

**Speech by Ms Ann Herbert, Director,
ILO Country Office for China and Mongolia**

**Press Conference on Equal Retirement Age and
Labour Protection for Women Workers
29 March 2011, Beijing**

Distinguished Ms Tan Lin, Director-General of the Women's Studies Institute of China,
Representatives from the MOHRSS, ACFTU, CEC,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning!

On behalf of the International Labour Office, I would like to welcome you to attend this Press Conference. We are very pleased to host this event together with the Women's Studies Institute of China. The ILO and the All-China Women's Federation have carried out many joint activities to promote gender equality and eliminate inequality and discrimination in the world of work, and this collaboration is deeply appreciated.

The ILO with partners in China has made great efforts to develop and improve national policies and legislation, measures and mechanisms to create an environment that promotes gender equality and decent work for all. Our ultimate goal is to ensure that men and women will have equal rights as well as equal opportunities and treatment with regard to employment, social protection and social dialogue.

Since 2001, a series of ILO projects have been implemented by the Chinese tripartite constituents and the All-China Women's Federation, with the aim of:

- strengthening the implementation of the key International labour standards on gender equality;
- advocating the removal of existing barriers to gender equality as beneficial for all;
- and increasing general awareness and understanding of equal opportunities and treatment.

The purpose of today's meeting is to publicize the findings and recommendations of two surveys conducted by the Women's Studies Institute and the ILO. One focuses on labour protection for women; the other on the retirement age.

As you all know, in response to rapid social and economic changes, the Chinese government is in the process of revising the "Regulation on labour protection for women workers", issued in 1988.

In accordance with our survey findings, a holistic approach to improve the "Regulation" is needed: on the one hand, women in the informal sector should be better protected than is currently the case. The application of maternity insurance should be improved, and paternity leave should be reinforced; on the other hand, those overly protective measures that limit women's employment opportunities should be removed. For example, it is suggested that areas of work currently prohibited to women need to be reviewed and revised, while the risks and hazards in working environments must be reduced or eliminated in order to provide safe and healthy working environments for both men and women.

Here, I would like to reiterate our fundamental concern that improved labour protection for women should secure the optimum necessary protection while safeguarding women's rights to equal opportunity and treatment in employment. Furthermore, protective measures need to be assessed and adjusted regularly based on solid scientific studies.

With regard to the other important equality issue - retirement age, currently, China is practicing different retirement ages for men and women. Among civil servants, men retire at the age of 60, and women 55; and among workers, men retire at the age of 60, women at 50, and female administrative and professional staff at 55. Thus, women must retire 5-10 years earlier than men.

Thirty years ago, most countries around the world had similar provisions. The mandatory early retirement age for women was designed to 'protect' older women, and acknowledged women's double workload at home and at work. However this is no longer the case. Dramatic changes have occurred around the world with regard to women's social roles, workforce participation and life expectancy. As societies age, the worldwide trend is to encourage all workers to work longer, rather than to retire early.

Today, the mandatory lower retirement age for women is considered to be institutionalized sex-based direct discrimination. Inequality in retirement age is increasingly being corrected worldwide, taking into consideration four specific perspectives:

- Rights perspective: unequal retirement ages are considered to be a violation of equality laws, and the principles of non discrimination and equality of treatment.
- Social justice perspective: early retirement adversely affects women's income during their working lives by preventing them from reaching the highest earnings brackets later in their careers. And where women's life expectancy is longer than men's, it exposes women to a higher risk of poverty in their later years as it results in lower pension levels.
- Economic perspective: it does not make good business sense in ageing societies to convert productive, economically active workers into pensioners at a time when labour shortages are on the horizon.
- Social Security perspective: early retirement places a heavy burden on social security schemes.

In the context of China, the labour market currently has an oversupply of workers, but at the same time, there is a shortage of skilled workers. The unequal retirement age for women cuts short their ability to work, wastes their knowledge and skills, and limits opportunities for career development. It has led to less representation of women in decision making in both the public and private sectors, wider pay gaps and disparities in social security benefits.

China has ratified the ILO Convention No. 111 concerning Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, and UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and obligated itself to apply these international conventions. The 12th five-year plan highlights the importance of equity and social justice in social and economic development. It is time to equalize the retirement age. Once the decision is made with regard to the principle of equal retirement age for men and women, implementation could be gradual and accommodate the concerns of all involved, for example being optional for a period of time, or providing flexible options for both men and women.

I believe the presentations and discussion today will help address the issues from an evidence-based scientific perspective. Hopefully they will lead to the decision to remove the mandatory lower retirement ages for women, while providing rational labour protection for both women and men.

Finally, my sincere thanks to the Women's Studies Institute of China, and provincial women's studies institutes in Heilongjiang, Jiangsu and Sichuan for their excellent work in producing these high quality papers, which I very much enjoyed reading.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the Women Studies Institute of China for their great contribution in organizing this meeting.

I wish this event every success.