



International
Labour
Organization



In conditions of freedom and dignity

Pathways to racial equality
in the world of work

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



► Executive summary

The Declaration concerning the aims and purposes of the International Labour Organization (Declaration of Philadelphia), adopted in 1944, proclaims that “all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity.”

Eighty years later, at the United Nations Summit of the Future in 2024, world leaders recognized that “our efforts to redress injustice and to reduce inequalities within and between countries to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies cannot succeed unless we step up our efforts to promote tolerance, embrace diversity and combat all forms of discrimination, including racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance”.¹ Following up on this renewed commitment to tackling racial discrimination, this report sheds light on racial inequalities in labour markets and policies intended to address them. Identifying a set of pathways for strengthening action towards racial equality in the world of work, this report seeks to promote social dialogue and policy reforms for ensuring and promoting equality of opportunity and treatment for all.

What is racial discrimination?

As defined by the 1966 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, “racial discrimination” is differential treatment on the grounds of race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin. In the context of the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), racial discrimination has been addressed primarily in relation to the prohibited grounds of race, colour and national extraction, all mentioned in that instrument. Convention No. 111 defines discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion or preference” based on a prohibited ground which has “the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation”.

Convention No. 111 recognizes that distinctions, exclusions or preferences based on genuine occupational requirements do not amount to discrimination. Employment decisions based on job-related factors such as experience, skills or efforts (commonly referred to as “merit”) are not only legitimate but essential for business success. However, such decisions should be unrelated to protected personal characteristics such as race, colour or national extraction, unless they are a genuine occupational requirement.

Combating discrimination: A necessity in diverse societies

Racial inequalities in labour markets remain pervasive and persistent. Most countries are ethnically diverse, but populations are also becoming more diverse as a result of human mobility. Migration for work and forced displacement are part of this reality. People find themselves in different social settings and may experience discrimination based on their racial or ethnic identity.

Equality and non-discrimination in employment and occupation is a universal human right. Implementing appropriate policies and measures to tackle racial discrimination in the world of work is indispensable for achieving social justice. Not taking such action has serious consequences for individuals, enterprises, labour markets and societies. Discrimination prevents people from developing their potential, skills and talents, and from being rewarded for their contributions on an equal footing with others, regardless of what type of employment or occupation they aspire to pursue. Discrimination hampers productivity and creates barriers to attracting and maintaining talent.

1 UN General Assembly, resolution 79/1, The Pact for the Future, [A/RES/79/1](#) (2024).

In contrast, diverse workplaces are more successful. Societies in which employment opportunities are accessible irrespective of racial or ethnic belonging, and where diversity is respected and valued, are better able to reduce inequalities and strengthen social cohesion and ultimately peace and stability.

Leveraging international labour standards for racial equality

Since the adoption of the Declaration of Philadelphia, the ILO has developed a range of international labour standards guiding action to eliminate discrimination in the world of work. Convention No. 111, adopted in 1958, is the first legally binding international instrument wholly dedicated to the elimination of discrimination in employment and occupation. The Convention addresses discrimination based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction and social origin, while also enabling States to determine additional prohibited grounds, after consulting employers' and workers' organizations.

In addition, specific ILO instruments address the rights of groups particularly vulnerable to racial discrimination, namely migrant workers and indigenous and tribal peoples. Furthermore, ILO standard-setting has focused on closing gaps in social and labour protection by including such groups, for example, through the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), and the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). Chapter 2 of the report presents the key features of Convention No. 111 and other international labour standards that guide action to combat racial discrimination and promote equality.

Understanding racial inequalities in the labour market

In-depth data collection and analysis are crucial for understanding inequalities and discrimination in the labour market. Reliable data provide a solid foundation for identifying trends, forecasting future developments and informing evidence-based policy decisions. Transparency and accessibility of these data are essential for ensuring that labour market interventions are grounded in empirical evidence rather than speculation or assumptions. This also ensures the legitimacy of these interventions and builds public trust.

