



8 March

Women and workers, or the right to be equal as human beings

On 8th March 1908, the workers of the Cotton textile company in New York went on strike to protest against unacceptable working conditions. The owner of the factory refused their demands, so the women exercised their legitimate collective right by locking themselves into the factory. They all died in a subsequent fire, the origin of which was never discovered. It was at the second Socialist Women's Conference that the 8th March was proposed as a date to commemorate the rights of women. Since that date, mauve – the colour of the fabric that these women produced – has become the symbol of the feminist struggle.

Dear colleagues,

It is both a duty and a pleasure for me today to address this message of solidarity to my fellow workers in the ILO, particularly in my threefold role as woman, international civil servant and President of the Staff Union (the sixth person in the history of this Committee to be able to make such a claim). I am proud to be a worker, a professional who believes in the importance of labour relations, but above all to be a human being who is open to the outside world and is convinced that social justice – and therefore decent work – can lead to a better world.

It is a message I want to share with all those women who, like me, have spent hours, days, years of their time contributing to the objectives of an almost 90-year-old Organization, sometimes against all odds, sometimes with the backing of colleagues, but always determined that the equal treatment and non-discrimination that working women aspire to throughout the world should also be true of this international organization. It has not always been easy and much still needs to be done, but our efforts have not gone unrewarded.

Let me make it quite clear that, as an individual, as a citizen and as a worker, I am first and foremost a feminist – or, to put it another way, anti-sexist. For me it has always gone without saying that, at this point in history, any thinking, decent man or woman has to be anti-sexist, just

as they have to be tolerant and anti-racist. Nowadays – and how society has changed! – this has surely become a truism.

Easy, though! Don't expect me to come out with your typical feminist or trade-unionist tirade! That's not my style, either. On the contrary, my feelings today are simply those of any one of you with 18 years in the field and at ILO headquarters - in other words, with some experience behind her. Besides, speeches are not just for putting your own views across. Like any kind of analysis they are a way of raising your own consciousness; they are written or spoken so as to gain a better grasp on the world, to try and understand, to bring a little light to the surrounding darkness. Before you can write or speak for others, you need to look deep into your subconscious mind (and the collective subconscious, too) to find what lies hidden there. It is a journey on which you cannot bring your preconceived ideas.

Today let us all, women and men alike, examine our little world. In the corridors, in the meeting rooms and in official documents, we hear talk of the integration of women, of breaking through the glass ceiling, of equality in both form and substance. But how many of us still carry with us our old prejudices, in which a woman working in the ILO invariably conjured up a picture of a secretary, however essential their contribution may be? Come on! Let's be truthful! Who can honestly say that he or she has never instinctively thought, on seeing a woman sitting at a computer, that she must be some kind of administrative staff? Why is it that in so many offices the men are called by their family name and the women by their first name, whatever their grade? How come that, in some units and departments, when the director is away it is always the oldest and highest-ranking man who takes over and not a woman in the same grade, often with longer experience? And why do we always call women "Miss" or "Mrs", when men are "Mr." and "Sir"? It is thousands of little daily anecdotes and idiosyncrasies like these that show that the point we women are trying to make today is still far from being properly understood.

The sort of frustration each one of us has to bear in our working life comes to the surface every time the Director-General appoints a woman to a management post ("Well, of course, it's because she's a woman"). We all too easily forget that those who get promoted may have started out as P2s more than 20 years ago and have pursued a blameless, progressive career in which they have shown themselves to be worthy of the trust that the senior management places in them. It is still difficult for a woman to give orders outside the home, perhaps because we find it difficult to think of ourselves as complete, competent human beings. Why are people so afraid of this 53 per cent of the population?

For years women have been thought of as a source of sin, as impure, as subservient - a conception that flies in the face of the earliest days when the matriarch, as the giver of life, was looked upon as the centre of nature. It was not until the French Revolution that a handful of men began to understand that equality means equality for everyone and, for the very first time, to speak of the human race as having "universal" rights.

Declarations, myths and laws aside, you only have to look back in time to see that there have always been extraordinary women who, though their lives may be portrayed as monotonous and domestic, are no less worthy of admiration for that. Their name is legion, and it would take far too long to cite them all here.

Take a look at the brief history of the ILO too, and you may find that you have been working side by side with women, exceptional both as human beings and as professionals, who have left their

mark on the ILO and on our day-to-day lives. Stop for a moment and think, and you will realise just how much you owe that assistant, that colleague, that director that you have been working with, not to mention the smile of those who serve you your coffee in the morning or come in at night to empty your waste-paper basket and who, the labour market being what it is, tend more often than not to be women. Where would you be without them?

In the end, we are each and every one of us unique, regardless of our sex, our race, our physical condition, our religion and our culture. Of course, we women are no better and no worse than men. We are just as brave and just as cowardly; we may be assertive or we may be shy; some of us are competent, some are not. And don't get the idea that we are privileged, just because staff policy today is more on our side (or, rather, treats us fairly)! Instead, try to look at us more honestly, without prejudice!

The occasion we are celebrating today is nothing more or less than the recognition that is due to us after so many years during which our significant contribution to professional life has been ignored or, worse still, sneered at. But we shouldn't forget that to achieve a world without sexism, we need for women and men to work together. Only in this way can we hope for a fairer and more democratic society. That is why the Staff Union Committee, on this 8th of March, wishes to pay tribute to all our colleagues, men and women alike, who are working together on an equal footing. Such, anyway, is our dearest hope!

Maria-Luz Vega
Chairperson
ILO Staff Union Committee