

**ILO/ACFTU Workshop on Strengthening Workers' Education,  
Promoting Gender Equality and Achieving Decent Work  
8 July 2010, Shanghai Expo**

**Opening Remarks**

**Ms. Ann Herbert,**

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Mr. Ni Jianmin, Vice-President of ACFTU,

Distinguished colleagues and friends from the ACFTU, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the China Enterprise Confederation the All China Women's Federation,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning!

On 1 October 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded, and Chairman Mao proclaimed that the Chinese people had stood up. With that affirmation began an era of social transformation in which the roles of women and men were redefined. "Women hold up half the sky": These six words were the resounding call for gender equality in China.

Since that time, huge strides have been made in terms of establishing equal rights for women and men under the law; educating girls on an equal footing with boys; providing ever widening opportunities for women in the world of work; and tackling discrimination.

By 1995 China was selected as the host country for the United Nations Conference on Women during which a global strategy for promoting gender equality was adopted in the form of the Beijing Platform for Action. That strategic document placed gender equality

as a primary goal in all areas of social and economic development, and it is as relevant today as it was at the moment of its adoption.

It is therefore only right that here at the Shanghai Expo – where our minds and hearts are turned towards the future and to building a better life – that we meet together to discuss gender equality in the world of work and what we can do, through workers' education, to promote gender equality in practice. I would like to seize this opportunity to thank the organizers for selecting such a pertinent subject for our deliberations. It is truly a pleasure to be here with you.

Ladies and gentlemen, gender equality is a matter of human rights and social justice. It is the centerpiece of human-centered policies that contribute to productive economies, sustainable development and the reduction of poverty. We in the ILO believe that gender equality lies at the heart of Decent Work.

Indeed, how could we begin to address such fundamental issues as

- equality of opportunity and treatment in employment;
- equal remuneration for work of equal value;
- equal participation and representation in governance and decision-making processes in the economic, social and labour fields

unless we had a gender equality perspective?

How effective would our work be, if we failed to address

- equal access to safe work;
- equal treatment in terms of social security;
- equality in opportunities for meaningful career development;
- shared responsibilities in the home, and
- a balance between work and family life that benefits both men and women?

Let us be clear. Gender issues are not just about women, and it is not women alone who are responsible for promoting gender equality. Gender issues arise because law, practice or social mores can affect men and women differently – both at work and in society at large.

When women and men work together for equitable treatment of both men and women, real progress can be achieved ... but such progress does not come easy. It requires conscious effort and a willingness to examine our own assumptions in a critical manner. Sometimes very well intentioned policies can have a negative effect – for example, in some countries, highly protective legislation prevents women from having full access to the labour market. In such cases, we need to re-examine the protection to determine whether it is justified – for example, the special protection afforded to women during pregnancy and following childbirth – or whether it may be discriminatory, for example, provisions that effectively bar women from entering certain professions or occupations.

Sometimes such a critical examination may force us out of complacency. For example, rather than prohibiting women from carrying out dangerous activities, we might be better advised to make the necessary effort to improve working conditions for all workers, to ensure that both men and women enjoy a safe and healthy working environment.

When we talk about mainstreaming a gender perspective in our work, we are talking about both a strategy and a process that require new thinking and add a rich, new dimension to our analysis and decision-making. Gender mainstreaming is a strategy – a strategy of participation – that brings together the concerns, knowledge and experiences of women and of men in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of our organization's policies and programmes. It ensures that women and men benefit equally, and that inequality and inequitable outcomes are not perpetuated. Gender mainstreaming is also a process which calls on us to assess the implications of our organization's actions, policies or programmes in a scientific way, and to consider the differentiated impacts they may have on women and men. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality.

Education and skills training increase the ability of women and men to work with new technologies, thus enhancing their employability as well as the productivity and competitiveness of enterprises. Effective skills development systems ---- this cycle of connecting education to technical training, technical training to labour market entry and

labour market entry to workplace and lifelong learning ---- can help women and men benefit from existing and emerging opportunities over the long term. Developing such systems offers a rich field for tripartite collaboration.

When we look at countries around the world, we can observe the many hurdles that restrict women's advancement and hinder overall social and economic development. In far too many countries, household work and caring for the family are considered to be a woman's duty, and are shouldered by women alone. Women lag behind men in access to training and in the use of advanced technology that is vital both for their professional advancement and for their contribution to productive enterprises. Many women lack opportunities for mobility and the free time needed for their personal and professional development. In almost all countries, gender stereotypes remain an obstacle to building up a society based on harmony, equality and mutual respect. However, we can also observe that in the most advanced countries, where access to education, training and professional advancement is open equally to men and women, women's talents and potential are the most fully tapped.

China is in the process of rapid economic and social transition. You have the opportunity at this time to ensure that gender equality is truly embedded in new policies, systems and institutions. Now is the critical moment for getting it right. Now is the time to review the different implications for men and women of long-standing legislative provisions, regulations, and policies to see if they remain relevant for the future and to make any necessary changes to ensure that equality is promoted. Now is the time to encourage social dialogue institutions to increase women's participation and to address gender concerns with more visibility, voice and representation. Building further on the solid foundation of the Beijing Platform for Action, China could well become a 21<sup>st</sup> century model for countries around the world in the promotion of gender equality in the world of work.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the proactive measures undertaken by ACFTU to improve awareness and capacity within trade union structures and among trade unionists to mainstream gender equality into trade union work. More remains to be

done, of course, in terms of increasing women's participation in policymaking bodies and particularly in leadership positions. By applying the "gender equality lens" in areas such as employment promotion, collective agreements, democratic management, social security, occupational safety and health as well as the management of labour relations, the rights and interests of working people – both men and women – can be represented more effectively. It is therefore particularly heartening to learn more about ACFTU's efforts to integrate gender equality issues into workers' education and training.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the China Enterprise Confederation and the All China Women's Federation and other social partners for your commitments to the promotion of gender equality and the achievement of social justice. We in the ILO hope to continue our work with each of you to secure decent work for all women and men.

Let me conclude by inviting you each to participate fully in today's discussions, to gather new insights and to reflect further on how you can best contribute to achieving gender equality. Perhaps you would like to encourage your daughter to study hard and make great achievements in her life. Perhaps your son needs to find a more harmonious balance between his work and family life. Or perhaps you and your colleagues could take on a new initiative to promote more equal treatment in the workplace. I would invite you to nurture these thoughts and to develop one key message that you would like to convey to your friends, colleagues or family members at home. Before you leave the pavilion today, please take the opportunity to write down your message on an ILO postcard, and we will take the responsibility of putting on a stamp and mailing the card for you from the Shanghai Expo post office. Let's use this occasion today to develop our own understanding and commitment to new ways of working towards gender equality, and then let's share those insights with the world.

I wish you every success in this important meeting.