the MDGS: Women's Entrepreneurship and Decent Work in the Africa Region

Wednesday, 25 April 13.00-14.45

Introduction

The primary goal of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.

Decent work aims to deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, and to organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

In promoting equality of opportunity, the ILO has taken a human rights based approach because gender equality and non-discrimination are fundamental human rights recognized by a number of international legal instruments, including ILO convention. In adopting this approach, ILO considers it essential that women acquire the education, knowledge, skills and opportunities they need in order to realize their full potential. Women's entrepreneurship can be one of the possible avenues for decent and productive work.

Objectives

This lunch debate will:

- Exchange views on how women's entrepreneurship and decent work can contribute not only to women's empowerment but also to the removal of structural and legal barriers for women;
- Exchange views on how to ensure that women's entrepreneurship does not only empower women economically and financially, but also empowered to make independent and value driven choices;
- Share information on other initiatives aimed at women's empowerment;
- Discuss a possible way forward.

Key issues and challenges

In Africa, the equal rights of women and their equal participation in the social, cultural, economic and political life have remained illusive and women are still the main victims of poverty, social prejudice, lack of access to health services and education.

Hidden forms of discrimination against women in, inter alia, education, health, including HIV/AIDS, early marriage, forced marriage, genital mutilation, forced sex or other forms of sexual violence and some negative traditional practices continue.

There continues to be discriminatory laws and the lack of enforcement of laws is quite rampant. Dual legal systems in terms of formal or common law and customary laws continue to co-exist and continue to dis-empower women.

Pervasive patriarchal gender biases and stereotypes and narrowly defined gender roles continue to place women at the bottom of the societal ladder. Women's empowerment, inter alia, through entrepreneurship and decent work, are an important means of reversing the disadvantaged position of women.

Decent work mobilises human resources that would otherwise be underutilised for socio-economic development. In addition women's entrepreneurship can be a channel for instituting mechanisms that provide greater protection, security and safety to women entrepreneurs and their families and communities. It further ensures that women, particularly marginalised women, become aware of their rights and entitlements to available resources. This contributes to combating discrimination in the labour market.

Research¹ shows that:

- Women's entrepreneurship is an untapped source of economic growth;
- Women have a lower participation rate in entrepreneurship than men;
- Women choose different industries than men do;
- Such industries are perceived as being less important to economic growth and development;
- Mainstream government policies and programmes do not take into account specific needs of women entrepreneurs.

ILO responses

ILO is playing the role of agent for change, catalyst and advocate. It has undertaken and put into place a number of initiatives in the area of women's empowerment through entrepreneurship, such as employment creation through small enterprise development and business development services. One of the recent initiatives is the Women's Entrepreneurship Development and Gender Equality (WEDGE) programme. WEDGE offers a model for an ILO strategy in women's entrepreneurship development. WEDGE adopts a three-pronged strategy: it promotes knowledge about women's entrepreneurship; it supports voice and representation for women entrepreneurs; and has developed a variety of services targeted at women entrepreneurs and their service providers.

The challenge is on how to situate women's entrepreneurship development with decent work values as a key priority in the development agenda for Africa.

¹ Gerry Finnegan: "Facilitating Women's Entrepreneurship: Lessons from the ILO's research and support programmes. Paper presented at the OECD workshop on "Entrepreneurship in a Global Economy: Strategic Issues and Policies", Budapest, 8-10 September 2003

Possible questions for debate

- Ways and means to strengthen the collaboration and impact of the development partners and social partners on the issues of women's entrepreneurship, for instance pooling of resources.
- How to strengthen and make more explicit the linkages between women's entrepreneurship and the Decent Work Agenda.
- Ways and means to support positive steps taken by countries or organisations to better integrate women's entrepreneurship issues in national development policies.