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Feb. 2004

World Mental Health Day - 10 October 2000

Symposium on Work and Mental Health

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Opening remarks by

Mr. Juan Somavia, Director-General, International Labour Organization

I am very happy that this Symposium is taking place here in the ILO. Already there are extremely positive echoes about the work you have been doing over the last couple of days. It is most important to come together with our different backgrounds, to pool our experience and reflect on how we can really make a difference. We need to do this because work and mental health is at the core of what is going on in the world today. So it is a great pleasure to welcome you to this celebration of World Mental Health Day and I thank the World Federation for Mental Health, the WHO and ILO colleagues for organizing this event.

Everywhere work is central to the lives of women and men. They are affected whether they are unemployed or underemployed or overworked; by the social and physical environment of work; by the loss of work, by the level of security they might count on when they cannot work. Work takes on another dimension when mental health issues are involved. People with problems may have to stop working - or, as you know only too well, they may go on working without being able to acknowledge the situation. Prejudices may bar them from work or working conditions may be part of the problem.

I firmly believe that the bottom line of economic activity is how it translates into the quality of people's lives. Work is about people and it depends on people so that mental health and illness are workplace issues.

And for the ILO, mental health and mental illness are, more specifically, "decent work" issues. Our view is that there is a glaring deficit of decent work in today's global economy. What does this mean? First, that we need more work through which people can earn a decent living. It must also be work which respects human dignity by respecting their basic rights - freedom of association and collective bargaining, freedom from forced labour and child labour and, not least, freedom from discrimination which is so relevant to these discussions. Decent work also means giving people protection against contingency and vulnerability when they cannot work, as well as protection at work. And finally they must be able to engage in dialogue about the issues that affect their work lives. Decent work reflects people's aspirations - for people with mental health difficulties, as for everyone else, decent work is a fundamental concern.

People with mental health difficulties may also bear a social burden. Again, you know this better than anyone else. Mental illness often carries a social stigma that reaches into the workplace. Those with difficulties face greater problems getting and keeping jobs compared to people with other types of disability. They may be excluded from the job market because of prejudices about their capacity to work even when they have recovered or when their disability is perfectly under control. In real terms - that is to say, in terms of people's lives - this means that they frequently end up isolated and impoverished, suffering from low morale, persistent anxiety and stress.

But we all know that the effects go beyond the individual and his or her family. Employers feel the costs in terms of low productivity, absenteeism, high rates of staff turnover, increased costs of recruiting and training and, ultimately, reduced profits. Where the person in difficulty is the owner, especially of a small enterprise, the ultimate price may be business collapse. For governments, there are the costs of health care and insurance payments and the loss of income at the national level.

Our research in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Finland shows that what we are dealing with is not at all a marginal phenomenon. On the contrary, it is a significant and growing problem which needs to be checked. The human cost is high enough in the countries I mentioned - but imagine what the situation is like where there are no disability pensions, no protection against such contingencies, no social support systems. The majority of working age people do not have access to the kind of assistance and institutions that may be available in the developed world. I think that we must also deal with the realities of developing countries which are equally touched by these problems.

Today, we are operating in a particularly challenging environment for work and mental health. The global economy has triggered a widespread malaise. There is a sense of insecurity and uncertainty and these feelings are often connected to work. People are having to deal with issues such as the informalization of employment, the loss of jobs, the precariousness of new jobs or the plain absence of new jobs. The opportunities opened up by new technology also come with new stress factors. At the same time, old social protection mechanisms are coming under threat.