

Women in the Workforce

The empowerment and rights of women at work has for a sustained period of time been championed by international bodies such as the International Labour Organization, governments and local nongovernmental organizations. Much time has been spent on promoting equal rights of women in the workplace. The bottom-line is that the elimination of discrimination against women lies at the core of this.

Barbados as a small island developing state with a population of approximately 275,000 people has been a leader in championing the cause of women. This dates back to 1943 when women were accorded the right to vote, entitled to hold public office and exercise all public functions established by national law on equal terms with men.

The World Bank measurements of 2014 indicated that women occupied 48.9 percent of the Barbadian workforce. In her address to mark the centenary of International Women's day in 2011, Dr. the Hon. Esther Byer Suckoo, Minister of Labour in Barbados, made the observation 'that though accounting for the majority of professionals in the workforce, women continue to be disproportionately represented in other key positions such as managerial, administrative and technical positions.' This is seemingly one of the vexing issues that continue to be associated with the gender debate in Barbados.

There is evidently a certain level of contradiction in the workplace when it comes to the practices which tend to infringe of the rights of women. The most contentious of these has been the discrimination of employment and occupation and equal pay for women. Dating as far back as 2007, all thirteen CARICOM Member States, with the exception of Suriname had ratified ILO Convention concerning Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, No. 111 (1958) and ILO Convention concerning Equal Remuneration, No. 100 (1951). Specifically, Barbados ratified both of these conventions in 1974. All thirteen CARICOM Member States had also ratified or acceded to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

It is amazing that pockets of discrimination against women in various forms in the workplace continue to exist in the workplace in the first quarter of the

21st century. It is more than a matter of passing interest that the subject of equal pay for women has become a campaign issue in 2016 Presidential Elections in the United States of America. As the super power of the developed and industrialized world, it is embarrassing and pathetic to think that this should be the case.

The Equal Pay Act of 1963 is a Federal Law of the United States of America. It aims to abolish wage disparity based on sex. The law in part provides that: 'No employer having employees subject to any provisions of this section [section 206 of title 29 of the United States Code] shall discriminate, within any establishment in which such employees are employed, between employees on the basis of sex by paying wages to employees in such establishment at a rate less than the rate at which he pays wages to employees of the opposite sex in such establishment for equal work on jobs, the performance of which requires equal skill, effort, and responsibility, and which are performed under similar working conditions, except where such payment is made pursuant to (i) a seniority system (ii) a merit system (iii) a system which measures earnings by quantity or quality of production; or (iv) a differential based on any other factor other than sex.'

To simplify it even more, The Equal Pay Act requires that men and women in the same workplace are given equal pay for equal work. The jobs need not be identical, but they must be substantially equal. Job content and not job titles determine whether jobs are substantially equal. All forms of pay are covered by this law. This extends to include salary, overtime pay, bonuses, stock options, profit sharing and bonus plans, life insurance, vacation and holiday pay, cleaning or gasoline allowances, hotel accommodations, reimbursement for travel expenses, and benefits. If there is an inequality in wages between men and women, employers may not reduce the wages of either sex to equalize their pay.

In Great Britain, the Equal Pay and Equality Act 2010 has been introduced to ensure the observance of ILO Conventions 111 and 100. The Act entitles a woman doing equal work with a man in the same employment to equality of pay and corresponding terms and conditions employment.

Statistics show that the global female labour force was estimated to be 1.3 billion in 2012, which accounted for approximately 39.9 per cent of the total labour force of 3.3 billion. Research points to the trend where women are moving out of agriculture in developing economies, out of industry in developed economies and into services. It is to be expected that as they compete for jobs, having all the requisite academic qualifications, skills and expertise, there can be no grounds for them to be discriminated against in any form or fashion.