

Gender equality at the heart of decent work

Over the past year the ILO's Bureau for Gender Equality has held a major awareness-raising campaign: Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work. In the following pages World of Work looks at themes of the campaign so far and interviews Jane Hodges, Director of the Bureau for Gender Equality.

04/01/2009

What will be the impact of the financial crisis on employment opportunities for women and men? Will it translate itself into a setback for the gender equality achievements made over the past years?

Jane Hodges: The most recent *Global Employment Trends for Women* released on this year's International Women's Day gives us an analysis of the initial data gathering. Projections point to 22 million more unemployed women by the end of the year! Overall, women and men have been impacted differently right from the start of the economic downturn, as a result of the different employment situation for women and men before the crisis. Weak labour market situations are exacerbated by crises. We can see that in this first stage, in the developed economies there are more men than women losing their jobs. This is due to the fact that the sectors where most job losses are occurring at present, such as manufacturing and construction, are male-dominated sectors. But this "tip of the iceberg" is predicted to be outdone by female job losses as the next wave of bankruptcies, closures and retrenchments takes hold.

For example, women's unemployment rates are still higher compared to men's: in 2008 global unemployment rates stood at 6.3 per cent for women compared to 5.9 per cent for men, and 2009 estimates place the female rate at 7.4 per cent and the men's at 7 per cent. Moreover, women continue to suffer multiple disadvantages in terms of access to labour markets. Women are found more in the informal economy, in vulnerable employment, part-time work and are still on average paid less than men for work of equal value.

The ILO must keep tracking these trends and also make sure that the recovery packages and policies developed to address the current crisis are gender sensitive. In other words, they must take into account the different employment situations of women and men. In that sense the current crisis may actually be an opportunity for greater gender equality in the world of work instead of a threat or a setback. But we have to be vigilant.

2009 is an important year for the ILO in terms of gender equality: it is the 10th anniversary of its gender equality action plan and in June the ILC features Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work as a general discussion item. How would you assess the ILO's work on advancing gender equality in the world of work?

Jane Hodges: In the past ten years a lot of attention has been paid to mainstreaming gender issues in the ILO's work, through the gender action plan, the promotion of gender equality as a cross-cutting theme, the establishment of a gender network composed of gender focal points in the different units in the Office in Geneva and the field offices, as well as the further development of the Bureau for Gender Equality. The ILO's commitment to gender equality was reconfirmed in the Decent Work Agenda and the 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, stating that gender equality and non-discrimination must be considered to be cross-cutting issues in the strategic objectives of the ILO. Gender equality and creating decent work for women and men, providing both women and men with access to rights, employment opportunities, social protection and social dialogue are therefore at the heart of the ILO's work. This year's ILC discussion will help chart a strategic course for the coming years on the activities the ILO needs to develop to further advance gender equality in the world of work.

Unemployment: a gender perspective

The economic crisis is expected to increase the number of unemployed women by up to 22 million in 2009, according to the report *Global Employment Trends for Women* issued by the TRENDS team of the ILO Employment sector. The ILO also said the global economic crisis would place new hurdles in

the path toward sustainable and socially equitable growth, making decent work for women increasingly more difficult, and called for “creative solutions” to address the gender gap.

The report indicates that of the 3 billion people employed around the world in 2008, 1.2 billion were women (40.4 per cent). It said that in 2009, the global unemployment rate for women could reach 7.4 per cent, compared to 7.0 per cent for men.

The report says that the gender impact of the economic crisis in terms of unemployment rates is expected to be more detrimental for females than for males in most regions of the world. It adds that the only regions where unemployment rates are expected to be less detrimental for women are East Asia, the developed economies and the non-EU South-Eastern Europe and CIS, which had narrower gender gaps in terms of job opportunities prior to the current economic crisis.

The labour market projections for 2009 show deterioration in global labour markets for both women and men. The ILO projects that the global unemployment rate could reach between 6.3 per cent and 7.1 per cent, with a corresponding female unemployment rate ranging from 6.5 to 7.4 per cent (compared to 6.1 per cent to 7.0 per cent for men). This would result in an increase of between 24 million and 52 million people unemployed worldwide, of which from 10 million to 22 million would be women.

At the same time, the ILO also projects that the global vulnerable employment rate* would range from 50.5 to 54.7 per cent for women in 2009, and from 47.2 to 51.8 per cent for men, indicating that while the burden of vulnerability is still greater for women, the crisis is pushing more men into vulnerable employment compared to 2007.

Policy implications and measures

“Women’s lower employment rates, weaker control over property and resources, concentration in informal and vulnerable forms of employment with lower earnings, and less social protection, all place women in a weaker position than men to weather crises,” said ILO Bureau for Gender Equality Director Jane Hodges, adding that “women may cope by engaging in working longer hours or by taking multiple low-income jobs but still having to maintain unpaid care commitments”.

ILO Director-General Juan Somavia said that gender equality should be a key principle in any policy response, as the effects of the economic and financial crisis go beyond the scope of women in the world of work and have an impact on the overall stability of society, considering the various roles that women play.

