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Statement by
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Opening of the 53rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Chair,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ILO is honoured to address this 53rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women. This year's theme - *Equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS* - is particularly relevant to the ILO's mandate.

For the past 90 years the ILO has been at the forefront of promoting gender equality and non-discrimination at work. Of particular interest, in June 2008, the International Labour Conference adopted the Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, which is a clarion call to action for the international community to sustain open economies and open societies based on social justice, full and productive employment, sustainable enterprises and social cohesion. It recognizes gender equality as central to these goals. A proof of this commitment is the 12 month campaign "Gender equality at the Heart of Decent Work" which will culminate in June 2009 with the International Labour Conference discussion on this topic.

And now, at a time of great financial and economic crisis, we must strengthen our efforts collectively to reduce the social impact on the most vulnerable in society who will be disproportionately affected. As the ILO Director-General Mr Somavia has stated, before the current financial crisis there was already a job crisis. The challenges to gender equality in the wake of globalization, such as insecure employment status, precarious work arrangements, poor working conditions and massive growth of the informal economy, especially in developing countries, are now exacerbated by the global economic crisis.

The number of working poor, where women are disproportionately represented, could increase to 1.4 billion. The proportion of persons in vulnerable employment, again where women are over-represented, could rise to 53 per cent of the employed population. Although this scenario is daunting, it is not insurmountable. But it requires the commitment of all those governments and organizations present here and beyond.

As we have seen, Chair, financial downturns can have a negative impact on families, by increasing unpaid work especially for women and girls as economies shrink and public spending declines. However, past experience demonstrates that investments in care and public services and the implementation of counter-cyclical policies can help mitigate some of the more severe problems that disproportionately affect women by creating opportunities and providing much needed safety nets. It is important to highlight that stimulus packages that include the voice of women have a better chance of achieving what they set out to. The ILO stands ready to support member States in their efforts to strengthen social policies aimed at alleviating unpaid work demands on households, which particularly affect women and girls.

Decent work stresses the importance of safeguarding fundamental principles and rights at work, investing in skills development and training, promoting job creation, rolling out a basic social protection package, and fully utilizing institutions for social dialogue. The Decent Work Agenda together with other UN policy frameworks can significantly contribute to lessening the immediate impact of the crisis and put into place progressive strategies aimed at averting future crisis. These frameworks would also provide policy guidance to national governments to ensure that care work is recognized, measured and valued in their practical approaches to realizing equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men.

While the growing proportion of women in the labour force has been a recent trend (46.4 per cent globally), obstacles to women's equal opportunities and treatment in the world of work persist. Labour markets in the formal economy remain highly segregated, with many women caught in traditionally 'female' jobs which tend to be low-status, insecure, poorly paid, and without opportunities for advancement compared to those held by men. Even for work of equal value, women are still paid on average 20 to 30 per cent less than men in both industrialized and developing economies.

Reconciling family responsibilities with paid work where viable State services are lacking is a major factor contributing to women's disadvantage in the labour market. At the same time, paid work demands and their conflict with family responsibilities limit men's ability to be involved in family matters. Despite this, almost half of the world's countries have no formal childcare programmes for children under three years of age, and for those that do, the coverage is limited. Similarly, families must still take on the bulk of care for the elderly, as services for them including specialized community and home-based providers have been slow to develop, and may not be offering quality care.

The difficulty of balancing working and family responsibilities has worsened over the last years with the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. HIV/AIDS threatens the livelihoods of many workers and those who depend on them: families, communities and enterprises. In doing so, it also weakens national economies. Discrimination and stigmatization against women and men with HIV/AIDS threaten fundamental principles and rights at work, and undermine efforts for prevention and care.

The problem of finding ways to combine paid work with caring for those infected by HIV/AIDS has become a critical issue, with implications for gender inequalities. As the burden of care falls more heavily on women and girls, it adds to their unpaid workload and makes it difficult for women to find and continue in paid employment and for girls to go to school, thus jeopardizing their future.

To provide Governments with a legal framework for work and family balance, in 1981 the International Labour Conference adopted the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156) and its accompanying Recommendation (No. 165). The Convention calls for equality of opportunity and treatment for both women and men workers with family responsibilities.

The ILO's *2001 Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work* is the framework for action on HIV/AIDS related to the workplace. It contains key principles for policy development and practical guidelines for programmes, enterprise, community and national level. Moreover, it gives policy advice on the gender dimensions of the HIV epidemic, including on how to mitigate the impact and spread prevention messages so that the care economy can cope with this demand.

I would like to conclude, Chair, by calling on governments, the UN and other international and regional organizations, employers' and workers' organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations, to ensure coherent policies and measures to promote greater understanding, recognition and sharing of family responsibilities between the State, the private sector and households and between women and men. Such an effort is essential if we are to make it easier for women and men to reconcile the pressures to earn a living while fulfilling their family responsibilities.