

Decent Work for a Life-Time of Gender Equality

The eternal cycle of life is defined by birth, childhood, youth, adulthood and old age. Today, the life cycle pattern of women and men are changing with profound implications for gender relations. The world's population is living longer than at any other time in history and social patterns are also evolving through new technology, increased mobility and different family models. Yet, gender equality remains a challenge all over the world, particularly in the world of work.

Script:

Safe maternity for mother and infant survival is at the core of life itself. For working women, the joy of bringing a new life into the world can bring fear as well. In Cambodia, for example, many women are at risk of losing their jobs when they become pregnant.

Ros Kimsreng, Textile Factory Worker

When I got pregnant, I was very worried about my health and my job.

But textile factories monitored by the ILO's Better Factories Cambodia programme offer maternity protection to their employees, including paid maternity leave, health protection and the guarantee of a job when returning to work.

When young women like Ros Kimsreng benefit from their company's maternity protection policy, having a baby and keeping a good job can go hand in hand.

Childhood is a vulnerable phase in the life cycles of women and men. Education is a key vehicle for girls and boys to be lifted out of poverty and is a crucial step towards decent work.

El Bouchtaouia, Child Labourer in Morocco

...whenever I saw children going to school it reminded me that I could not go to school myself and I was heartbroken.

Like hundreds of thousands of other child labourers in Morocco, with no chance to go to school, El Bouchtaouia will grow up illiterate, poor, and desperate.

But thanks to the efforts of a local community group supported by the ILO, girls and boys who once were child labourers now combine juggling and trapeze at the “circus school”, with receiving a formal education in a nearby classroom, just like most other children their age.

El Bouchtaouia is one of the success stories, catching up on her education. She’s 16 now, and in the 5th year of her primary schooling. Child labour is part of her past, not her future.

Youth is a stage of life that is crucial in determining paths to achieving productive employment and decent work. But even a good education is not always a guarantee for getting a good job, if there are few opportunities. In Kyrgyzstan, most of the trained workers have left to seek work in Russia and the West.

Instead, Dilorom Holmatova stayed, and opened a successful curtain-making workshop in town, after going through the ILO’s training course “Start and Improve Your Business.”

Dilorom Holmatova, Curtain Maker

Now I can definitely call myself a business woman.

Entrepreneurship requires information, training, some capital and lots of motivation. The demand for her products grew, creating new jobs, and new hope, for the unemployed women in her town.

Adulthood is the “rush hour” of life, defined by providing income for dependent family members together with caring for them. Finding the right balance between these responsibilities is challenging indeed, especially with more women entering the workforce. ILO Convention 156 on workers with family responsibilities refers to governments, employers and workers sharing these societal obligations. In Paraguay, one of the country’s biggest employers took the initiative to facilitate the daily lives of their employees.

“ANDE” – the Administración Nacional de Electricidad – runs a day care center for children of employees. Both men and women are taking up the responsibility of bringing their children to the day care centre.

Irineo Zarate, ANDE Human Resources Department

There are benefits for the company and the employees. Employees really feel more committed by being provided with these services. It is like being part of a large family, because we all have a common objective.

An ultimate work and family imbalance occurs when women and men do not find sufficient job opportunities in their own countries and have to migrate for work. Each year, the Philippines trains thousands of skilled nurses, but can't pay them what they earn overseas. But sometimes working abroad and earning can have unwanted consequences.

Annie Geron, Public Service Labor Independent Confederation

We're talking also of families, children growing up without their parents, if both parents are working overseas. And you have a different kind of culture being developed because of migration.

Working in partnership with the ILO and overseas governments, the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration regulates recruitment, contracts and employment in destination countries.

Hans Cacdac, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration

I think it's a model in Asia because as far back as the 1970s...there is a network of administrative protection, a set of guarantees of rights of our migrant workers if and when they do work abroad.

By and large, people prefer to find decent work in their own countries. Yet new opportunities need to be generated at home, such as the creation of "green jobs". In Burkina Faso a foreign social worker trained by the ILO started a plastic recycling facility. This helped create jobs and protected the environment from plastic trash - a hazard to both humans and livestock.

The workers are all women, learning new skills and holding paid jobs. The facility also appeals to the local community to support its dual objectives of job creation and a cleaner environment.

Margueritte Ovempeko Kabore, President, Women's Association for the Recycling of Plastic Waste

We have to spread the word about the centre, so that people bring plastic waste here. We work hard cleaning and sorting the plastic, recycling four to five tons every month, so we can cover our salary and maintenance costs.

Students go on field trips to the recycling facility to learn first hand about the impact of environmental pollution, and the important role played by the women workers.

All over the world, what is perceived as “women’s work” has always been chronically undervalued.

Maria Olívia Pinto, Kitchen Assistants Manager, Pasteis de Belém

It's only tradition. I don't like to do this work, but this is all we can do as women. I don't talk about what I do, this is not an interesting job.

