

Development of Female Trade Union Leadership

Ceylon Bank Employees Union

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Address by Tine Staermose, Director ILO Sri Lanka and the Maldives

- *Mr. Shah, President of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union*
- *Members from other Trade Unions*
- *Brothers and sisters, ladies and gentlemen, friends.*

Good morning. I am very glad to be speaking here this morning sharing a few thoughts with you from the point of view of the international labour organization. I would like thank Shah and The Union of the Ceylon Bank Employees for organizing this very important seminar.

It is a fact that few female Trade Union Leaders are found here in Sri Lanka as well as in many other countries.

Why is it so important to address the issue of female leadership in trade unions ? Can male trade union leaders not address the rights of female workers you may ask ? They can, but they seldom fully grasp the special needs that female workers have in relation to their work situations. We

need both male and female leaders in the trade unions. But women have shown to place gender issues on the agenda more than men do. And there are many gender issues in the world of work today that needs urgent attention. A recent report by the ILO called Global Employment Trends for Women has reconfirmed that gender inequality remains an issue within labour markets globally. Women suffer multiple disadvantages in terms of access to labour markets, and often do not have the same level of freedom as men to choose to work. Gender differences in labour force participation rates are a persistent feature of global labour markets. IN 2008, an estimated 6.3 percent of the world female labour force was not working but looking for work, up from 6 percent in 2007. This is more than for men.

Women also face constraints in terms of sectors of economic activity in which they would like to work and working conditions to which they aspire. Women are overrepresented in the agricultural sector and if more industrialized regions are excluded, almost half of female employment can be found in this sector alone. Women are also often in a disadvantaged position in terms of the share of the vulnerable employment in total employment. Those women who are able to secure the relative comfort of wage and salaried employment are often not receiving the same remuneration as their male counterparts. Gender

differentials may be due to a variety of factors, including crowding of women in low-paying industries and differences in skills and work experience, but may also be the result of discrimination. So given the constraints that women are facing today promoting gender equality and empowering women is pivotal to achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all.

These were some of the gender issues that need urgent attention in most countries. But how do we get there and what role can female trade union leaders play ?

As you know, social dialogue is fundamentally about equitable participation. It is through participation that women and men can achieve decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Conscious of our mandate, the ILO is investing in ways to build the capacity of our constituents to take part in, influence and benefit from international efforts to promote sustainable development. In this time of global financial and economic crisis, the goal of consensus building and democratic involvement is more important than ever.

The challenges of promoting gender equality through social dialogue is twofold. First, there is the matter of increasing the participation and status of women in the process and secondly there is the challenge of

introducing a gender perspective into the content so as to reflect the changing nature of labour markets and patterns in the world of work, which I have just talked about. The equitable participation of women in the institutions of social dialogue is itself key to promoting gender equality through tripartism and social dialogue. In some countries as women have increased their participation in the paid workforce they have also increased their participation in trade unions and employers organisations. And when women more often than men place gender issues on the agenda then these issues have gained wider recognition in the collective bargaining processes. In general however, the participation of women in workers and employers organizations has remained relatively low. This is due to the low participation of women in leadership positions. Governments have succeeded to increase their rate of female delegates to the ILC, regional meetings etc. For workers organisations, the challenge has been to overcome the differences in union strength between sectors that have predominantly employed men and those that have predominantly employed women. In 2002, an awareness campaign was launched by what is now ITUC to increase the participation of women in workers organizations. In March 2008, the ITUC launched a two year campaign entitled “Decent Work, Decent Life for Women Campaign”. Affiliate unions have been urged to aim for a target of one-

third participation in leadership positions, with some unions actually opting for a target of parity.

I hope I have shed some light on why we in the ILO believe that promoting female trade union leadership is crucial in order for us to address many critical issues in the global labour market today. Without you these issues are simply not being addressed. I hope you will have a fruitful seminar and that some concrete plans can be developed for the promotion of female trade union leadership in Sri Lanka. It is long overdue and the ILO is ready to support this work.

Thank you