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to as being in “vulnerable employment” because, unlike most employees, they are subject to a high level of job insecurity and do not have safety nets to cover them during periods when they are out of work or unable to work (due to sickness, for example). For own-account workers the returns from work are often very low and their work situation is generally more sensitive to economic fluctuations and cycles, while for contributing family workers there are no cash returns. Informality of work characterizes these types of employment (see the discussion below on the informal sector and informal employment).6

Employment in the two categories considered as vulnerable employment is most prevalent among women and men in Eastern and Western Africa (figure 4.5). In Northern Africa and certain sub-regions of Asia, namely South-Eastern Asia, Southern Asia and the CIS in Asia, vulnerable employment is also prevalent among employed women, exceeding 40 per cent. In these sub-regions, higher proportions of women are in vulnerable employment compared to men, mainly due to large numbers of contributing family workers among the former. Vulnerable employment is not as common (less than 20

6 See also United Nations, 2009c.


Note: Unweighted averages; the numbers in brackets indicate the number of countries averaged. The average for Eastern Asia does not include China. Western Asia excludes Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; CIS in Asia includes the aforementioned countries plus Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Box 4.4
The importance of the status in employment classification

The key dimensions underlying the International Classification of Status in Employment (ICSE) are: (1) the economic risk involved in the job and (2) the type of authority over establishments and other workers. Reflecting these dimensions, the classification provides an important basis for understanding the structure of labour markets and the effects of this structure on poverty and gender equality. Two recent developments underscore the importance of ICSE.

First, the statistical definition of informal employment was approved by the 17th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 2003. Informal employment as defined is a job-based concept, and an important criterion for identifying workers in informal employment is their status in employment (see also box 4.5).

Second, at least two indicators for monitoring the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) rely on the status of employment classification. In Goal 1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger), a specific indicator is the proportion of own-account and contributing family workers in total employment; and in Goal 3 (promote gender equality and empower women), a new supplementary indicator was recommended that would cover all status in employment categories cross-classified by formal/informal and agricultural/non-agricultural employment.

The importance of an up-to-date classification of status in employment can not be over-emphasized. As conditions of employment are changing globally, there is increasing recognition that the current classification, ICSE-93, is no longer adequate. Many employment arrangements in both developed and developing countries do not fit easily into one or the other of the current status in employment categories. Thus, in 2008, the 18th ICLS recommended that the ILO Bureau of Statistics undertake methodological work for a revision of the ICSE that would better reflect contemporary realities of the labour market and the associated economic and social concerns.c

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