Speech draft

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Good afternoon! Thank you for giving me the opportunity for this intervention. I’d like to make a few points about protecting women’s economic, social and cultural rights, especially the right to work in the post-Covid-19 era.

As statistics and various research show, Covid-19 has far more negative impact on women’s right to work and other economic, social and cultural rights. It is however important to note that the Covid-19 is not the cause, it merely strengthened the already existing structural and systematic gender inequalities in our society and daily life. The pandemic makes these gender inequalities more visible like a magnifying glass.

Now we are at the transition period towards the post-Covid era, if we sincerely want to promote a “gender responsive recovery”, then it really is the time for our society to take this rare opportunity to identify the problems that have been missed and address them.

Gender equality is not a new issue and tremendous efforts have been made at the international and national level. But if we look at the international standards or national practices on the right to work and other human rights from a gender perspective, we’ll find these standards and practices are mainly based on the life experience and opinions of men. The life experience and opinions of the other half of the population, women, is often ignored or excluded. Therefore, some gender-blind spots are almost inevitable.

Here, I’d like to identify 3 major blind spots as the follows and wish to call the attention of the international society and member states to address these issues in addition to other problems such as poverty:

The first blind spot is that the economic and social value of unpaid care work by women at home is not recognized. It has two major consequences on women’s rights: first, the disproportionate share of unpaid care work at home overconsumes women’s time, energy and health, and consequently affects women’s performance at workplace, which reduces women’s income and in turn strengthens the stereotype that women are less capable than men. During the pandemic, we can see the load of housework increased significantly because of the control measures and women undertook the majority of the increased care work at home. As a result, women’s job performance can be affected. Research shows, for example, that female scholars publish much less during the pandemic, while male scholars published even more. My own experience also matches this finding. Second, in most countries, women are not compensated in any form for their care work in the family. The mainstream economic indicators such as GDP, do not take into account the economic contribution of women’s care work at home. This increases women’s economic and social vulnerability. And above all, it is just not fair.

The second blind spot is that the paid care jobs at the labor market, such as nursing, domestic work, are mainly undertaken by women and seriously undervalued and underpaid because they are often considered as female jobs. During the pandemic, women in care economy are among the most affected due to the irregularities of the care jobs and weak protection of social security these jobs provide.

The third blind spot is that the mainstream understanding of what constitutes the equal right to work is based on the principle of merits-based (or performance-based) workplace, which appears to be a fair standard but in fact put women at disadvantage at the workplace. The merits-based evaluation system is the product of men’s experience and way of thinking. For example, men can separate work and life, while women often need to work and take care of family at the same time such as answering phone calls from children’s school during the work time. Also, what is considered as “merits” is often patriarchy. Moreover, this merits-based evaluation system ignores the fact that women have far less workplace resources than man, including time, energy, transportation means, financial resources, digital skills and social network.

So, my suggestions are as the follows. First of all, policy makers need to recognize how the existing rules and social security system disempower women and find a way to change it.

Second, the economic contribution of unpaid care work should be counted and care takers should be compensated with remuneration and social security benefits. States should also support a redistribution of unpaid care work between family members, and between society and family. Measures can include encouraging employers to provide flexible work time to workers with family responsibilities, or supporting the care business, or providing care service by social security system, and developing Artificial Intelligence for care service., etc.

Third, as regards the low compensation and poor social protection of care jobs, States can reconsider the principle of “equal pay for work of equal value”, finding ways to improve the income of care workers, such as introducing minimum wages, strengthening the representation of care workers and their bargaining power, and encouraging men entering care economy by financial means, etc.

Forth, States need to take measures to tackle the gender inequalities in resources distribution, both in public and within family. For example, public transportation needs to pay more attention to women’s needs, especially women in disadvantaged groups. For another example, public investments can prioritize those sectors more likely to create jobs equally for men and women. Policies need to make to tackle the digital divides between men and women, and to enhance women’s digital skills, and to support women and girls in STEM sectors.

Fifth, more work needs to be done to tackle and eliminate gender violence at workplace, including sexual harassment and domestic violence that can seriously affect women’s right to work and other rights. For example, the national laws should require employers to take responsibility to deal with domestic violence related to the workplace. When work from home and distant work is more common nowadays, non-conventional gender violence, like sexual harassment and violence in the cyber space, needs particular attention and national laws need to adapt to these new forms of gender violence as quickly as possible.

I think time is up. Thank you very much for your attention.