

MESSAGE FOR SECRETARY ARTURO D. BRION

(to be read by Undersecretary Luzviminda Padilla)

ILO Forum for International Women's Day

Theme: Celebrating Working Women: Breaking Boundaries, Driving Change; Ending Impunity for Violence Against Women and Girls

Security Bank Case Room, AIM Conference Center

Benavidez Street, Makati City

Before anything else, I would like to greet everyone a Happy Women's Month and advance Happy International Women's Day tomorrow -- March 8.

It is both an honor and privilege to speak before all of you today ⁱⁿ and represent ^{tion of} Secretary Art Brion, in this momentous occasion. The Secretary sends his apologies for not being able to join you due to a conflict of schedule, ^{and} so he requested me to read the Message he prepared for all of you.

Message of Secretary Arturo Brion

Good morning to everyone. Happy International Women's Day to all and my salute to all women. I congratulate the International Labor Organization for organizing this forum with the theme: ***“Celebrating Working Women: Breaking Boundaries, Driving Change; and, Ending Impunity for Violence Against Women and Girls.”***

Indeed, gone are the days when women are at the periphery of politics and governance, education, economy, and health. In the Philippines, we

have had two women Presidents who are making a mark in history. Women are practically involved in all levels of decision-making in both the government and the private sector.

Today, women excel in all spheres and have become drivers of change. In labor and employment alone, the labor force participation rate of women is already 50%. Figures also show that 12.9 million ^{women} are employed or 92.5% of women who are in the labor force.

I believe that this has become possible due to the partnership of both men and women in advancing not only the cause of women but in advocating gender equality.

Relatedly, I am pleased to inform you that according to the 2006 Gender Gap Index conducted by the World Economic Forum, the Philippines is the only country in Asia to have closed the gender gap on both education and health and is among only five in the world that have done so (the others are the Dominican Republic, France, Honduras and Lesotho). The 2006 Gender Gap Index covers 115 countries, representing 90% of the world's population.

It is true that much has been done to improve the plight of women in our country and to minimize abuse and exploitation being committed against them, but we still face a lot of challenges particularly in specific sectors to truly become a country known for gender equality.

At this point, allow me to share my thoughts with you regarding these challenges and possible strategies on how to respond to them.

Strengthen Protection Services for Women Migrant Workers to Further Minimize Abuse and Exploitation

First, there is a need to strengthen protection services for women migrant workers to further minimize abuse and exploitation. During the Philippine Overseas Labor Conference held in Manila last December 2006, attended by our labor attaches and welfare officers assigned abroad, I emphasized a two-pronged strategy for our migrant workers. I told them that it is high time for us to promote higher levels of skills in our traditional markets like the Middle East, at the same time that we try to create newer and higher paying markets in Europe, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand.

We are now discouraging the deployment of unskilled workers, especially women, as they are the most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. If you have been watching the television and reading the newspapers, the Department of Labor has been widely criticized for upgrading the labor standards for our overseas domestic helpers which ^{some people fear} might result in the country's losing markets for this kind of job. But let me tell you that the decision to raise labor standards for domestic helpers is a result of many years of experience and careful study. Did you know that 85% of cases of abuse and exploitation ^{of overseas women} happen to overseas domestic helpers? We ^{are willing to} ~~have~~ ^{chosen} to be unpopular ^{is only} to be able to protect our most vulnerable sectors and act in favor of their protection when called upon to exercise our discretion.

Improving the Plight of Women in the Informal Economy

The second challenge that we are seriously responding to now is improving the plight of women in the informal economy. We all know that they now comprise more than half of the entire labor force. Majority of them are women. We, at the Department of Labor, have a comprehensive set of services for them but we admit that the government ^{alone} cannot ^{help} reach them ^{adequately} alone. It is a good thing that we have a strong partnership now with the group of Ms. Babes Tesiorna. Just recently, we launched the Unlad Kabuhayan Project (Worktrep) for workers in the informal economy. It is being piloted in a number of local government units with great support from the local chief executives.

NGOs

This gargantuan task of reaching out to men and women in the informal economy also requires the help of our tripartite partners – the employers groups and workers organizations. Through social dialogue, I am sure that we can come up with concrete, small steps on how to improve labor standards and working conditions, increase productivity, and develop social protection schemes for workers in the informal economy.

Concluding Remarks

Gender Mainstreaming: A Priority

During the 1990s, the DOLE was cited by the NCRFW as a trailblazer in gender and development (GAD) mainstreaming. We want to bring back that glory in DOLE to ensure that all policies, programs and projects of the

Department will have a gender perspective. It is for this reason that I made a policy pronouncement during our recently concluded corporate planning exercises that all agencies and offices under DOLE should make women's issues a cross-cutting concern. I, together with my staff, am committed to respond to the seven priority gender issues as brought forth in the Beijing Platform for Action. These are: a) Promotion of equality in employment opportunities and treatment; b) Advocacy against sex-based discrimination (including sexual harassment); c) Protection and promotion of the welfare of women in the informal sector, particularly the home-based workers; d) Protection and promotion of the welfare of female overseas Filipino workers; e) Enhancing the participation of women in policy-making and decision-making processes in trade unions and other workers' organizations; f) Protection and promotion of the welfare of the girl-child; and, g) Harmonizing work and family responsibilities.

Again, thank you and I wish you all a productive day with our inspiring gender equality advocates who will share their experiences this afternoon.