In a statement issued for International Women’s Day, Mr. Somavia said, “Gender inequality in the world of work has long been with us – but it is likely that it will be exacerbated by the crisis. In times of economic upheaval, women often experience the negative consequences more rapidly and are slower to enjoy the benefits of recovery. And already before the crisis, the majority of working women were in the informal economy with lower earnings and less social protection.”

Mr. Somavia cited a number of policy measures that could help rebalance the burden placed on women and address the impact of globalization, such as sustainable and quality jobs open to both men and women, broader social protection including unemployment benefits and insurance schemes that recognize women’s vulnerable position in the labour market, and social dialogue with the active inclusion of women in decision-making processes.

* *Global vulnerable employment rate: share of unpaid family workers and own-account workers in total employment. These workers are most likely to be characterized by insecure employment, low earnings and low productivity.*

Last year the Bureau for Gender Equality launched a major awareness-raising campaign on Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work, leading up to the ILC discussion. What are the objectives of the campaign and major achievements so far?

Jane Hodges: The campaign was launched during the 2008 International Labour Conference. During the 12 months leading up to the ILC 2009 general discussion, we have been actively reaching out to the ILO constituents and many other stakeholders on gender equality issues, with several objectives.

First of all, it is a general awareness-raising campaign to increase the understanding of gender equality issues in the world of work, based on the life-cycle approach. We highlight the specific linkages between gender equality and securing decent work for all women and men. The campaign therefore is built around 12 Decent Work themes and each of these themes is looked at through a gender lens, showing how various issues may affect women and men differently in their access to rights, employment, social protection and social dialogue. In addition we are actively promoting the ratification and application of the key ILO gender equality Conventions and we advocate the importance of overcoming existing barriers to gender equality as beneficial for all. It has been a huge undertaking to prepare the campaign materials together with the ILO technical units – but what we realized during this process is that this active collaboration in itself has been a way of further mainstreaming gender issues throughout the organization as well as an opportunity to highlight the gender dimensions of the work of many of our colleagues. The campaign materials have been widely distributed among the constituents and other stakeholders all over the world and used in high-level and grassroots meetings in many parts of the world. The ILO Training Centre in Turin has been actively involved in the campaign.

The ILO has major conventions on gender equality, two of which are among the most highly ratified; still we continue to see many gender inequalities in the world of work all around the world. Do you believe that our work has created the kind of societal and behavioural changes required to make sex-based discrimination a thing of the past?

Jane Hodges: The ILO Conventions – especially the fundamental texts on non-discrimination and on equal pay – are the starting point, as they provide the legal framework for gender equality in the world of work and we continue to advocate for the ratification of these Conventions. When it comes to everyday life, yes, we continue to see a lot of sex discrimination in the world of work, be it in terms of equal employment opportunities, working conditions or pay. Through our assistance to governments, employers' and workers' organizations, technical cooperation projects, training and communication work, the Bureau contributes to the necessary societal and behavioural changes. However, this is a long-term process, as traditional gender stereotypes are very strong in many parts of the world and change in behaviour always takes time. But we have to be optimistic when we see that over the past 50 years there has been a constant growth in the participation of women in the workforce in all parts of the world, thus increasing women's economic and financial independence and decision-making. And the policy and legal framework is solid across the regions. Given the many challenges still ahead that need to be addressed on the international and national levels, we are confident that the ILC discussion and its conclusions will provide constituents with good guidance.

The ILO is not the only UN agency working on gender equality. What would you say are the competitive advantages of the ILO's gender equality work?

Jane Hodges: The competitive advantages of the ILO are linked to its unique tripartite structure, our way of doing things with actors of the real economy and its focus on decent work for all women and men. Moreover, ILO sets labour standards that apply equally to both women and men, in addition to the four key gender equality Conventions (Nos. 111, 100, 156 and 183). Its employment and sustainable enterprises programmes have mainstreamed gender on the policy level and in technical cooperation. We have specific programmes aimed at improving women's employment opportunities and enterprise development in many parts of the world. In terms of social protection, the ILO looks into ways to specifically address the protection of women in the informal economy and in vulnerable employment, like migration and domestic work. And all of this we do together with governments, employers' and workers' organizations.

The ILO Bureau for Gender Equality has developed a participatory gender audit tool that is not only used within the ILO and the constituents, but is also much appreciated within the UN family.

In September 2008 you took up the post of Director of the Bureau for Gender Equality. What are your impressions and priorities after six months in the job?

Jane Hodges: I'm struck by the seriousness with which Office units handle the gender dimension in their own areas of work, and also by the way that our UN family entities look to the ILO for guidance. But I'm leading at a time of great challenge to gender equality achievements in the world of work.

The current financial crisis will adversely affect men's but especially women's hard-won advances for economic and social empowerment. The ILO must keep tracking the employment trends and be ready to provide gender-sensitive policy advice for recovery plans. Ask me this question again at the end of 2009 and we'll see if the Office has made a difference.