

**Keynote address by:**

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***Achieving Gender Equality and Decent Work***

(Shanghai, China, 8 July 2010)

[Your Excellencies, Representatives of ILO's Constituents, Dear Participants...]

I am honoured to be present at this important event and to contribute to our joint efforts of advancing gender equality in the world of work. I am delighted that ACFTU has taken the occasion of EXPO 2010 to give visibility to their longstanding commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment.

Non-discrimination and equality between women and men have been fundamental principles underpinning the work of ILO since its creation in 1919. Gender equality is integral to the vision of Decent Work for all women and men and cuts across ILO's four strategic objectives: (i) standards and fundamental principles and rights at work; (ii) employment creation; (iii) social protection; and (iv) social dialogue and tripartism.

ILO's mandate to promote gender equality in the world of work is enshrined in its Constitution and reflected in international labour standards. Four ILO Conventions are of particular importance in the promotion of gender equality. These are the Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100 – which was ratified by China in 1990), the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111 – which was ratified by China as recent as in 2005 following tripartite consultations), the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156), and the Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183).

True to the mandate that the constituents have entrusted to it in the policy decisions of the last two decades, there can be no doubt that ILO has intensified its efforts to make a difference regarding gender equality in the world of work. From the 1991 ILC resolution concerning ILO action for women workers and the 2004 ILC resolution concerning the promotion of gender equality, pay equity and maternity protection through to more recent Governing Body guidance on various practical measures (such as gender audits, monitoring through action plans and technical cooperation requirements with regard to gender equality), the clear message is that sustainable development cannot be achieved when glaring inequalities between women and men persist in the world of work. The Decent Work Agenda, which finds its policy anchor in the 2008 Declaration on Social Justice and operational delivery through instruments such as the Decent Work Country Programmes, has shown that the ILO can deliver from the point of view of rights, employment, social protection and social dialogue. The usefulness of gender mainstreaming is clear from the ILO's current efforts to implement ILC resolutions and Governing Body decisions on that topic.

In terms of gender equality success, it is generally accepted that the status and treatment of girls and women in society have significantly advanced with regard to the adoption and enforcement of legislation (and particularly in the application of corrective measures addressing long-standing biases and direct discrimination against women), the provision of educational opportunities, access to participation in political processes and institutions, and the availability of work and employment opportunities. The ILO's twofold approach to gender equality in the world of work (the rights-based and economic efficiency argument) is proving its worth.

Amongst successful gender equality interventions implemented by governments, employers' and workers' organizations are:

- Pro-poor strategies that are in line with the ILO mandate of poverty reduction for the most vulnerable and which take into account the impact that they might have on both women and men;
- High rates of ratification of Conventions Nos 111 and 100;

- New gender equality provisions in a significant number of national laws, policies and programmes and, in some regions, major improvements in enforcement and workplace knowledge of the provisions by both employers and workers;
- Gender-based policies addressing some aspects of maternity protection and infant health care;
- Increased equal opportunities for skills upgrading and wider occupational choices for young women and men;
- The massive entry of women into the labour market and increased women's presence in small businesses and, in some regions, in management, and women's career advancement through affirmative action;
- Gradual legislative attention to the contractual status of women and clarification of employment relationships for women; and
- Decreasing – albeit slowly – pay gaps and an acceptance by policy-makers in most regions that remuneration should be set without reference to the sex of the worker.

Just over a year has passed since the 98th Session of the International Labour Conference in June 2009 engaged in an in-depth discussion on gender equality at the heart of decent work. This was the first occasion in 24 years where ILO constituents gave direct guidance on how to proceed in the Organization's mandate to advance gender equality in the world of work. The Conclusions take particular cognisance of the impact of the global financial and economic crisis on the lives of working women and men. The Conclusions state that crisis should not be used as an excuse to create even greater inequalities nor undermine women's acquired rights.

However, the global financial and economic crisis is placing recent gender equality advances at risk, including in China. ILO's recent 2010 report on *Women in labour markets: Measuring progress and identifying challenges*, shows that a new gender gap may be emerging. Although women's overall labour force participation is growing, women remain disproportionately represented in poorly-paid, insecure, part-time, home-based or informal work, and continue to be undervalued when it comes to equal pay for

work of equal value. Major causes of inequality are linked to structural imbalances that weigh against women and systems of collecting national data that are gender-blind.

Progress is thus continually challenged and many obstacles remain to the achievement of gender equality, such as the poor implementation and enforcement of national policies. Complacency, stagnation (sometimes referred to as “gender fatigue”) and backlash can slow the pace of reforms. Crises, such as the current financial and economic downturn, can swiftly demolish years of achievement, giving rise to a reemergence of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, as well as a change of workplace practices that had previously been free of sex discrimination. The importance of monitoring and evaluation should therefore be recognized, with their useful methodologies for tracking progress towards or backsliding away from goals.

The Global Jobs Pact was adopted by the International Labour Conference in June 2009 to help mitigate the social impact of the crisis. The Pact calls for recovery packages that integrate gender equality concerns in all measures. Indeed, the economic crisis is an opportunity to shape new gender equality policy responses. For example, we know women carry the heaviest burden when it comes to unpaid care work. This may expand as the crisis deepens and further limit women’s access to labour markets unless policies for sharing care responsibilities with men are forthcoming.

