



“Women’s Economic Empowerment”:

by Ms. Jane Hodges, Director, ILO Bureau for Gender Equality

Pan-African Forum on Women’s Entrepreneurship Development

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Your Excellencies, Guests of Honour, Representatives of ILO’s Constituents, Dear Participants:

Non-discrimination and equality between women and men have been fundamental principles underpinning the work of ILO since its creation in 1919. As we celebrate ILO’s 90th anniversary, it is also fitting to be celebrating women’s entrepreneurship and economic empowerment because gender equality is integral to the vision of Decent Work for all women and men and cuts across ILO’s four strategic objectives: (i) standards and fundamental principles and rights at work; (ii) employment creation; (iii) social protection; and (iv) social dialogue and tripartism.

ILO’s mandate to promote gender equality in the world of work is enshrined in its Constitution and reflected in international labour standards. The four ILO gender equality Conventions are the Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100 – 167 ratifications), the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111 – 169 ratifications), the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156 - 40 ratifications), and the Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183 – 17 ratifications). Conventions 100 and 111 are among the eight fundamental Conventions of the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998) which must be promoted, respected and realised by all ILO member States.

ILO has adopted a strategy of gender mainstreaming for achieving equality between women and men in the world of work. ILO's approach to gender mainstreaming is two-pronged and based on analysis that considers the specific and often different needs and interests of women and men. On the one hand, awareness of these differences is integrated into all policies, programmes, projects and institutional structures and procedures. On the other hand, especially where inequalities are extreme or deeply entrenched, such different needs are addressed through gender-specific measures involving women and men, either separately or together or through measures designed explicitly to overcome inequalities – such as women's entrepreneurship development.

The 98th Session of the International Labour Conference in June 2009 engaged in an indepth discussion on gender equality at the heart of decent work. This was the first occasion in 25 years where ILO constituents gave direct guidance on how to proceed in the Organization's efforts to advance gender equality in the world of work. The Conclusions from this discussion reaffirm a strong commitment to equality between women and men as espoused by the 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation. The Conclusions take particular cognisance of the impact of the global financial and economic crisis on the working lives of women and men. The Conclusions state that crises should not be used as an excuse to create even greater inequalities nor undermine women's acquired rights. In particular, during times of economic crisis, not respecting fundamental principles and rights at work would represent both a failure to uphold universally recognised rights and a failure of economic policy to ensure growth and recovery.

ILO's tripartite constituents have already singled out measures to alleviate the immediate impact of the crisis and to assist in medium-term to long-term responses to avoid recurrences, with concurrent attention to promoting gender equality. Amongst such measures are revised legislation, including labour laws, to provide better opportunities for women and men to reconcile work and family responsibilities; policies to cover training for women in non-traditional areas of work, including as entrepreneurs; retraining women and men for jobs that break through occupational segregation; use of modern technology; and active labour market policies, including,

for instance, affirmative action for women; and working to combat gender stereotypes which may impact on women's experience of the crisis.

These words are echoed in the Global Jobs Pact which was adopted by the International Labour Conference on 19 June 2009 and which was spoken to by a number of heads of State, including many of the distinguished delegates present at this Forum. The Global Jobs Pact affirms that "this current crisis should be viewed as an opportunity to shape new gender equality policy responses. Recovery packages during economic crises need to take into account the impact on women and men and integrate gender concerns in all measures. In discussions on recovery packages, both regarding their design and assessing their success, women must have an equal voice with men". Moreover, the Global Jobs Pact calls for promotion of labour standards that support economic and jobs recovery and reduce gender inequalities as well as policies to sustain enterprises, in particular small, medium-sized and micro-enterprises. These enterprises and workplaces are the subject matter of this Forum. This message was brought forward to the summit of the G20 countries, which met in Pittsburgh this September, and is reflected in the Summit Leaders' Statement.

Dear Participants,

At the African regional level, the gender equality dimension of Decent Work has received great attention. Five years ago, employment took centre stage at the Extraordinary Summit of African Union (AU) Heads of State and Governments in Ouagadougou in September 2004. Women's entrepreneurship, in particular, was promoted as a key strategy for poverty reduction. The recent report of the Chairperson of the AU Commission on Ouagadougou +5 on Employment and Poverty Alleviation – under the theme "impact of the global crisis and employment and labour markets in Africa" – calls for support to an entrepreneurial culture that helps potential women entrepreneurs make better informed decisions and to organise themselves as well as to engage in social dialogue.

