

## Discrimination at Work in Africa

Discrimination in Africa is characterized by sharp contrasts. While there have been major advancements against racial segregation in some countries, gender inequality remains widespread. Also the growing number of migrant workers seeking better employment opportunities abroad has engendered hostility and anxiety in host societies resulting in greater discriminatory practices.

In addition to traditional forms of discrimination - some of it based on ethnicity or "caste"-new forms based on lifestyle and health status have emerged, especially concerning HIV/AIDS. Other forms of discrimination include social isolation, violence and verbal harassment or abuse.

Ensuring equality in the treatment of persons who work requires legislative frameworks and effective enforcement. In many African countries, the incompatibility between positive and customary justice systems may reinforce discrimination, especially against marginal groups. In some cases, customary law may even reinforce certain inequalities, especially involving women, including denial of their rights to property or other assets. In other cases, laws may even underpin ethnic-based structures of power.

### **GENDER INEQUALITY: A KEY ISSUE**

Most African women still earn less than men and are more likely to be trapped in low-paid, low-skilled jobs-often in the informal economy. Since 1994, the participation of women in the labour force has declined by 1.6%. On the plus side, the number of women in non-agricultural, paid employment over the past decade has increased by 3.5%.

Unemployment rates for both men and women in Africa have remained largely unchanged over the past decade, with women still maintaining lower levels at 7.6% compared to men at 9.1%. In relation to women elsewhere, unemployment rates of African women are lower than for women in the European Union, currently at 9.3%.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of women in high-status positions - called legislative, senior official or managerial (LSOM) jobs - has increased by nearly 3% over the past decade, reaching a level of 24.8%. When compared to the number of women in such positions throughout the world, which is estimated at 28%, the progress by African women can be seen as encouraging.

One of the more serious examples of gender-based discrimination involves violence, especially physical and sexual abuse. In Zimbabwe, a study in 2004 showed that 87.4% of girls with disabilities had been sexually abused; among them, 52.4% tested HIV positive. Studies in Namibia and Botswana delivered similar results.

### **OTHER FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION**

Caste systems still exist, sometimes in a work-related context. In Kenya, a subsection of the Samburu, known as the Ilkunono or blacksmiths, are despised and discriminated against. In the

Somali region of Ethiopia, the Midgo community is regarded as impure, unlucky, sinful and polluting, and survives economically thanks to remittances from abroad. In Nigeria, the Osu are seen as untouchable and socially rejected.

Rising employment opportunities and demand for skilled and unskilled labour is driving the high levels of migrants searching for work. Intensified labour migration, and the anxiety it engenders in host societies, have fuelled expressions of hostility against migrant workers. Recent studies in Europe reveal that discrimination in hiring and recruitment against second-generation younger immigrants in France is widespread, especially against those of North African origin.

In response to this heightened anxiety over migrant workers, trade unions around the world have increasingly taken steps to address their plight. For instance, there has been an increase in bilateral or multilateral agreements concluded by unions from origin and destination countries to assist migrant workers and combat their exploitation, one example being the agreement signed by Mauritanian and Spanish unions.

In terms of lifestyle and health status, new forms of discrimination are emerging. A recent study in South Africa on stigma and discrimination at the workplace showed that the greatest fear among people focused on relations with colleagues: three-quarters feared social isolation, 50 per cent mentioned rumours and gossip, 18 per cent verbal abuse. Around 90 per cent of workers surveyed agreed with the statement "if I have AIDS, people will avoid me". One-quarter of workers and 55 per cent of the workers' female partners or relatives said they were afraid of dismissal on account of AIDS.

### **ADDRESSING DISCRIMINATION**

In South Africa, a new, innovative initiative called "Preferential Procurement" helps create more opportunities for black- and women-owned enterprises by giving them preference during the letting of public tenders. The impact of such initiatives can be quite significant given that State and state-owned enterprises spent over \$123 billion on goods and services in 2004.

Preferential Procurement is part of a wider strategy adopted under the broad-based Black Economic Empowerment Act, 2003, to help transform the social landscape of South Africa.

In Namibia, the representation of previously racially disadvantaged men increased at the special/skilled/supervisory level, where they formed the dominant group, and the share of their female peers also improved. However, men, especially white men, dominated both top and senior management positions, while women, both white and black, were still under-represented. ■