

## ***The ILO Women at Work Centenary Initiative: Where we are, and where we want to be***

Panel event to mark International Women's Day

ILO Headquarters, Geneva, 7 March 2014

The ILO Centenary Initiative on *Women at Work* is one of seven being launched ahead of the ILO's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in order to help "equip the Organization to take up successfully the challenges of its mandate in the future".<sup>1</sup> The ILO is planning a major assessment of women in the world of work in the years leading up to its Centenary in 2019. This year's observance of International Women's Day launches a process of reflection on this Initiative.

On Friday 7 March 2014 eminent gender equality scholars and activists from workers' and employers' organisations will take part in a high-level panel at the ILO Headquarters in Geneva. This panel will be one of a series of activities aimed at giving wider voice to the ILO's tripartite constituents and experts on the theme of women at work inspiring and informing the Centenary Initiative as it develops. This event takes place within the broad framework of the United Nations' chosen topic for International Women's Day covering achievements and challenges for the MDGs.

### **Building on achievements...**

The ILO enjoys a long-established record of advocacy and contributions toward improving women's status and recognition of their rights in the world of work. Since its founding in 1919, the Organization has taken the lead in developing international labour standards, policies and approaches in promoting women workers' rights and equality with men in the world of work. The ILO fundamental Conventions on equality at work<sup>2</sup> and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - have been almost universally ratified. In 2009 the International Labour Conference adopted Conclusions concerning gender equality<sup>3</sup> which contain a wealth of strategies, suggested policies and approaches for promoting equality. The 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization mandates the ILO to make gender equality and non-discrimination cross-cutting issues throughout its strategic objectives.<sup>4</sup>

In most countries the principles of equality and non-discrimination have been incorporated into national legislation, many governments have adopted active labour market policies to tackle sex discrimination, and a growing number of employers' and workers' organizations have implemented measures to help ensure equality of opportunity and treatment. Targeted measures/positive action have been identified as an instrument to overcome persistent

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<sup>1</sup> [Report of the Director-General: Towards the centenary: realities, renewal and tripartite commitment, Report I\(A\), International Labour Conference](#), 102<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2013. See also [GB.319/INS/3/1](#), at para. 30-33.

<sup>2</sup> These are the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111).

<sup>3</sup> See [Resolution concerning gender equality at the heart of decent work](#), International Labour Conference, 98<sup>th</sup> Session, Geneva, 2009, Provisional Record No. 13, 13/64.

<sup>4</sup> The ILO Office mainstreams gender equality within its structures, staffing and substantive programmatic frameworks, see ILO, [ILO Action Plan for Gender Equality 2010–15 - Phase II: Aligned with the Programme and Budget for 2012–13](#) (2012).

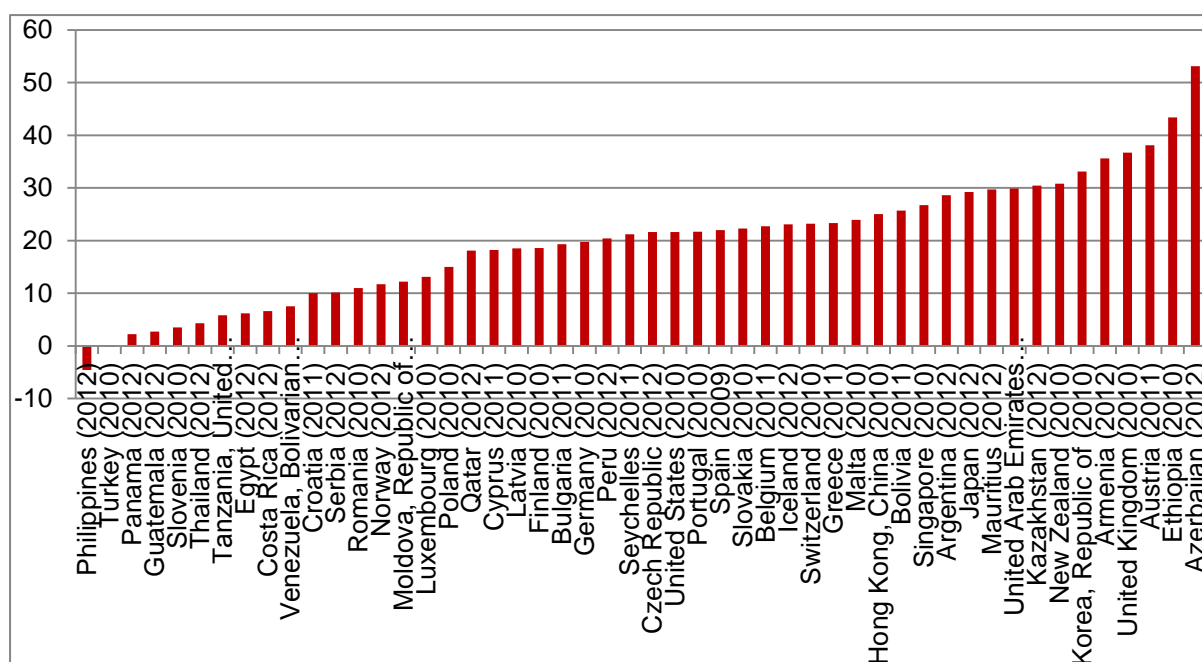
employment discrimination (e.g. temporary goals or quotas), along with ensuring equitable representation of women in tripartite bodies.

**...assessing the gaps...**

However, progress in achieving women’s empowerment and gender equality has been mixed. Though women’s labour market participation has often significantly increased, progress has been uneven across countries and regions. Horizontal and vertical occupational sex segregation and gender pay gaps persist. Women are overrepresented in the informal economy, precarious work, and in low-paid jobs (e.g. in agriculture, homework, care work, and domestic work). In the formal economy, women’s share among CEO and top managers remains unacceptably low, despite the existing pool of talented and competent women leaders. Indirect discrimination and its effects remain poorly understood and addressed, as is the case with discrimination on multiple grounds.