This undervaluation leads to lower wages. Direct wage discrimination between a man and a woman performing the same job is easy to identify. But equal pay for work of equal value requires that different jobs are evaluated to prevent pay differences based on gender bias.

But at the world famous Pasteis de Belém restaurant in Lisbon, the ILO Job Evaluation Method was used to assess the content of men's jobs in the visible portions or women's jobs behind the scenes. This resulted in breaking through traditionally stereotyped jobs and led to more equitable pay. Women are now working everywhere in the restaurant, and not just in the back.

Victor Domingos, Managing Director, Pasteis de Belém

Nowadays whether someone is a man or woman makes no difference. It's a stigma that no longer holds true here. We don't have jobs exclusively for men or women. Just like you see women working in construction, you now see women working as waitresses in restaurants and pastry shops.

But even where women traditionally work alongside men, sometimes it is the women who are doing the “heavy lifting.”

On construction sites in India, women do much of the unskilled work, carrying bricks, gravel, mortar and water up to the skilled carpenters and masons. Injuries and a lifetime of chronic pain are common.

Supported in part by the International Labour Organization, the Self Employed Women's Association or “SEWA” has trained several thousand women in safety and masonry skills.

It's giving them the chance to overcome dangerous work practices, and provide opportunities to secure better paying jobs that improve the quality of their lives.

Woman Mason

I have benefited a lot from the training. Before I had no idea about the ratio for concrete, I had no idea about how much sand, cement, bricks etc... I did whatever the mason said. Now I know 9 inch bricks and 4.5 bricks. Before I used to get 70 or 80 rupees, now I get 150 rupees.

Sometimes ancient traditions can provide the basis for new job opportunities by adapting skills and making use of modern technology. On the windy, desolate high desert of Argentina, the indigenous Kolla people shear fleece by hand, and spin it into high quality wool.

The FORMUJER programme of the ILO Inter-American Centre for Vocational Training "CINTERFOR" helped make this ancient tradition into a commercial success, providing livelihoods for many.

The trained workers formed a cooperative and elected one of their own women as their leader.

Eugenia Gutierrez, Wool Spinner

It changed my vision, from being only a craftswoman to becoming a community leader who thinks about and understands the needs of others.

The wool and the prized articles made from it are sold around the region in a network of schools and shops, and even beyond through the internet.

Women who want or need to work outside the home in paid jobs still face many challenges in traditional societies where sex-discrimination runs deep. But things can change, especially through the promotion of workplace gender equality laws, and by giving women a voice through social dialogue.

Yemen has signed many of the international labour conventions, and their provisions are reflected in national laws.

Dr. Amat Alrazza Hommad, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs

But despite this fact, there is a big gap between law and practice concerning equal rights, opportunities for and treatment of women. This is perhaps the biggest challenge of our ministry, and requires raising the awareness of our society. Because our main struggle is not an institutional one in essence, but it is society's perception of women workers.

The “Directorate General of Women Workers” supported by the ILO/Netherlands Partnership project has organized training programmes throughout the country, together with the social partners. These programmes help both men and women understand women's rights at work and raise their awareness on gender equality.

Sabah al Hindi, Administrative Coordinator in the Directorate

At home, I am the only breadwinner, but I also take care of my mother or other family members when they are sick, I take care of everything. My mother always says, “My daughter is the man and the woman of the house!”

Longevity is one of the most positive demographic developments in recent decades. But as people age, the chances to change their economic situations or find reliable sources of income diminish. This is especially true for women, who have faced accumulated discrimination throughout their lives.

At a small market in Addis Ababa, 70-year old Chaltu Hassen changed the odds, and her life, for the better. Struck by leprosy when she was a girl, this woman spent most of her life begging on the streets. But then Chaltu heard about a new training programme supported by the ILO Irish Aid Partnership Programme called “Improve your Business.” Despite her advanced age, she was offered a place on the training programme.

Now she is a micro-entrepreneur, selling herbs and tea to her customers. She covers her expenses and even helps pay for her grandchildren's education.

Chaltu Hassen Micro Entrepreneur

I have been saved from being on the street and totally dependent on others. Now I can depend on myself. I can sell what I have, and I can live on it.

These remarkable women and men have proven that change for the better is possible in striving for gender equality. If there is opportunity, the expertise to help make it happen, and the chance to develop skills then much progress can be made. Government, employers' and workers' organizations, together with the ILO, have an important role to play in helping transform lives and inspiring change in others.

In today's global financial and economic crisis, there are more challenges than ever before. But these very difficulties may lead to a new way of thinking and to strengthening men and women's equal access to decent work.

Maria Ducci, Executive Director of the Office of the Director-General

...I would say that women's empowerment is also the empowerment of societies and communities. We need new ideas; we need thinking out of the box. We need to invent something to get us out of the mess we are in. It is not only about women, it is about women and men working together. But women might feel a little less tied up in the conventionalities that lead us to where we are.