Chapter 3 examines how different countries collect data disaggregated by race or ethnicity in labour force surveys, highlighting the methodological challenges and implications. Based on an analysis of data disaggregated by race or ethnicity from 47 countries available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Collection, the chapter then presents empirical evidence on differences in labour market outcomes between different racial or ethnic groups to illustrate these inequalities; discusses different methods for understanding the extent to which discrimination drives labour market inequalities along racial or ethnic lines; and presents results from applying the so-called decomposition method for selected countries to provide insights into the extent to which observed inequalities may be due to racial discrimination.

Across the countries analysed, indigenous and tribal peoples and people of African descent are consistently among the groups experiencing persistent and pronounced inequalities. Members of these and other disadvantaged racial or ethnic groups are more likely to be found in informal employment, elementary occupations and lower-paying jobs, and to experience unequal access to social protection. The decomposition analysis clearly points to racial discrimination being a factor behind inequalities as regards access to employment and earnings.

Prohibiting racial discrimination in employment and occupation

The establishment of an appropriate legal framework prohibiting racial and other forms of discrimination is fundamental to progress towards its elimination and the promotion of equal opportunities for all. Chapter 4 presents the results of a global legal mapping exercise carried out by the ILO. Most countries



have included equality and non-discrimination clauses in their constitutions, with more than 140 constitutions explicitly prohibit racial discrimination. At a global scale, labour legislation is the main vehicle for prohibiting discrimination in the workplace. In 139 of the 187 ILO Member States, labour legislation prohibits racial discrimination. In 21 of these countries, the protection against discrimination is incomplete because the legislation does not prohibit racial discrimination in all areas of employment and occupation. For example, there may be no protection during recruitment. In a range of countries, protection from racial discrimination at work is available under specialized equality legislation or human rights acts, rather than labour legislation.

Legal protection against racial discrimination may also be incomplete because labour or other legislation may not explicitly prohibit and define both direct and indirect discrimination. To date, this is the case in only 47 ILO Member States, the majority of which are in Europe, under the influence of the European Union's Equal Treatment Directives. The legislation of 33 other countries prohibits both direct and indirect discrimination, though without providing a legal definition for these concepts.

In addition, legal protection is often incomplete because the relevant legislation does not include provisions shifting the burden of proof in legal proceedings to the alleged discriminator once a prima facie case is established. Furthermore, the legislation may yet need to be adjusted to specifically address discrimination-based violence and harassment. Knowledge on how existing legislative provisions concerning equality and non-discrimination have been relied on, in practice, to address algorithmic discrimination in employment and occupation remains limited. Such knowledge will be needed to ensure that the legislation is fit for purpose (see Chapter 7).

Proactive measures to tackle structural and systemic discrimination

The persistence of racial inequalities in labour markets points to a need to reflect on ways to more proactively prevent and address racial and other intersecting forms of discrimination. In addition to ensuring effective legal protection for individual victims of discrimination, proactive measures are needed to tackle structural and systemic discrimination as a means of achieving equitable labour market outcomes for all. While the type and mix of measures will need to be tailored to circumstance, the report shows that national employment policies and public procurement policies have been underutilized to promote such objectives (Chapter 6).

A positive development to be noted is the increased attention to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion at the workplace level, including through adopting and implementing equality policies or plans. This is equally an area where more needs to be done to assess existing experiences, share lessons learned and build knowledge on what works in advancing equality of opportunity and treatment for groups vulnerable to racial discrimination (Chapter 5).

Pathways to racial equality: Taking action in the world of work

Racial discrimination is a denial of human rights, freedom and dignity. With the Declaration of Philadelphia as an enduring foundation, taking action against racial and any other discrimination and inequalities in the world of work is at the heart of the ILO's social justice mandate and vision for social progress. The ILO's constituents – governments, employers and workers – all have an important role and responsibility in this regard (see Chapter 8). Building on its findings and drawing on relevant international labour standards, the report proposes eight pathways to racial equality that ILO constituents and policymakers may wish to consider when taking action to promote equality of opportunity and treatment for all (see box ES1).



