Opening Remarks
Ms. Lakshmi Puri, Assistant Secretary-General/Deputy Executive Director

Presentation to the Executive Board of the ILO - UN Women report
“Global Employment Trends for Women”

29 November 2012, 4:00 – 5:00 p.m.

I am pleased to be here today to present the findings of a joint ILO-UNWOMEN draft Report on “Global Employment Trends for Women”, both in pre-crisis and crisis contexts, to be launched by Ms. Bachelet, UN Women Executive Director, and the International Labour Organization next month, on its completion. I would like to thank the ILO for this partnership which exemplifies the deepening collaboration between the two organizations.

This publication is significant for several reasons. First, it includes the most recent data and analysis of trends on the impact of the global financial and economic crisis on women’s employment worldwide, with cross regional comparisons. Such hard evidence is imperative for gender responsive policy formulation and implementation. Second, it provides a plethora of information on crisis response measures and most pertinently, on their gender dimensions, which is often difficult to obtain. Third, it offers a set of policy options to promote gender equality in employment in crisis and normal times and a mine of good practices that can be drawn on to advance national implementation.

Addressing gender gaps in employment is essential because both women and men participate in the labor market but on very different and unequal terms. This is mediated by an interface of feminized poverty, ethnic, and other forms of marginalization and discriminatory gender-based stereotypes that reinforce women’s domestic roles and men’s public roles as “natural” and that exclude women from access to material and non-material resources, including in the realm of work. Pre-crisis illustrations of this phenomenon include a gap in female and male labor force participation - which stood globally at 26 percentage points in 2008 -, occupational segregation, women’s concentration in vulnerable work, gender pay gaps. The recent global financial and economic crisis has exacerbated the already adverse condition of women workers. If they are to ensure gender equality and women’s empowerment in general and in employment, policies and programs should take account gender differences and inequalities in normal times and crisis.

Gender equality and women’s empowerment, in general and in employment, also matters intrinsically because it is a basic human right. Further, gender equality matters instrumentally because it contributes to inclusive growth and the achievement of other key development outcomes, including better development outcomes for the next generation and more representative institutions. This draws on our shared vision in the Rio+20 outcome document that recognizes gender equality and women’s empowerment as a priority, including the promotion of full and productive employment and decent work for women.

As pointed out by the report, the crisis has badly affected female employment rates and women face more difficulties than men in reducing unemployment rates to pre-crisis levels. This gender gap in
employment can be explained by several factors. Disproportionately employed in vulnerable jobs with fragile and/or flexible contracts, women are further disadvantaged by social attitudes and seniority rules privileging male workers and tend to lose their job first during a crisis. Moreover, perceived as more docile and nimble and preferred because of their willingness to accept flexible contracts, women are more engaged in export-oriented jobs, a sector likely to suffer from exports falls during financial crises. Other factors disadvantaging women in employment include lower levels of skills and education, their exclusion from some occupations, gender pay gaps, flows in and out of employment and lack of access to productive assets such as land, credit and technology.

Women’s participation in the workforce is also constrained by their care roles, which are further impacted during crises. Quite often, governments respond to financial crises with fiscal austerity and by cutting back on public spending, sometimes by imposing user fees on public services such as public health, sanitation, education services and utilities providing energy and transport. The withdrawal or reduction of access to such services puts a greater burden on unpaid labour within the household, which is typically performed by women. Where pre-crisis levels of physical and social infrastructure development and access to natural resources and to basic public services are already inadequate, the withdrawal or reduction of access to such services during crisis exacerbates work burdens and health costs for women and children in particular.

In response to the crisis, stimulus packages varied across countries and impacted men and women differently. Policies implemented in developed countries were directed in the immediate aftermath mainly to male dominated sectors, which were the first to be hit. At the same time, austerity measures disproportionately affected women in several developed economies where many public administrations stopped new recruitments or fired current staff, mostly women. In the developing world, similarly, some countries directed their stimulus programs towards male dominated industries such as the public infrastructure sector - construction, mining, energy, roads... - benefiting men. Some countries introduced taxes leading to employment loss in female-dominated manufacturing sectors or reduced public spending on health and childcare imposing a double burden on women: directly through the employment loss in these sectors and indirectly through increased housework and child care responsibility at home.

However, some countries successfully adopted measures that generated jobs for women. Uzbekistan for instance created 534,600 new jobs in 2009, with 328,000 of them in rural areas and 52,000 in the domestic services sector, where women are concentrated. Similarly, women are expected to benefit more from the support measures to small and medium enterprises in Chile, Mexico and Peru, as well as agricultural support funds in Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico.

