

Gender Issues at the Workplace

The discussion on gender issues in the workplace is one that continues to engage various interest groups, including trade union representatives, advocates and champions of both women and men's rights, and indeed some social commentators. It would appear that in most instances when the discussion is engaged, there is a tendency to address the issues of sexual harassment and gender equality.

The engaging discussion on these two specific topics is driven by the fact that there is the continued perception that women are being disadvantaged and discriminated in the workplace. This makes for interesting debate, given the fact that women have been integrated into the workforce, and furthermore, have been empowered.

Barbados can boast of the fact that it is one country where the law of the land provides for the equality of treatment for both male and female workers. Be this as it may, there are some who will claim that there are instances where equality of treatment does not prevail. There may be merit in this contention, given allegations of poor treatment that is said to be meted out to those who work as domestics.

In recent years, women have been competing fiercely with men for job placement. As in the case of Barbados, there is a great numbers of females who are both enrolling and graduating from the University of the West Indies They are now working in jobs that traditionally were once male dominated, and moreover, are beginning to assume more leadership and management roles.

Based on the trend, can a case be made that females are being disadvantaged, marginalized and discriminated against? Is it that the alleged discrimination against women is being overtaken by workplace violence, sexual harassment and domestic violence?

In gauging the extent to which any one is, or all of these are significant issues, it requires that any conclusions drawn are supported by evidence. Emotionalism will not advance the cause championed by those who advocate on the behalf of either male or female groups. They ought not to be an apparent divide or bias shown by the male and female groups who promote and champion gender issues.

It is expected that the labour movement as the representative of workers and a promoter of fairness and justice, would be in the forefront of addressing gender issues at all levels. It is therefore not per chance that the movement pays serious attention to

issues such as gender equity, equality of opportunity and treatment in occupation and employment.

Trade unions worldwide are guided by the standards set by the International Labour Organization (ILO). For example, on the subject of gender equity, the ILO pronounces that "Gender equity means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs and interests. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities." (ABC of Women Workers' Rights and Gender Equality, Second Edition).

Should the ILO Convention No. 111 on 'Discrimination' be observed, then there should be less worry about emerging gender workplace issues. Discrimination in the Convention No. 111 is defined as 'any distinction, exclusion or preference based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality or treatment in employment or occupation.'" (ABC of Women Workers' Rights and Gender Equality, Second Edition).