

8 March 2007

For maternity protection



STATEMENT

Strong standards of maternity protection for all women workers

In recent decades women's participation in both the formal and informal labour markets has risen to 40 per cent. This unprecedented development has changed our societies and the labour market, and through both their visible and invisible work women have become a vital force in the global economy.

It is an accepted fact that today's labour market does not offer equal access to women workers. Globally, women earn 12-60% less than men, women make up 60% of the 550 million working poor and 35.8 million young women (aged 15 - 24) are out of work.

Maternity is one of the areas in which gender discrimination is most blatantly common. Too many women around the world do not enjoy maternity protection. They are subjected to numerous forms of discrimination, ranging from pregnancy tests at the recruitment stage, particularly in the export processing zones, to sackings during pregnancy and loss or withholding of wages that are vitally needed to ensure many households' survival. What is more, pregnant women and their children are exposed to many health risks.

Despite the fact that many countries have legislation providing for paid maternity leave, and many others provide health benefits and employment protection, the gap between law and practice remains huge. Not all women workers enjoy the same coverage and a large majority are excluded owing to their being in atypical employment, such as the informal economy, agriculture, home work, domestic work or part-time work.

A large proportion of women workers around the world are still subjected to unequal treatment in employment owing to their reproductive function. That function has not yet been recognised and correctly valued by society generally, by political leaders and by those who see maternity as an obstacle to profitability and the amassing of wealth.

Fully ensuring maternity protection is a way of recognising the major contribution made by women to the renewal of populations and the work force. Enhancement of this vitally important social function that women fulfil is on the ITUC's list of priorities.

As a trade union organisation, the ITUC is aware that equal opportunities is likely to remain an empty notion if the vital social function of maternity is not explicitly protected and supported by

measures promoting an increased involvement of both parents in tasks related to caring for and educating children.

Six years after the adoption of ILO Convention 183 on maternity protection, only a minority of countries have ratified it (13) and the “developed” countries do not form a majority within that group.

The protection provided by the Convention meets the individual needs of mothers whilst fully recognising the vital social function they fulfil.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, and to ensure that the protection guaranteed under Convention 183 and its associated Recommendation 191 does not remain a mere statement of intent, the ITUC:

- reaffirms the vital and crucial importance of **strong standards** of maternity protection for all women workers.
- calls on governments and all the relevant players to make every effort **to ratify and implement ILO Convention 183** on maternity protection and its associated Recommendation 191 which calls, amongst other things, for 18 weeks of paid maternity leave.
- insists that governments amend their legislation and put in place effective measures to ensure that all women workers are entitled to maternity protection and paid maternity leave. Given the expansion of the informal economy and of jobs in atypical sectors, it is vital that **legislation is adapted and that maternity protection is also applied to the women working in those sectors of the economy.**
- **calls on employers to assume their responsibilities** in this area by adopting appropriate policies and practices with respect to health matters, pay and employment. Ensuring that maternity is not a source of discrimination should be the guiding principle of these policies and practices.
- **calls on all trade union organisations to prioritise maternity protection** by negotiating the application of ILO Convention 183 and its associated Recommendation 191 in collective agreements and labour legislation. In addition to this, they should organise collective activities in their countries to raise awareness among political leaders, employers and society as a whole about the vital importance of maternity protection and paid maternity leave.