

Women and working conditions

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The point that is often missed about contemporary manpower is that it is also woman-power.

Over the past two decades, the female workforce participation rate grew from 24.2 to 33.7 per cent in North America, from 22.7 to 28 per cent in Oceania and from 29.3 to 32.2 per cent in Europe.

In the OECD area, about two of every three workforce entrants between 1970 and 1981 were women — 30.3 million out of a total increase of 46.4 million.

The increased female participation in the labour force, however, has not yet been accompanied by a corresponding or equivalent move towards genuine sex equality at work.

That the world of labour is still a man's world is never more apparent than on payday. ILO findings show that in some countries men earn more than twice as much as women working in the same sector. In addition, the proportion of females in the "low-paid" category is much higher than that of men — up to three or four times.

Women's problems at the

At least three out of ten workers are women. Most of them complain—and rightly so—that they are "segregated" to a small number of sectors and occupations in which they generally hold unskilled, low-paid, repetitive and stressful jobs, offering little stability and few career opportunities. But salutary measures to change this situation can be speeded up by women themselves.

workplace, their reasons and possible solutions are discussed in a new study just published by the ILO.

work and the advent of the "electronic office" may be a mixed blessing for them. The new technology makes some jobs some interesting and challenging, while other become more boring and unrewarding. The trouble is that men usually reap the benefits and women are assigned to stressful, low-skilled posts.

Moreover, the ranks of working mothers are swelling. For instance, the employment rate of mothers with children under 3 years of age is 32 per cent in the Federal Republic of Germany, 43 per cent in France and 80 per cent in the German Democratic Republic.

When they finish work, these women have a second shift to do at home. Even in Sweden where it was recognised early on that family roles need to be restructured, some "51 per

cent of women and only 18 per cent of men spend 20 hours or more a week on household tasks and child care," the study reports.

Recent years have seen many improvements in employment and working conditions of women but a lot remains to be done, particularly with respect to equality of opportunity and treatment.

Women workers can and should help accelerate salutary measures that need to be taken to this end by joining trade unions and through them, the democratic process of collective bargaining which is a "fundamental tool for improving working conditions of wage earners", the study urges.

Take the wages gap. Its underlying reasons are fairly well known and ILO standards proposing ways to overcome these difficulties have been adopted by many countries. Yet it is

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at the plant level that employers and workers have to get down to the nitty-gritty negotiations that translate ideas into reality.

Unfortunately, women's participation in trade union activities is far below that of men. "It is still inhibited by lack of time owing to an overburdened schedule (at work and at home), the high rate of turnover in monotonous and unskilled jobs and the large proportion of women among part-timers and homeworkers", the study says.

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