



Women and Work

*Seminar for Chairpersons and Members of Parliamentary Bodies Dealing with Gender Equality and other committees addressing labour issues
Organized jointly by the IPU and the ILO*



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Concluding observations by the Rapporteur, Ms. Desirée Pethrus Engström, Member of the Labour Committee, Parliament of Sweden

We have come together these past two and a half days to discuss and exchange experiences on women and work. Our objective has been to identify key priority areas for action and parliamentary initiatives and strategies to achieve equality between men and women on the labour market.

We would like to recall that gender equality is at the core of development and a condition for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Empowering women on the labour market is therefore instrumental.

Our discussions began by taking stock of recent trends related to women and work. The past two decades have seen a massive influx of women in the labour force, although there are significant variations from one region to another. Despite important progress in women's education and access to decision-making positions, their status on the labour market is not commensurate with their educational achievements and work experience.

Women continue to face numerous challenges in accessing the labour market. More often than not they obtain jobs that are of a lesser quality than men's, they are discriminated against in the workplace, they experience poor working conditions and job insecurity, and they are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The difficult environment in which they work often results in less security in their post-professional life.

There is no single solution to address these challenges and reach the objective of equality at work. Rather, there are a variety of approaches, reflecting the diversity of situations and country experiences. The following is by no means an exhaustive summary of the range of experiences and detailed practices that were examined during the conference. Rather, it aims to highlight the main strategies and elements that can contribute to achieving progress.

First, we need to build a **gender-sensitive environment**. We cannot hope to address challenges related to women and work without taking into account the wider situation and the need to secure respect for women's fundamental rights in general. Women's economic empowerment cannot be achieved without tackling gender inequality.

Such an environment also needs **gender-sensitive actors**. Women should be present in all bodies, including governments, parliaments, trade unions and enterprises, not only in high numbers, but also in key decision-making positions. In this regard, IPU is called on to pursue its work in favour of a stronger participation of women in parliament.

Second, to secure and promote equality for women in the workplace, we must begin with a strong and effective **legal framework**. Developing gender-sensitive legislation is the basic foundation for which we - as parliamentarians - have responsibility. National legislation must meet the international standards and benchmarks to which our countries are committed. It must

also address national realities and serve the interests of all of our constituents, including rural women and marginalized women.

Developing adequate and gender-responsive legislation requires reliable, comprehensive, sex-disaggregated **data**. We need to build our national statistical capacities. We call on international organizations such as the ILO and the IPU to provide us with comparative research that can inform our legislative work. The creation of a database of legislation on women and work, and of best practices, in particular with regard to implementation measures, is recommended. The provision of information on general legal frameworks required would also be welcome.

Third, while legislation is necessary, it is not sufficient, as there is often a gap between de jure and de facto equality, i.e. there is a gap between legislation and its effective **implementation**. Responsibility for bridging this gap lies also with parliamentarians, as we can oversee the implementation of policies and programmes to ensure that they meet the standards and goals we have set. We must ask the difficult questions and hold governments to account. Budgets need to match the priorities set in legislation and national policies.

We must also make sure that we raise issues relating to gender equality in public debates and help forge national consensus on these issues. In addition, we must ensure that legislation is easily accessible and well understood by the people, including through sensitization and educational campaigns, translation into local languages and public debates.

Fourth, in the context of globalization, **international actors** can strongly influence countries' development agendas, without necessarily being subject to national scrutiny or having national interests as their first priority. In order to lessen possible negative effects and advance equality, we must aim for globalization processes that are inclusive and consultative. It is important to maintain open channels of communication and forge **alliances** between the various stakeholders, from the local to the international levels. This must also mean that we have to increase our own involvement in, and oversight of, the multilateral system in order to encourage better performance and accountability of international organizations.

Fifth, as parliamentarians, we must ensure that our countries are State parties to **international treaties** and texts related to gender equality and work: for instance, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; ILO Conventions on Maternity Protection (No.183), Equal Remuneration for Men and Women (No. 100), Discrimination (No.111); Workers with Family Responsibilities (No.156), and Social Security (Minimum Standards - No.102). With regard to the social partners (trade unions and employers), which are key partners in achieving progress for women in the workplace, ILO Conventions 87 and 98 are also worth mentioning. For those of our countries that are parties to these international treaties, we have an obligation as parliamentarians to monitor effective implementation at the national level, oversee government action in this field, raise awareness and sensitize citizens to their rights. We must also regularly review the validity of reservations certain parties may have made to some treaties and aim for their gradual removal.

Sixth, facilitating women's access to work begins with providing them with **education**, not only to lift them out of poverty, but also to ensure their economic empowerment and security. Education alone, however, is not sufficient to avoid employment discrimination against women. The example of declining average earnings in professions that have become "feminized" in recent years suggest that other policy measures are needed to eliminate discrimination and ensure equal opportunities at work for both men and women.

An increasing number of women are now in the paid workforce across the world; however women still perform the vast majority of *unpaid* economic and care work. Giving visibility to **unpaid work** is therefore a priority. There is a need for recognition of women's continuing heavy burden of unpaid work in the light of their increasing participation in the paid labour force. We need to consider what the best policies are to enable women to participate in the paid workforce; we also need to develop mechanisms to include unpaid care work in the formal accounts of national economic activity.

