

STATEMENT

58th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women
Side Event on Trafficking – Council of Europe and Mission of Austria



International
Labour Office

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STATEMENT BY

Beate Andrees
Head, Special Action Programme Against Forced Labour

***Trafficking in human beings - a severe form of violence against women
and girls and a flagrant violation of human rights:
the Council of Europe response***

Dear Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished participants,

I would like to thank the Council of Europe and the Austrian Chair for inviting the ILO to join this eminent panel. As the organisers of this event pointed out in their invitation letter, the Council of Europe Convention against trafficking “is a far-reaching treaty which goes beyond the minimum standards agreed upon in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons”. That’s indeed the case.

Having acted as an observer to the committee which drafted the Convention, I recall the passionate interventions made by human rights defenders to ensure legal guarantees for victims of trafficking. The drafters of the Convention did not fall short of those high expectations. Its adoption in 2005 was a landmark in the global fight against trafficking and the promotion of a human rights based approach.

Six years later, the ILO’s International Labour Conference adopted a new Convention on Domestic Workers – another major milestone in the struggle to ensure decent work for all. For the first time in ILO’s history, domestic workers received the

recognition they deserve as workers; workers, who add significant value to our economies, who have become indispensable in the global labour market and who often leave their own families behind to seek decent employment abroad.

The ILO estimates that there are at least 53 million domestic workers in the labour market today, but given the often informal nature of domestic work, their number may well be higher. We also expect that their numbers are growing, and so is their abuse. Every year, thousands of them become victims of human trafficking and end up in situations similar to slavery. Many of them pay extortionate recruitment fees only to find out that their wages will never make up for the debts they have incurred. In May this year, the ILO will release new estimates of illegal profits generated by forced labour and trafficking. All the indicators are that private households illegally save millions in unpaid wages every year. This is money that should go to domestic workers and their families. It is money that could lift some of these families out of poverty, but cannot.

In addition to being cheated, many domestic workers also endure severe violence and psychological abuse. Immigration policies that tie migrant domestic workers to one particular employer, what is sometimes called “sponsorship system”, create an environment that is conducive to such kind of abuse.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

The ILO has always promoted a comprehensive approach to trafficking: we need to make sure that offenders are behind bars. But it is equally important to prevent the crime from happening, to protect victims and all those who are potentially at risk. Doctors say that prevention is better than cure. It is less costly, it reduces the risk of disease and it benefits us all. We may not always like what our doctors tell us but they are usually right.

Implementing the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers can go a long way to prevent domestic servitude and to reaffirm the dignity of domestic workers as workers.

They are not family; they are not helping out – they are workers who have rights. This is the essence of the Domestic Workers Convention. It establishes the rules of the game, stipulates the conditions of decent recruitment and employment and calls for special protection of migrant domestic workers. Where countries have started ratifying and implementing the Convention, the game for unscrupulous employers has changed. This also includes diplomats from within our ranks, and we just heard the example of Austria.

Twelve ILO member States have already done so, many more are exploring ways to do so, and we need all to take action. We owe this to the women, girls, boys and men who do the chores behind closed doors, who go hungry at the end of the day and who don't earn enough to sustain their families.

I would also like to take this opportunity to commend the governments of India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Jordan and Lebanon that participate in ILO's new Work in Freedom Programme which will seek to prevent trafficking of at least 100,000 women and girls.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

There are at least 21 million victims of forced labour, trafficking and slavery today, according to ILO's most recent count. They are exploited in the sex industry, in private homes, sweatshops, in agriculture and in construction, on fishing vessels and in many other, often informal sectors of the economy. Women and girls make up for the majority of all victims.

The sheer scale of forced labour and its stubborn persistence convinced ILO member States – governments, workers and employers – to place the issue on the agenda of the International Labour Conference in June this year. The purpose is to discuss a new instrument supplementing ILO's Forced Labour Convention No. 29 to address contemporary forms of forced labour, such as human trafficking and domestic servitude, and to strengthen prevention, protection and compensation.

Whatever the decision of the Conference will be, the discussion presents a unique opportunity to raise the bar in the struggle against trafficking and forced labour, similar to what member States of the Council of Europe did nine years ago. We cannot afford to miss this opportunity. 21 million victims of forced labour give us 21 million reasons to act.

Thank you for your attention.