STATEMENT

68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly - Third Committee

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STATEMENT BY

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Agenda Item 28: Advancement of Women

Madame Chair,

The Report of the Secretary-General on violence against women migrant workers (A/68/178) calls upon States to ensure that national laws protecting women migrant workers, including domestic workers, should include robust monitoring, complaints and dispute resolution mechanisms in line with relevant ILO conventions, including the Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189), and United Nations instruments.

The ILO welcomes this call which is consistent with our primary goal of promoting opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.

Almost half of the total international migrant population (232 million) are women, and most of them migrate in search of better job opportunities. Women migrant workers have become important income earners for their families and contributors for their countries of origin and destination, often on par with men. Their movement has been spurred by lack of employment opportunities in their countries of origin, the continuing negative impact of the economic and financial crises, difficult transitions to market economies, and political conflicts in their home countries.

The call for greater protection and concrete measures to protect women at work, including women migrant workers, is reflected in the agreed conclusions of the 57th Session Commission on the Status of Women (E/2013/27) which asks Member States to promote “women’s full participation in the formal economy and equal access to full employment and decent work”.

Madame Chair, in this context please let me convey 5 core ILO messages on protecting and promoting decent conditions for migrant women at work.
First, the ILO advocates for a migrant-centred and rights-based approach to labour migration. This approach includes gender-sensitive labour migration policies, effective institutions, and legislation and policies guided by international labour standards – namely the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97), Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, No. 143, as well as Recommendations No. 86 and 151 – which should be framed towards improving development outcomes. As discussed in the High Level Dialogue on Migration and Development, better harmonization of employment, social protection and labour migration policies with development planning is crucial to realizing sustainable and inclusive development.

Second, particular attention should be given to domestic workers. There are currently 52.6 million domestic workers globally with more than 80 per cent of all domestic workers being women. They face many challenges including very low wages, excessively long hours, the absence of a weekly rest day, risks of physical, mental and sexual abuse and restrictions on freedom of movement. These problems can be partly attributed to gaps in national labour and employment legislation and often reflect long-standing discrimination along the lines of sex, race and social position. Our global strategy consists, inter alia, of promoting the ratification and implementation of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and Recommendation (No. 201); strengthening national capacities and institutions including policy and legislative reforms; and facilitating the organization of domestic workers and their employers.

Third, decisive action should be taken to regulate recruitment agencies. From a wider view, the “migration business” has become extremely lucrative. So much so that recruitment agents, overseas employment promoters and a host of other legal and illegal intermediaries often taking advantage of the women’s lack of access to accurate and realistic information as well as legal protection. The fees charged by agents are commonly exorbitant, so that the women and their families often go into long-term debt or sell their property to pay these fees. This largely unregulated process can increase the vulnerability of women migrating for work into situations of trafficking. The ILO Convention on Private Employment Agencies (No. 181) offers an international framework for action.

Fourth, there should be no complacency for human trafficking and forced labour. Trafficking in human beings – male and female adults and children – has grown in scope and magnitude to such an extent that it is now the focus of international, regional and national counter-trafficking initiatives. Although there are no hard data because of the nature of the phenomenon, it is estimated that around 900,000 persons are trafficked across borders annually. Of particular concern is that the bulk of victims of trafficking are women and girls who end up in prostitution and sexual exploitation or in other exploitative forms of employment, forced labour, debt bondage or slavery. To address these issues, the ILO has placed on the agenda of next year’s International Labour Conference (2014) a standard-setting process on forced labour which includes in its definition human trafficking and will supplement the ILO’s existing Forced Labour Convention (No. 29).
Finally, we must act together to stop gender-based violence in the world of work. Violence against women represents an obstacle to development and implies significant costs for developing and developed countries alike. Coherent and effective labour laws and enforcement mechanisms are needed so that proactive laws as well as individual complaint-based mechanisms dissuade gender-based violence. There should be consistency between labour codes and criminal, civil or family laws and other bodies of law and governments need to remove obstacles to women’s access to justice, including labour justice.

Madame Chair,

No other form of sex discrimination violates so many fundamental human rights, as violence against women. Workplace violence and sexual harassment present a significant barrier to women accessing and progressing through the labour market, and therefore ILO will never tire in its efforts to eradicate it.

ILO stands ready to assist its tripartite constituents, and to cooperate fully with the whole UN family, to ensure a world free from violence against women and girls and promote full and productive employment and decent work for all.

Thank you!