

International Women's Day

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*Excellencies,  
Distinguished Speakers,  
Guests,  
Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Welcome to the commemoration of International Women's Day at the United Nations in Bangkok. At the outset, I would like to thank the Gender Thematic Working Group of the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism of the United Nations for organizing this function.

As the global economic crisis is rapidly taking a toll in the Asia-Pacific region, our focus today is to explore from a multiple perspective how women are being affected by the current economic crisis, and to consider how women and girls are shaping effective responses.

The Asia-Pacific region has the second highest ratio of employed women of working age at 48.9 per cent. But, whether as farmers, factory workers or home-based workers, women's employment is increasingly taking place at the heart of the global supply chain- which starts with a woman sewing a shirt in South Asia to it being sold at an upmarket department store in a developed country. Globalization has led to an unprecedented demand for female workers in certain sectors. They make up 60 to 90 per cent of the labour force in the clothing sector especially at the labour intensive stage of the supply chain; they are also a major presence in the new tertiary outsourced services sector, such as call centres and financial services. Women have in fact emerged as the flexible labour force par excellence for the highly competitive labour intensive sector of the global economy.

Because of the growing demand for flexible labour that can be drawn upon or dropped depending on market conditions, females' entry into the workforce in large numbers has coincided with trends towards outsourcing, subcontracting and relegating women's jobs to the informal sector without any job security or benefits. With the financial crisis becoming a full blown economic crisis, there is a major decline in the trade and manufacturing sector resulting from reduced consumption. The ILO estimates that 22 million women have lost their jobs in the manufacturing sector due to the present economic crisis.

Women are often first to lose jobs; given their contractual and unskilled employment status - they are viewed as flexible, even expendable. Data from Indonesia to the United Kingdom indicates that more women than men have lost jobs. Employment segregation is therefore an important factor in determining how women fare amidst volatility. Women frequently dominate in low-skilled, labour-intensive manufacturing jobs, such as in textiles, apparel and electronics, as well as domestic and agricultural work.

Women occupy temporary, casual, seasonal and contract jobs which generally lack security and benefit offerings, such as retirement or maternity allowances. They have fewer and less effective safety nets, or buffers against economic fluctuations. Often unskilled and restricted to informal employment,

they are ill-equipped to quickly change jobs and secure that next wage. They are also unlikely to possess assets such as land and housing or have easy access to credit.

The impact of the crisis on women is of course not limited to the realm of the labour force, but is largely present in the home. Women and girls are usually responsible for household expenditures and coping strategies to make ends meet when household incomes fall. They are the ones called upon to provide substitutes for goods the family can no longer afford and to care for sick or ageing family members in addition to their existing workloads. Yet they also tend to be most affected by smaller meals, lower spending on health, and withdrawing children from school to reduce expenses. Women's household burden has recently been magnified due to fluctuating and on-average higher food prices. Their generally lower incomes also means that families are disproportionately affected when it is men lose their jobs.

Previous economic downturns have further revealed some evidence of rising crime rates, including abuse and violence against women. Women suffering financially may be pressured to remain in unsafe relationships due to a lack of means and options. Similarly, they may become economic migrants, a rapidly growing trend among women in our region. However, economic vulnerability and migration increase the risk of entering into dangerous employment or being trafficking for forced labour or sexual servitude. There are signs emerging that some of these dangers are already on the rise.

Among the lessons from the previous Asian Financial Crisis, which we learned the hard way, was that cuts in public spending often affect social sectors and policies such as education, health, food subsidies and sanitation, which are essential services to households and families, which can provide the support that women need. It is especially important that we bear this lesson in mind today and resist the temptation to reduce funding to – or divert funding from – these areas. Social spending enables well-being and opportunities, and we cannot risk losing the important gains we have achieved in the region – particularly in educating our children. Social protection measures, from unemployment assistance to access to health care, as well as gender budgeting, have a fundamental role in preventing this. There is great scope in our region to build and strengthen social protection policies in a sound and sustainable manner. In fact I would go one step further to say that the finance crisis provides an opportunity- we have to seize the opportunity to bring about a greater transformation to build the social foundation for more resilient communities and households to face the crisis, so that girls, women, families and households can survive the crisis.

Similarly, we must urgently ensure that fiscal stimulus packages are engendered, if development is not be endangered. These must encompass investment in women-dominated industries and provide support to such areas as educational initiatives, women's health and agricultural extension services. As many countries are now crafting their national stimulus packages, we have a window of opportunity – right now – to advocate for these to be gender responsive.

While it is clear that the region is now faced with complex immediate challenges, we must not lose sight of risks and strategies in the long-term. Investment in women and girls is fundamental not only to gender equality and women's empowerment, but essential to poverty reduction and development. In fact, it is even a low-cost and low-risk development and growth strategy, which these days should sound even more attractive. Such investments are tried and true, and increasingly referred to as “smart economics”. They entail such practical interventions as accessible and affordable health-care systems, and enforcement of gender-based violence legislation.

I would like to close with another appeal from our Secretary-General Mr. Ban, which is: “The global financial crisis is forcing all of us to save and cut costs where we can. But our work for the women of the world must continue undiminished”. I think this sums up succinctly yet eloquently the ultimate message we would like to leave with you today.

We must prevent the financial and economic crisis from becoming a human tragedy. International Women's Day began when women said no to the many injustices that shaped their lives- mobilizing against the poor working conditions of textile workers who were killed when their factory caught fire. We

need the same courage and determination to continue to shape a world of larger freedom, free from fear and want, despite the financial crisis.

Let us keep alive the spirit and purpose for which this day was created.

Happy International Women's day.

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