Seventh, access to paid work for women is closely linked to the **challenge of reconciling family and work**. We must explore incentives to enable a more balanced sharing of family responsibilities between the State and families and between men and women, including paternity and parental leave entitlements, childcare arrangements, maternity protection, and investments in infrastructure and services. Implementing such policies may require sensitization and educational initiatives aimed at changing mentalities.

As parliamentarians, we also have a special responsibility to pay particular attention to our work space and its functioning, with a view to ensuring that it facilitates women's participation. Our parliaments need to be gender-sensitive and offer facilities and some flexibility to allow women MPs and women members of the secretariat to reconcile family and work obligations. The provision of certain facilities such as crèches or the limitation of late/night meetings are some initiatives that could be considered.

Reviewing working time policies is an additional need. The emergence of **new forms of employment** contracts characterized by flexibility (part-time, temporary work, self-employment) has the potential to increase female labour force participation. However, in view of the poor quality of many of these jobs, it remains important to provide terms of employment that are equivalent to those of full-time workers, particularly regarding wages, social security coverage and pensions. In addition, very long working hours also restrict time available to dedicate to family life, and efforts are necessary to reduce excessive working hours and overtime for all workers.

Eighth, for women to set up their own business and become **entrepreneurs**, several challenges must be overcome. Constraints include lack of access to credit, finance and markets; lack of access to relevant education and training; gender-blind/gender-insensitive macro-economic policies; excessive administrative procedures; lack of cultural acceptance and recognition of women as entrepreneurs and social restrictions posing problems in reconciling public and private life.

To facilitate and promote women **entrepreneurship** we need to implement targeted measures. These can include affirmative action, programmes to ensure that women and men have equal access to resources, support and opportunities to run businesses, micro-credit facilities, and training programmes, including in ICT. It is also important to promote an entrepreneurial culture that motivates and engenders the community. For this, there needs to be an enabling legislative framework, with the possibility of tax rebates for female-led enterprises, integration of non-discriminatory clauses in all enterprise-related laws, and monitoring mechanisms.

Ninth, access to **social protection** remains a challenge. While a variety of models exist, it is important to bear in mind gender biases and gender-differentiated impacts on men and women. Social security systems based on employment entitlements and contributions, for instance, can disadvantage women who may have spent considerable proportions of their adult working years performing essentially reproductive and societal tasks without remuneration, or in part-time work. Systems requiring fees and charges at public health facilities can lead to exclusion of the poorest. Particular attention needs to be paid to the ageing population and to

the informal sector, which are both most likely not to benefit from adequate social protection policies.

Tenth, the CEDAW Convention is an effective instrument to combat discrimination against women in the workplace. It provides the framework for parliamentary action to identify and regularly review discrimination in existing legislation, policies and practices, and in the work culture. The reporting mechanism to the United Nations CEDAW Committee provides opportunities for regular stock-taking: parliaments should be strongly involved in this process, in particular in the follow-up of the Committee's recommendations. Tackling discrimination requires as a priority reviewing laws with a view to removing discriminatory provisions. We wish to stress in particular the need to abolish legislation that limits or denies legal status to women.

Combating discrimination also requires building a culture of equality and tolerance, sensitization and raising awareness. Education is fundamental, and should start in the home. School curricula should also be reviewed to include education on human rights and gender equality.

Eleventh, protection of women in the workplace is another cause for concern, especially with regard to sexual abuse, harassment and exploitation. Measures and legislation must be taken to criminalize such behaviours. Efforts also need to be inclusive and cover all areas of work. Particular attention was paid to discrimination against women in the police, the military and in jails. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was invited to address this particular issue and produce a report on the subject.

Twelfth, progress will only result from the combined efforts of all stakeholders aimed at achieving equality. Political commitment, strong and sound regulatory frameworks, targeted public policies, partnerships, including with trade unions and employers, and sensitization campaigns are all important ingredients for success.

To ensure follow-up of the conference and its results, we need to take action when we get back home. We need to disseminate the results of the meeting in parliament and bring them to the attention of specialized committees. We must also make use of all possible opportunities (including celebration of international, regional and national days for women) to draw attention to some of the issues discussed, raise awareness and trigger discussions and initiatives.

Networking among participants is also important in order to continue to support one another, share experiences, follow trends and highlight progress. Networking with other partners concerned with gender issues is also key. This can be done through electronic fora such as iKNOWpolitics (www.iKNOWpolitics.org), set up by IDEA, IPU, NDI, UNDP and UNIFEM.

Dissemination of the results of the meeting should also be ensured by the IPU and the ILO. The IPU is requested to circulate the results of the conference to all parliaments and present them at its next Assembly, to be held in Cape Town, South Africa (April 2007). A report on the conference, including presentations and highlights of the debates, should also be produced. The IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians is asked to discuss follow-up of the conference and ways of monitoring initiatives taken and progress made.

Furthermore, we request that a conference of parliamentary bodies dealing with gender equality be organized next year. We would like to suggest that a session on follow-up of our conference on *Women and Work* be included in the programme.