Future She Deserves Salon: “Preventing Gender-Based Violence”

4 February 2016

U.S. Mission, Geneva

The IOE attended the first event in the 2016 Salon Series under the title “Future She Deserves”, which explored the theme of gender-based violence. The Salon opened with a keynote speech by Nazir Afzal OBE, former Chief Crown Prosecutor for the North West of England, a global leader on child protection and on addressing violence against women and girls. The Salon continued with small group discussions on the following:

- The reasons behind gender-based violence;
- What can be done to end gender-based violence; and
- In this respect, what has worked (and what has not)

Considerable progress has been made over the past decade in the international community’s ability to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, particularly in emergency situations. Yet, despite increasing awareness and existing global policies, plans of action and initiatives, gender-based violence continues to be a global epidemic that represents not only a moral issue but also a security, stability, prosperity, public health and human rights concern for every country.

Discussions within groups during the salon demonstrated that gender-based violence is unfortunately ingrained in many cultures and that patriarchal cultures and deep-rooted behaviours have been key in perpetuating gender-based violence in homes. The IOE shared the organisation’s commitment on the issue as well as good examples regarding preventing and combating violence at the workplace. For instance, many companies have harassment policies. Some companies also provide counselling services to their employees who have been victims of violence.

When discussing what works and what has not, many participants agreed that laws have not been the best means in preventing gender-based violence. While there are laws in many countries concerning violence against women and men, these laws tend to be limited in scope and have not been duly implemented or enforced in their countries. For laws to be duly implemented and enforced, there is a need for society to change its patriarchal mindsets and deep-rooted condescending behaviours against women. Changing mindsets requires raising awareness and educating society on the scope of the problem and its impact, especially at an early age, which will result in zero tolerance against gender-based violence and violence in general. The need to strengthen prevention efforts and improve services for survivors of violence was also highlighted during the discussions.

However, the utility of having an ILO international labour standard to address gender-based violence needs to be better reflected upon in this context. International labour conventions create binding obligations on countries that ratify them. They are powerful instruments. But not every problem can best be resolved by a legal response, so when considering potential new
standards, the Organization should also explore other options for addressing problems. While this is a serious issue of concern for all, international labour standards are not necessarily the best or only means to combating gender-based violence.

ILO standard-setting on this issue would require in-depth reflection and analysis on a wide range of questions notably on the scope of violence (whether we are referring to physical violence or other forms of violence such as harassment), the relevant victims (women and girls, or will we also include the LGBT community) as well as the issue of privacy at the workplace (whether the privacy of employees will be encroached if companies need to deal with domestic violence). Without due consideration of the above, as well as other pertinent issues, ILO standards risk being irrelevant and counter-productive towards preventing gender-based violence.

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