► **Box ES1. Pathways to racial equality: Taking action in the world of work**

1. Improving data availability

Enhancing the visibility of inequalities in the labour market through comprehensive collection and analyses of labour market data disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and other characteristics does not only require the expansion of labour force and household surveys to include racial or ethnic identifiers, but also the careful design of probabilistic samples to ensure that meaningful inferences can be drawn. With robust data, policymakers will be equipped to assess the extent of labour market inequalities and the impacts of barriers faced by individuals subjected to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. This is an essential first step in formulating effective policies for reducing structural inequalities.

2. Strengthening legal protection from racial and other discrimination

It is now timely for countries to review and strengthen their legal frameworks with a view to comprehensively prohibiting racial and other forms of discrimination in employment and occupation, including discrimination-based violence and harassment. Legislative protection should be available for all workers; it should cover indirect discrimination and include rules shifting the burden of proof in discrimination cases. Reforms should be informed by careful assessments of the functioning and effectiveness of existing legislation (including in relation to algorithmic discrimination) and be advanced in consultations with employers' and workers' organizations.

3. Proactively tackling structural discrimination

There is a need to take proactive measures for equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation across a wider range of socio-economic policies – including employment, social protection and labour migration policies – to overcome intergenerational disadvantage and structural labour market inequalities of groups vulnerable to racial discrimination. Tackling structural discrimination involves assessing whether and how existing policies and institutions, including labour institutions, effectively operate to reduce racial inequalities and discrimination. There is a need to develop theoretical and practical frameworks and tools for making such assessments.

4. Making employment policies responsive to racial inequalities

National employment policies need to move beyond general commitments to the principle of non-discrimination and formulate specific measures for labour market inclusion of groups vulnerable to discrimination, including racial or ethnic discrimination. A robust labour market analysis that considers the experiences of groups vulnerable to discrimination can provide a stronger foundation for such policies. Disaggregated labour market statistics by ethnicity (along with gender, disability and other relevant characteristics) is critical, as it highlights the specific challenges faced by different groups vulnerable to discrimination. Ensuring effective access to the measures, services, programmes and interventions for affected groups is crucial and can facilitate access to quality employment, on an equal footing with others. The level to which they do benefit from such access should be monitored through relevant results frameworks.



5. Facilitating economic opportunities

Supporting entrepreneurs from disadvantaged racial or ethnic groups through training and skills development and facilitating access to resources (such as credit and land) and to social public procurement are among the pathways for overcoming labour market exclusion. Documenting and evaluating such programmes, as well as sharing experiences and lessons learned, can play a vital role in strengthening initiatives and facilitating the replication or scaling up of successful interventions.

6. Strengthening workplace policies

Public and private employers around the world are pursuing efforts to promote equality, diversity and inclusion in their organizations and enterprises. In a range of countries, the legislation mandates certain workplace action. More recently, new pay transparency laws and policies – some of which specifically address intersectional pay discrimination – leverage the workplace-level interventions as indispensable for achieving change. Convention No. 190 refers to workplace policies as a means of action for preventing violence and harassment. Developing knowledge and evidence on the functioning and effectiveness of different types of workplace policies and sharing experiences and lessons learned will be critical for further promoting such policies and building appropriate regulatory or other frameworks guiding and supporting their design and implementation.

7. Walking the talk

Advancing racial equality in the world of work calls for efforts to promote equality, diversity and inclusion within the ILO constituents, namely governments and employers' and workers' organizations. As constituents' own institutions and organizations become more diverse and inclusive, and they strengthen their capacities to address equality and non-discrimination issues in the world of work, they can lead by example and foster social dialogue and cooperation to combat discrimination and advance equality, diversity and inclusion.

8. Social dialogue, voice and participation

The voice and participation of those affected by racial discrimination are crucial for ensuring policies and decisions address real needs. Their lived experiences provide valuable insights, fostering more equitable solutions. Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining and the related fundamental ILO Conventions – the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87), and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98) – are enablers for such voice and participation. The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), specifically recognizes the right of indigenous and tribal peoples to consultation and participation. Governments should establish dedicated mechanisms that enable institutionalized dialogue, meaningful consultation and active participation in decisions affecting their lives and communities.





Advancing social justice, promoting decent work

The International Labour Organization is the United Nations agency for the world of work. We bring together governments, employers and workers to drive a human-centred approach to the future of work through employment creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue.

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