

Panel Discussion - “Public services for gender equality and the empowerment  
of women and girls”

Topic Introduction – Ms. Laura Addati, International Labour Organization

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Excellences,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Introduction

It is an honour to introduce the subject of this important panel discussion - the role of public services in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. I thank UN Women for the opportunity to share the ILO’s perspective on the need to ensure the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adequate quality of public services.

The ILO’s Decent Work Agenda is grounded on a range of international labour standards that are relevant to all the three interrelated areas of this year’s priority theme. These standards include fundamental workers’ rights, such as freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, non-discrimination and equal remuneration, as well as social protection, working conditions and occupational safety and health, decent work for nursing personnel and domestic workers. The ILO is also engaged in setting an international standard on violence and harassment in the world of work.

The ILO has just marked the celebration of its first centenary in 2019 by the publication of the Global Commission Report on the Future of Work launched

at the UN yesterday. As part of its human-centred agenda, the report stresses that **“Gender equality begins in the home”** and calls for a **transformative and measurable agenda for gender equality** that relies on greater investment in the care economy. This includes **public investments in quality care services, decent work policies for care workers, and revaluing and formalizing paid work in care sectors.**

### Investing in quality care jobs

**Investing in more and decent care work can be a strategic policy intervention** to fulfil the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, including: achieving universal health coverage, with quality maternity and sexual and reproductive health and rights, education for all and gender equality.

In particular, **investing in quality care jobs** will address the unfair valuation of women’s work, both paid and unpaid; attracting and keeping more women in employment and breaking occupational segregation. **The unequal distribution of unpaid care is the main barrier to women’s access to decent work.** In 2018, 606 million women (in contrast to only 41 million men) were either unavailable for employment or not seeking a job due to unpaid care work.

Transforming the care economy will also **support closing the gender pay gap**, which stands for about 20 per cent at the global level, as estimated by the ILO’s Global Wage Report published in November.

The ILO estimates that the care economy could **create 269 million new jobs around the world by 2030 compared with 2015 levels.** Of those jobs, 120 million would be in education, health and social work. Ensuring that these care jobs are decent requires doubling current levels of investment in care sectors by 2030.

### Shortcomings of current public services globally

The Report of the Secretary-General on the priority theme indicates that progress has been made in women's and girls' access to public services, particularly health and education. Also many countries are implementing universal health coverage reforms. However, gaps and inequalities are widespread.

**Affordability remains a key challenge.** The privatization of services and the application of user fees and co-payments on public services, especially in the health sector, have a disproportionately negative impact on low-income women. **The quality of public services and the removal of non-financial barriers**, such as physical distance, transportation and discrimination in health and education settings, are also crucial, especially for indigenous, Afrodescendent and migrant women, women with disabilities, single mothers and older women.

**Quality of public services means quality of public care jobs.** Care workers are the faces and hands of public service delivery. This is an important factor for gender equality, since care jobs are a significant source of employment, particularly for women. Globally, women constitute 60 per cent of the education workforce and almost 70 per cent of the health and social work sector. Similar to other sectors, women are underrepresented in leadership positions and decision-making, but overrepresented in **frontline service delivery**, such as nursing, teaching and midwifery, as well as among community health workers. Their capacity to deliver quality care is often compromised by low wages, poor and unsafe working conditions, lack of social protection, exposure to violence and harassment and lack of voice,

representation and access to collective bargaining. Domestic and migrant workers particularly vulnerable to decent work deficits.

Other types of services are also essential but remain insufficiently available and underfunded. Coordinated, multisectoral services for women and girls who are survivors of violence and public care services are crucial, in particular universal, quality childcare services and long-term care. Globally, gross enrolment ratios in early childhood education services for children under 3 was only 18.3 per cent in 2015. Long-term care services are close to non-existent, with very few exceptions. In their absence, an estimated 57 million unpaid workers are providing the bulk of long-term care work globally, the large majority of whom are women. This is also found in the context of HIV and AIDS.

### Conclusion

As a conclusion, delivering accessible, adequate and quality public services means investing in a high road to care work that builds in what the ILO has defined the **5R Framework for Decent Care Work**: recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work; reward paid care work, by promoting more and decent work for care workers; and guarantee care workers' representation, social dialogue and collective bargaining.

As the ILO celebrates its 100 years of advancing social justice and promoting decent work for all women and men, we stand ready to make our contribution in shaping this important agenda.

Thank you.