

Women at work, past and present: Like night and day

As the ILO marks its 90th anniversary, a year-long campaign on gender equality at the heart of decent work culminates with a discussion at the International Labour Conference. The ILO has always been in the forefront of promoting gender equality at work, and women's rights, and this year's campaign and discussion will be a milestone in the Organization's efforts to shine new light on the status of women in the world of work.

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Yet frankly speaking, it hasn't always been so. The early days of the ILO saw the adoption of some measures that effectively restricted women from some forms of work, most notably the Night Work (Women) Convention, 1919 (No. 4). Banning women from night work, like other legislation preventing women from working in certain jobs, including factories and mines, was in keeping with the times.

But times change. Today, social progress together with economic development and technological advancement have not only proved too "protective" laws to be wrong, but have seen women enter the workforce in massive numbers around the world. Yet debate still rages in many countries over the benefits or liabilities of special protective labour legislation for women.

Night work is a good example. From the 1919 Convention to provisions of the 1990 Protocol allowing for exemptions to the prohibition contained in ILO Convention No. 89, ILO constituents have tried to adapt relevant international labour instruments to changing times. They sought a new balance capable of offering the best guarantees of protection for women workers while keeping up with social progress and contemporary thinking on the status of women in the working world.

Yet the relaxation of rules on working hours is but one step in a broad, slow transition in the role of women in the world of work. Despite considerable progress over the last decades, gender gaps in employment and pay persist worldwide.

Notwithstanding the tenor of the times in the early days, gender equality in the world of work was enshrined in the ILO Constitution from day one, and has been reflected in relevant international labour standards adopted since then. The four key ILO gender equality Conventions are the Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100), Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111), Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156), and Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183). These Conventions show that the ILO does indeed move with the times – and will continue to do so.