

This document is an excerpt from:

ILO International Training Centre, Module on Gender, Poverty and Employment

The approach of the ILO to action against poverty and through a gender perspective may be summarized in three main arguments:

Main arguments

First, when addressing poverty, it is necessary to deal with employment. Poverty may be traced to different patterns of employment and to obstacles which individuals face in earning and securing their income. Similarly, access to productive employment is also the most effective way of breaking out of poverty.

Secondly, it is critically important to look into and address the specific situation of women. While there are similar processes that bring about poverty among men and women, there are processes which are gender-specific and cannot be explained solely by social class, ethnicity or household membership. Some processes which lead to women's poverty are different from those that lead to men's. At the same time, poor women are more vulnerable than poor men, and find it more difficult to escape from poverty.

Thirdly, while the poverty of women is closely linked to the pattern of their employment and to their status in the labour market, economic policies are not sufficient to bring about the needed change. Effective action requires, in addition, a favourable global framework promoting equality of opportunity and treatment between men and women workers. Promoting such a framework entails legal and policy reform at the national level and effective enforcement measures in addition to improving the social bargaining power of women through organization and participation. This three-pronged strategy synthesizes ILO's approach to action against poverty.

Actions in interrelated areas

Breaking out of poverty, hence, requires both policy changes and direct actions in a number of interrelated areas:

- positive action for promoting an overall environment for equality of opportunity and treatment between men and women at work; the ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), sets the principles for such a framework;
- strengthening the organizational and negotiating capacity of the poor, so that they can defend their interests and secure lasting improvements in their situations;
- expanding women's access to wage employment opportunities;
- access to financial resources for consumption and for capital investment;
- improving the human capital base of the poor through training in order to enhance their ability to respond to market opportunities and to raise productivity;
- access to land and other assets, the availability of which determine the returns to self-employed women in the rural farming and non-farm activities, and in the urban informal sector;
- extending social protection and improving conditions of work in jobs that are unregulated and unprotected.

Policy reform and direct interventions: A complementary duo

Improving opportunities in all these areas requires policy reform and direct targeted programmes.

Direct programmes ensure effective outreach and implementation of policy decisions, especially when socially disadvantaged and “invisible” groups are concerned; they can provide interim support to the poor while the full effects of a redistributive development strategy are being worked through; they can form part of support mechanisms required by the poor in a transitional and adjustment situation; they can help to bring about necessary enhancement of the capabilities of the poor; they can directly improve the worst manifestations of poverty; and they can also provide avenues for broader policy changes. Similarly, major policy and institutional reforms are often required in order to ensure that direct programmes achieve their objectives on a sufficiently large and meaningful scale.

Programmes to promote new economic activities among the poor and to raise productivity in existing activities have the best chance of success when they are accompanied by changes which ensure a supportive institutional and policy environment.

A favourable policy environment for positive action for equality of opportunity between men and women facilitates the introduction and effectiveness of gender-sensitive poverty eradication strategies. It also prepares the ground for reform of the legal framework which often replicates the underlying social discriminatory