



Gender Equality at the HEART of Decent Work
ILO Inter-Regional Learning Forum
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Welcome and opening remarks

By

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Jane, ILO colleagues and friends from HQ, Africa, the Arab states, Europe and Latin America, and from Asia and the Pacific..On behalf of Ms. Sachiko Yamamoto, the Regional Director for ILO in Asia and the Pacific, it is an honour and privilege for me to welcome you to this internal ILO Learning Forum on Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work.

This Forum takes place at a special time..(not because of the political turbulence we had a while ago..) but because we are all in a celebrative mood for ILO's 90th anniversary. This is a 'neat fit' because equality between men and women at work has from the inception of the ILO stood at the center of the ILO core .

This Forum also takes place at a time of considerable worry and concern. The financial and ensuing economic crisis is hitting hard – worldwide, and its negative effects are being felt the most by the most vulnerable groups in society: the poor, the marginalized and those who are discriminated because of their age, sex, colour, ethnicity, migrant or health status.

Our region responded relatively quickly to the economic crisis and held in early February a Policy Forum in Manila to discuss with constituents options for an integrated and coherent set of recovery policies for growth, employment and decent work. One of the ILO background papers addressed the gender impact of the crisis and while data to

ascertain this was happening was not yet available, experience from the previous 97-98 crisis convinced most participants that gender sensitive policies if responses to the crisis are to be effective, because this crisis exacerbates inequalities along gender, racial, ethnic and income class lines.

The ILO Office for Asia and the Pacific is particularly pleased to host this Gender Forum with the Bureau of Gender Equality as there are many gender and decent work dynamics that require our attention in this region. Our constituents – male-dominated to a large extent at the policy-making levels - are aware that much still needs to be done in this field. For this reason they indicated in 2001 that gender mainstreaming should be a priority on the employment agenda.¹ And in 2006 they called for gender equality promotion through empowering women by promoting equality of opportunity to decent and productive work.²

Gender trends in this region suggest that women have and are entering paid employment in increasing numbers, but many of them are in low status, non-regular, informal, low-pay or no-pay jobs, even before the crisis. In South Asia, 90 per cent of what are formally considered “economically inactive people of prime age “are women. Of course most of them are active but in the informal-lowly paid jobs. If South Asia could manage to get half-way to achieving the female participation rate in Asia’s developed economies in the formal economy by 2020, this would translate into more than 106 million additional women in the labour force, boosting economic growth and reducing poverty.

Insufficient social protection by States also means that women do more “care work” in times of economic hardships. In this region as elsewhere, we also see that crisis of any sort is accompanied by an increase in violence and exploitation especially of women workers, many of whom are young migrants. ILO needs to play its role in confronting and combating such behaviour

As we all know, gender is not only about women but about women and men and how they build their families, institutions and societies. In relation hereto, there is a looming gender gap in education: Young men are not doing as well as young women in higher

¹ 13th ARM, Bangkok, 2001

² 14th ARM, Busan, 2006

education and this will pose a danger for the next generations in future knowledge economies.

In brief - decent and productive work for all women and men is the biggest challenge of our time, a challenge that is now being taken up by many other actors in the international community and increasingly in national contexts. This means that we - as the ILO – should provide cutting-edge knowledge and assistance to our member states on how to promote equality between the sexes, invest in women alongside men and empower women as well as men where-ever they face pronounced gender barriers.

Within the Office, the first ROAP Strategic Plan of Action for Mainstreaming of Gender in ILO Activities in Asia and the Pacific was adopted in Manila in 1997. In 2004, the ROAP Regional Director endorsed and disseminated the 2004-07 ILO Gender Mainstreaming Strategy – or GEMS – in Asia and the Pacific for implementation to all field offices.

During this biennium we implement the global ILO Action Plan for Gender Equality in line with HQ and the other regions. Gender equality promotion will continue to be a regional priority in Asia and the Pacific in the future, not only in assisting our member States to overcome the financial crisis, but also in promoting green jobs, better migration policies, extending labour and income protection to vulnerable workers in informal employment, such as in domestic service, and combating discrimination, forced and child labour, and other forms of labour exploitation.

Capacity building events like this Forum are very useful for mutual knowledge sharing between the field and HQ. On behalf of all the field colleagues from the Asia and Pacific region I would like to encourage all the gender specialists and coordinators from the other regions and Geneva to share your expertise in the coming days with us. From the region's side, I like to urge our gender focal points, national and international experts to share your in-depth in-country experiences with our guests and colleagues.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you a fruitful and productive seminar, and an enjoyable time in Thailand, our friendly, welcoming and exciting host country.