

The Working Poor

Information drawn from the Centre of Poverty Research in the United States of America indicated that "In 2012, 46.5 million people were poor. The majority of the people who live below the poverty level do not work. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 10.6 million or 23 percent of the poor were "working poor."

The working poor are people who spend 27 weeks or more in a year "in the labor force" either working or looking for work but whose incomes fall below the poverty level.

In 2012, 4.4 million people who usually work full-time were working poor. Of these, 84 percent experienced at least one labor market problem (unemployment, involuntary part-time employment or low wages (defined as less than \$337.92 per week)."

In the absence of access to current statistical data for the Caribbean, and based on the level of the high levels of unemployment and underemployment, it may not be farfetched to conclude that in a region that has a population of approximately 8 million people, there are existing pockets of the working poor. To all intents and purposes the level wages paid to those at the bottom of the employment ladder makes it easy to reach the conclusion of the nature and severity of the problem. For example, there is no established national minimum wage in Barbados, but those who work as Shop Assistant earned Bds \$6.25 per hour, which is equivalent to US \$3.12.

The debate of who constitute the working poor has its relevance and place, but what is of immediate importance is what is being done to reduce the level of poverty which is being experienced across the region. The acute nature of the problem of poverty and unemployment in the Caribbean region was highlighted in a study commissioned by the ILO Sub-regional Office for the Caribbean. The statistical study of "the working poor" covering eight countries: The Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago.

The study revealed some interesting findings. It confirmed that a significant number of employed persons are poor. It however makes the startling revelation that proportions range between 29% for Guyana and 12% for Saint Kitts and Nevis, with the Bahamas and Barbados as exceptions. In the case of Barbados, most middle class worker would dismiss this as an assumption, on the reality that they exist from pay cheque to pay cheque.

The Working Poor: Dennis de Peiza, Labour Management Consultant: Regional Management Services Inc., 20 March 2015

The conclusion that males dominate the working poor in most countries seems a logical conclusion notwithstanding the fact both men and women are among the working poor, males. According to the research findings, the highest proportions of males are in Dominica (66%) and Trinidad and Tobago (12%). Based on the current trends where large number of young men now sit on the block in Barbados, and in the light of the permanency of this action, since they generally speak of not working for anyone, the possibility exists that Barbados could soon be posing a challenge to the Dominica.

Coming out of the research, the observation was made that the working poor are clustered in the 25 to 44 age group. This group denotes the most productive members of the workforce. It would seem that this group is more or less economically depressed, disenfranchised and marginalized.

One point of interest is that the study unearthed that the working poor have lower levels of education. In all countries, the majority of the working poor have only a primary level education e.g. 83% in Jamaica and 79% in Dominica; and only 2% to 8% have tertiary level education. In the case of Barbados some may want to challenge the accuracy of this, based only on the grounds that every child in Barbados has access to free secondary education, and where Education is compulsory for children between the ages of 5 and 16.

History would recall that the term 'the working poor' was once ascribed to those who worked in agriculture. Caribbean people now find themselves in a dilemma; current lifestyles can sometimes make it almost difficult to determine who the working poor. It is the most vulnerable whose level of income places them way below the poverty line and are offered some measure of comfort by the social protection floor, or does it include that group of workers whose income is riddled by taxation and the high cost of living, which leave them with little or no disposal income?