ILO’s tripartite constituents have already singled out measures to alleviate the immediate impact of the crisis and to assist in medium-term to long-term responses to avoid recurrences, with concurrent attention to promoting gender equality. Amongst such measures are state-subsidised public works schemes (*e.g. Uruguay has introduced state-subsidised loans for construction works*); support to SMEs (*e.g. Mexico has committed to making at certain percentage of government purchases from small or medium-sized enterprises*); launch of national counter-crisis plans (*e.g. El Salvador has announced a comprehensive plan to directly support job creation through upgrading public services and utilities, and South Africa’s crisis response plan includes a National Jobs Fund to save jobs and pave the way for new job creation by subsidising temporary work and*

*training periods for workers in industries threatened by the downturn*); countries in the Asia Region (e.g. Korea, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Bangladesh) have adopted swift, aggressive stimulus packages, which include job creation in public infrastructure, creation of green jobs, and assistance for unemployed in the form of training and social protection. ILO has supported many of these efforts, including innovative policy research for creating a “social protection floor” to safeguard basic social rights and benefits in a time of decreasing social spending.

Recovery packages could also, say the Conference Conclusions, include revision of legislation, including labour laws, to provide better opportunities for women and men to reconcile work and family responsibilities; policies to cover re-training for women in non-traditional areas of work; use of modern technology; and active labour market policies, including, for instance, affirmative action for women; and working to combat gender stereotypes which may impact on women’s experience of the crisis.

Key to the success of the Global Jobs Pact is effective social dialogue. Social dialogue and tripartism are essential policy tools to advance gender equality in the world of work, at international as well as at national levels. When governments, employers’ and workers’ organizations engage in social dialogue and consensus building, real progress can be achieved in designing and implementing non-discrimination legislation and gender equality policies. For social dialogue to be effective, the participation of women needs to be increased. For this to occur, more women need to have access to leadership positions in governments and in employers’ and workers’ organizations. The inclusion of women in social dialogue, including in collective bargaining, is a crucial step in eliminating sex discrimination and should be stimulated among representatives of governments and the social partners. Two key issues to be addressed are thus:

- How can a more equal representation of women and men be ensured in social dialogue bodies?
- How can social dialogue contribute to advancing gender equality in the world of work?

We all hope to hear today about Chinese examples of empowering women in leadership and decision-making roles, so that gender equality has a chance of being tabled in both tripartite and bipartite consultations and negotiations.

Gender equality is at the heart of the Government of China's national policy of social development. Since the world convened in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the Government has worked hard to strengthen national machineries for gender equality and women's empowerment. I am very pleased, and proud, that ILO has been able to play, and continues to play, an active supporting role in this endeavour.

Legal reforms have taken place in China during the past years which have been of utmost importance for the advancement of gender equality. Key amongst these is the passing of the *Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women* which forms the basis of the national policy on gender equality. The ILO was honoured to participate in the formulation of the law on employment promotion and law on labour contract, which have taken effect in 1 January 2008. A significant milestone was the ratification in 2006 of Convention No. 111 which boosted the inclusion of equality principles in labour, employment and industrial relations legislation.

Over the past few years, ILO has worked with its constituents in putting the newly-ratified Convention No. 111 into practice through a project funded by the Government of Norway geared at capacity building on strategies for combating employment discrimination and supporting the application of China's labour laws at national and provincial levels.

Through the Project on Enhancing the Gender Mainstreaming Capacity with Chinese tripartite constituents and All-China Women's Federation, the ILO has established a 3+1 working mechanism in China to promote gender quality since 2002. Gender-specific measures have been supported through the 3+1 mechanism in areas of capacity building on gender mainstreaming in employment and labour policies and programmes; women's enterprise development among vulnerable groups; knowledge development and capacity

building on pay equity; the reconciliation of work and family; maternity protection; and the protection of domestic workers, a mostly female-dominated occupation which provides employment to women with little education.

ACFTU is a key actor in the promotion of gender equality and decent work in China. I commend ACFTU for its commitment to gender mainstreaming as a long-term systematic process to safeguard the rights and interests of both women and men workers and to achieve social justice in a time of economic crisis.

ACFTU has actively worked to heighten awareness and build capacity on gender equality within the trade union structure and encouraged unionists to mainstream gender in areas of employment promotion, collective bargaining, democratic management, workers' education and occupational safety and health, to mention but a few.

I am very pleased to know that the ACFTU has training programme on domestic work to promote women employment and gender equality in the labour market. Under this programme, 137,000 women have been trained, and 83,000 have found jobs.

But some challenges remain. Although women's labour force participation rates have traditionally been high in Chinese society, women continue to face forms of employment discrimination. Traditional stereotypes assign family responsibilities almost exclusively to women who are increasingly, particularly in times of economic crisis, also expected to earn an income. These attitudes permeate the workplace and are deeply entrenched in labour institutions. Women often lack voice and representation in political and economic institutions for decision-making and women's representation in senior positions in government and labour market governance institutions remains low.

I therefore welcome this event as a significant platform for ILO's constituents in China to continue their advocacy for gender equality in the world of work, to share achievements and also to address some of the remaining challenges. ILO GENDER is genuinely delighted to be here with this esteemed assembly.