

Discrimination at Work in the Middle East and North Africa

There have been some improvements in combating discrimination at work in the Middle East and North African region such as relaxing constraints on migrant workers and provisions in free trade agreements. However, progress has been uneven and in some areas, such as women's paid employment and treatment of migrants, the region is falling behind others.

The Middle East and North Africa region is both a source and destination for many migrant workers. The Gulf States have been attracting a growing number of Asian migrant labourers mainly in the areas of construction, domestic work and agriculture. Conversely, there is also a growing number of Northern Africans migrating to Europe in search of better work who are confronted by a growing hostility in those receiving countries.

More generally, women are still facing widespread challenges in entering the workforce. The rate for women's participation in the labour force has increased for the region by 4.5% over the past decade.

With such a diverse region in terms of social, cultural and religious backgrounds, there are some forms of discrimination that require new policies and responses by the governments and employers in the region. Discrimination based on social origin, religion and ethnicity are still active in the region as well as discrimination experienced by those from the region seeking work outside their country of origin.

GENDER GAPS

Gender still remains an area of great concern for harnessing the full productive potential of the region. Women's participation in the labour force and in paid employment has maintained an upward trend in almost all regions of the world at 56.6%. Unfortunately, the narrowing of gender gap in labour participation rates for North Africa and the Middle East has proven difficult. The rate remains stubborn at 32%, the lowest level among all regions.

There have been some positive improvements for women in the region. While the Middle East and North Africa may still have the lowest share of women in non-agricultural paid employment at 28.2%, the increase in this variable for the region has been strongest compared to all other regions, rising 3.7% over the past decade.

A good indication of a reduction in discriminatory hiring policies is women's employment in good quality jobs in legislative, senior official or managerial (LSOM) positions. Although women still represent a distinct minority in such positions in all regions, in the North Africa and Middle East region there has been an absolute percentage increase of almost 2% reaching a level of 11% in 2004.

In 2003, for women's gross enrolment rates in primary and secondary education were equal to the rate of men's enrolment. When looking at tertiary enrolment rates for women there are considerably higher than men in the region.

MIGRANT WORKERS

The plight of migrant workers is a growing concern, since foreign-born workers represent significant and rising proportions of the workforce in many countries. In some Gulf States migrants labourers, mostly from Asian countries, represent over 50 per cent of the workforce.

Jobs for female migrants are concentrated in less regulated sectors, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and unequal treatment than migrant men (e.g. agriculture, sex industry, domestic work). Domestic workers are comprised mainly of female migrants in the Gulf States. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries women migrants represent about 20-40 per cent of the migrant workforce, and come mostly from South and South-East Asian countries. In 2000, for example, 35,000 Sri Lankans and 7,000 Filipinas were employed as domestic workers in Jordan.

Although their working conditions vary enormously, these workers are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and abuse of all kinds, including harassment, violence by employers and coercion by employment agencies, forced labour, low wages and inadequate social coverage. Wage discrimination by nationality is also common in many countries in Asia and the Middle East (while workers from the Philippines earn relatively high wages, most Indonesian and Sri Lankan women are not paid the minimum wage).

There are many ways in which migrant workers' free choice of employment and access to the labour market are restricted. In Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Syrian Arab Republic, the system of work permits allows governments to limit access of foreigners to certain categories of jobs and to restrict the job choices of migrant workers. In some Arab States, foreign workers have limited rights to family reunification and reduced access to health insurance schemes. Saudi Arabia has adopted measures such as taxation on the recruitment of foreigners and taxation of foreigners to finance training programmes for nationals. Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have also introduced indirect taxes, especially health and surgery fees, for migrants.

DISCRIMINATION AT WORK

Religious discrimination is often worse in societies where no freedom of religion exists or where a state religion tends to disadvantage or exclude other religions. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, migrant workers who are not Muslim must refrain from public display of religious symbols such as Christian crosses or Hindu tilaka. Other forms of discrimination consist of job advertisements excluding applicants belonging to certain religious groups (Hindus in particular), or of preventing migrant workers from practising their religion openly. The situation of the Baha'i in the Islamic Republic of Iran has long been a subject of comment by both ILO and United Nations bodies.

One of the most resilient forms of discrimination is the targeting of Copts in Egypt, who are denied equal access to education and equal opportunities in recruitment and promotion. Very

few are appointed to key positions in the Government or are candidates for parliament. Enrolment of Copts in police academies and military schools is restricted, and very few are teachers and professors.

For Muslims in general and people from the Middle East region, workplace discrimination against Muslims in the industrialized world worsened over the past few years. Situations ranged from harassment or offensive comments concerning religious beliefs or practices to the refusal by employers to accommodate the needs of a person arising from his or her religion that may conflict with a requirement, qualification or practice.

Violence, discrimination and segregation, because of alleged "impurity" and inferiority, are a daily experience for millions of men and women in several regions of the world. Discrimination rooted in caste or similar systems of rigid social stratification has been observed in the Middle East. In Yemen, for example, the Al Akhdam is a socially condemned group treated as non-citizens and engaged in the disposal of human waste.

Discrimination may also make it more difficult for some younger workers, because of their sex, nationality, race or ethnic origin, or a combination of these, to find a job or get training or obtain equal pay for equal work. Studies reveal that discrimination in hiring and recruitment against men and women of North African origin in France is widespread.

Some positive steps in addressing discrimination at work have seen economic and trade policy working together. Jordan's signing of a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States reaffirm the parties "commitments under the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up", thus endorsing the principle of non-discrimination and equality at work. ■