Marginalization of women from employment in normal times and crisis generates huge costs. A 2008 study from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD - estimated that, in the previous decade, a quarter of annual economic growth in Europe was due to increasing employment rates for women. The same study stated that if non-market activities were included in national accounting, then women would account for half of the gross domestic product - GDP - in the OECD area.

The global financial and economic crisis provides us with a huge window of opportunity that we should seize to rebuild the economic, social, and political fabric of our societies differently and in a better way that promotes inclusive and sustainable growth and development. Both from the normative and
efficiency point of view, we need to implement a judicious mix of macroeconomic, labor market and social protection policies to promote gender equality in employment, drawing on the raft of good practices to advance national implementation.

Attempts to ensure better conditions for women as paid and unpaid workers, or to prevent worsening conditions, require more than specific targeted and directed programmes. They must be part of broader macroeconomic and sectoral policies that emphasise public spending on employment creation and decent work for women, universal access to good quality essential social services, such as health, education and various forms of social protection, as reiterated in the 2011 Ms. Bachelet Report “Social Protection Floor for a Fair and Inclusive Globalization”. This must be part of national development strategies and plans that must be well resourced, through gender responsive budgets. Such an approach revitalizes effective demand and promotes inclusive growth. Equally important is the need to, in parallel, restructure financial systems, regulate capital, financial, labor markets more tightly as this has positive implications for an inclusive growth process.

Gender equal and empowering policies for women in employment include policies that stimulate labour demand and include additional public spending on infrastructure that provides for equal recruitment of women and decent work for them such as public employment works; poverty reduction programs targeted at vulnerable groups of women such as poor female headed households; new and expanded targeted non-traditional employment programs for women, financial inclusion and greater access to credit for women, subsidies and tax reductions for small and medium enterprises especially in sectors dominated by women. UN Women has supported economic rights and security issues of excluded women, specifically rural women, domestic workers, migrant women workers and home-based workers, to be incorporated into national policies or plans in 14 countries.

Labour market policies that support existing women workers, job seekers and unemployed women are also adequate, providing women with job search assistance and counselling, training and apprenticeships, skills development, strengthening capacity of service providers to effectively respond to the needs of women and to provide information and conduct trainings in ways accessible to women as well as other policies such as affirmative recruitment, promotion and retention policies at work, minimum wages, .... UN Women’s support to women’s increased share in non-farm wage employment occurred in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Guatemala and the Occupied Palestine Territories in 2011. CEOs of 92 companies have signed the Women’s Empowerment Principles and have begun implementing them in more than 10 countries.

Positive policies can also help reducing the burden of women’s unpaid labor and provide security to unemployed women by increasing the coverage and funding of social protection and public delivery of goods and services that are important for women. Some examples are conditional cash transfer programmes, unemployment benefits, pensions and disability allowances providing some form of social security to women who have performed mainly unpaid labour through most of their lives. Anti-poverty, employment and cash transfer programs were introduced with UN Women’s support to protect the most economically vulnerable groups of women in several countries.

It is also important to implement policies supporting viable self-employment and food security in agricultural and non-agricultural settings, including enhanced access to land, technology, extension services, institutional credit on reasonable terms. UN Women currently supports policies ensuring women’s equal access to productive assets, entrepreneurship development and decent work, market
access, improved technologies, business mentoring, investment in/provision of transport, provision of water and utilities and training for women to become solar engineers and use solar energy.

According to the ILO/World Bank Policy Inventory database, between 2008 and 2010, 39 out of 55 low and middle-income countries adopted new measures to address the large gender participation and employment gaps, one third of these were positive crisis response measures targeted at women. Frequently, in high income countries, crisis packages included child care support while countries with low levels of female labour force participation were more likely to implement labour market measures targeted at unemployed women such as job related certification, skills training, and job search support, targeted support to small and micro women entrepreneurs and artisans through special credit lines and reduced interest rates as in Turkey and Egypt, women’s employment on public works programs as in India, Latvia, Serbia and South Africa, subsidized employment as in Turkey, pensions as in France, Italy, Jamaica and Romania and other measures.

As the female employment rate is estimated to remain high until 2017 or beyond, it is imperative to expand employment opportunities for women, facilitate easier access for women into the labour market, expand social protection measures to reduce vulnerability and provide decent work, implement policies to equalize care work between men and women, invest in women’s skills and education and foster access to employment across the occupational spectrum and enhance women’s access to productive assets. By providing us with a range of good practices, this report demonstrates that this is more than doable. Thank you.