Women and girls still perform the large majority of unpaid care work, which limits their equal employment opportunities and treatment in labour markets. Measures assisting women and men in the balancing of work and family responsibilities, particularly quality State-funded child care, are unavailable or inaccessible for many.

**Gender pay gaps (monthly earnings, unadjusted)<sup>5</sup>**



Source: ILO STAT

<sup>5</sup> The gender wage gap (%) is the difference between men’s and women’s average earnings from employment, shown as a percentage of men’s average earnings. The monthly gender pay gap reflects differences in time worked and type of work performed. For the following countries the gaps above are calculated comparing women and men in full time work: Bolivia, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Island, Japan, Latvia, Luxembourg, Norway, Panama, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland, and United States.

Despite maternity protection having been a concern for the ILO from its very beginning, lack of such protection remains one of the major challenges faced by working women today. A statutory right to paid maternity leave is virtually universal;<sup>6</sup> however the large majority of women – especially self-employed, agricultural, domestic or non-standard workers – lack access to quality maternal and infant health care, income security, adequate rest, and protection from discrimination based on pregnancy or maternity around childbirth. When employers are statutorily mandated to shoulder fully the direct cost of maternity protection benefits, for example by financing wage replacement during leave, this creates disincentives to hiring, retaining and promoting workers with potential or real family responsibility. The ILO calls for maternity benefits to be funded by social insurance or public funds, the protection of women’s employment during maternity, and non-discrimination in relation to maternity and family status.

Financial and demographic considerations have become drivers for policy interventions on work and family reconciliation, sometimes relegating equality at work and social cohesion to the side lines. Or these may be seen as desirable “side effects” rather than distinct policy objectives that are a matter of rights as well as a factor for sustainable development. Only recently has more attention been paid to the negative effects and costs of gender-based violence on and in the world of work, and the impact of HIV and AIDS which disproportionately affect women and girls.

Taking into account on the one hand progress made and on the other hand remaining challenges, it is urgent to survey the situation of women in the world of work in greater detail and assess outcomes of existing gender equality and non-discrimination policies. This is especially important in the context of the economic crisis and rapidly-changing realities in labour markets. Learning from experiences within and across regions as well as the voices of workers and employers, expanding knowledge, and promoting policy innovation are essential to help ensure increased equality of opportunity for and treatment of working women.

### **...and bridging them through renewed action and benchmarks**

The findings of the *Women at Work* initiative are expected to provide a basis for future action by all who are striving to advance the goal of gender equality, as well as for developing a renewed ILO strategy for gender equality in its second century of existence. By engaging with the tripartite constituents and forging strategic alliances with others whose experience and expertise can help to advance the objectives of the Initiative, the focus will be on influencing change in the lives of women and men on the ground through concrete action to realize gender equality, and identifying and promoting labour market interventions that work more rapidly in different contexts.

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<sup>6</sup> ILO, *Maternity and paternity at work. A review of national legislation and practice*, Geneva, (2014 forthcoming).

## **Women's situation in the labour market: findings from the Global Employment Trends 2014**

Overall labour force participation rates are not improving and remain more than 1 percentage point below their pre-crisis level. The drop in participation rates has been particularly pronounced in East and South Asia, where many women have left the labour market. Women continue to face a higher risk of informal employment than men, as they often have less legal and social protection.

In developed economies, women are expected to benefit less from the timid recovery that is expected over the medium term; indeed, their unemployment rates will only gradually decline to 8.2 per cent in 2018, whereas men are projected to benefit from a stronger reduction to 7.6 per cent.

In the Eastern and South Eastern Europe (non-EU), and the CIS, the gender gap in employment continues to be large, with a general tendency towards a further widening. Women are more present in the informal economy, often involved in subsistence agriculture. Given the economic crisis, women are frequently forced to accept jobs below their qualification levels in order to be able to continue supporting their households.

Consistent with weak labour force growth, employment in East Asia expanded by only 5.6 million jobs, or 0.7 per cent, in 2013. Rising employment levels benefitted men more than women, however, as women occupied less than two in five newly created jobs. As a result, the male–female gap in the employment-to-population ratio edged up slightly, to 13.0 percentage points.

In South East Asia and Pacific, vulnerable employment continues to affect women more than men (63.1 per cent for women compared to 56 per cent for men in 2013), but the incidence of women's vulnerable employment is projected to decline slightly more than men's by 2017.

In East Asia, the share of wage workers in total employment increased significantly by 18.5 percentage points to 50.1 per cent from 1991 to 2013 (figure 25). Women have clearly benefitted from this process. While male workers are still more likely to earn a salary or wage compared with female workers, the gap is gradually shrinking. By 2013, the gender gap in wage employment rates had fallen to 5.2 percentage points in East Asia.

In South Asia, the quality of employment and opportunities for better jobs continue to be unequally distributed between men and women in the region. When women work they tend to earn less (the gender wage gap), to work in less productive jobs (often a case of occupation segregation) and are over-represented in unpaid family work.

Women face particular challenges in the labour market in the MENA region, in particular in GCC countries (see, also, ILO, 2013c). Female unemployment rates are high and the gender employment gap is large. Female labour market participation rates are lower than in any other region, reaching barely 25 per cent in North Africa and not even 20 per cent in the Middle East. Nevertheless, an increasing share of the female population has now attained tertiary level education, but so far they remain underutilized

(Adapted from ILO, Global Employment Trends, 2014, [http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/2014/WCMS\\_233953/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/2014/WCMS_233953/lang--en/index.htm) )