ILO believes that fostering women's entrepreneurship is a key means of generating employment and can offer the opportunity for social and economic empowerment of women as well as men and their families. The conclusions concerning the promotion of sustainable enterprises, adopted by the 96th Session of the International Labour Conference in 2007, propose some basic conditions generally considered to be essential: (1) peace and political stability; (2) good governance; (3) social dialogue; (4) respect for universal human rights and international labour standards; (5) entrepreneurial culture; (6) sound and stable macroeconomic policy and good management of the economy; (7) trade and sustainable economic integration; (8) an enabling legal and regulatory environment; (9) rule of law and secure property rights; (10) fair competition; (11) access to financial services; (12) physical infrastructure; (13) information and communication technologies; (14) education, training and lifelong learning; (15) social justice and social inclusion; (16) adequate social protection; and (17) responsible stewardship of the environment. ILO has been actively promoting this "recipe" for successful enterprises, with an accent on female-run enterprises.

Women, particularly rural women, need enhanced access to and control over productive resources including land, technology, market information and credit to ensure the viability of their enterprises. Access to credit is a particularly important element given the barriers encountered by many women when approaching formal financial institutions. Limited public investment in rural areas manifests itself in poor infrastructure and services which intensify women's unpaid work and curtail their opportunities for income. Increased public investment in social infrastructure in rural areas can significantly alleviate women's family responsibilities and enable these women to move out of poverty.

So, dear participants, beyond the policy guidance, what has ILO to offer on the practical side?

ILO aims to work in countries where there is a demand for women's entrepreneurship development support as part of Decent Work Country Programmes (DWCPs) and

United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs). ILO's women's entrepreneurship strategy seeks to unleash the economic potential of women's enterprises to contribute to the creation of quality jobs, gender equality, economic growth and poverty reduction. In Africa, one flagship programme is Women's Entrepreneurship Development and Gender Equality – the so-called WEDGE programme. WEDGE has been supporting women-owned operations through building capacity in business knowledge, including access to markets through trade fairs and exhibitions, providing training and strengthening women entrepreneurs' voice and representation through networks. Since 2000, almost 80'000 women, principally in sub-Saharan Africa, have participated in WEDGE activities aimed at honing entrepreneurial skills. Acknowledging the effectiveness of this approach, the Conclusions from this year's International Labour Conference call upon ILO to further "extend programmes to foster women's entrepreneurship and economic development". Your working group on expanding WEDGE, this afternoon, will be of great interest. We need to hear stories of skills being used successfully in the real market place.

Another example of practical support, which may well be examined more deeply in the working groups, is the place for gender equality in the broader macro-economic framework. As I said earlier, ILO believes that gender equality contributes to the objectives of employment growth, efficiently functioning labour markets and social cohesion. The Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122), which is one of the most significant Conventions from the viewpoint of governance, requires ratifying States to pursue an active policy designed to promote full, productive and freely chosen employment. It states that the policy shall ensure that there is freedom of choice of employment for each worker, "irrespective of sex", among other grounds. Free choice of employment under the Convention has gender implications when properly implemented.

So at the national level, policies for the promotion of entrepreneurship often take the gender dimension into account. The importance of women entrepreneurs for progress and sustainable development is universally recognised, but could it be made more tangible in national employment policies and strategies? For example, in South

Africa, training for the promotion of women's entrepreneurship and access to financial services and legal protection has been provided with support from ILO.

Yet another example of practical ILO assistance in fostering women's entrepreneurship is the Participatory Gender Audit. Over the last decade, ILO has implemented a series of Participatory Gender Audits, internally with ILO units and field offices, but also with ILO constituents, and more recently, with sister Agencies and programmes of the UN system. Through this process, ILO has been able to identify with greater clarity and detail the contemporary challenges that have prevented gender equality from becoming a reality, as well as share with more partners strategies for successfully overcoming such challenges. Findings from such Gender Audits suggest that women and children suffer disproportionately in times of crisis, often having fewer and less effective buffers to cope with economic hardship. Specifically for women and girls, gender-based vulnerabilities, including limited legal benefits and protection, lack of decision-making authority and limited control over financial resources, are likely to leave women and girls less equipped to cope with the crisis than men. ILO stresses that the current crisis will impact heavily on both women's and men's efforts to find and keep decent work and argues that if no remedial action is taken to overcome sex-based discrimination, disadvantages will intensify over time and leave women and girls even more vulnerable when crises strike.

Success in making women's entrepreneurship development part of our gender mainstreaming strategy as well as part of a decent work reality depend to a large extent on the ability to build strategic partnerships and achieve policy coherence with ILO constituents, national gender machineries, other UN Agencies and development actors. On this note, I emphasise the strategic partnership between ILO and the African Development Bank in co-hosting this Forum.

Based on this, I will leave you with some questions that may be discussed further in our working groups:

- How do we ensure women are included in decision-making processes, both within and outside the household, including in social dialogue processes?
- How do we continue promoting women's participation in the wider economy?

- How do we also address the role of men and boys when addressing women's empowerment and economic development?

We in the Bureau for Gender Equality along with our field Senior Gender Specialists sincerely hope that your work during the Forum will result in a Communiqué that can address some of the questions that face us all across Africa when promoting women's entrepreneurship and gender equality.

Thank you for your attention.