

Achieving social justice

THE Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) joins United Nations (UN) members to commemorate World Day of Social Justice. This year's theme is "Achieving Social Justice through Formal Employment." The day is observed on February 20 annually, starting from 2008.

The day recognises the promotion of social justice and efforts to overcome the barriers that prevent social mobility, such as poverty, exclusion, gender inequality and unemployment. The theme for 2022 focuses on the longstanding inequalities of workers in the informal economy, who usually engage in jobs such as street-vending, home-based work, waste-picking and domestic jobs; this has been exacerbated by the covid19 pandemic. These workers often lack any form of social protection or employment-related benefits and are thus twice as likely to be underprivileged compared to formal workers.

Workplace discrimination continues to be the leading category for complaints received by the EOC. In 2021, 45 per cent of the complaints lodged at the offices of the EOC were under the category of employment. This means that employment complaints are almost equal to all of the other categories combined (employment, education, provision of goods and services and provision of accommodation). This contin-



ues the trend where, every year, employment tops the most lodged category list.

While the solution requires an all-hands-on-deck approach to address and end these inequalities, the EOC offers a small but significant avenue for redress for employees. All employees, whether in the informal or formal economy, are protected by the Equal Opportunity Commission and can lodge a complaint at the EOC if they have been discriminated against. This includes at the hiring stage or while on the job. The EOC will investigate and conciliate the complaint. This service is free of charge.

The EOC also offers free inclusivity training to organisations including guidance on internal policies that promote equality within the work place and even at the recruitment stage. A key part of these sessions is informing employees on their rights and, employers on their responsibilities to promote equality at the work place. These inclusivity obligations are required irrespective

of the sector, or whether it is part of the formal or informal economy.

Studies have shown that training is a key component of diversity management in the workplace. When done right, training raises awareness and nurtures a better understanding of the impact of discriminatory behaviour. Diversity and inclusion training also informs employees and managers about the steps they can take when they see or experience unfair treatment stemming from protected characteristics.

Preventing discrimination begins before an individual is employed, for example job advertisements. The law explicitly forbids job adverts from stating or implying that certain candidates are preferred based on their protected characteristics.

Furthermore, during the interview process, hiring managers cannot ask candidates about their protected characteristics unless they are doing so for "positive action" to improve equality in the workplace.

According to the United Na-

tions, more than 60 per cent of the world's employed population, that is two billion women, men and youth, earn their livelihoods in the informal economy. Promoting the transition to formal employment is a necessary condition to reduce poverty and inequalities, advance decent work, increase productivity and sustainability of enterprises, notably in times of crisis.

In keeping with our mandate, the EOC continues its advocacy aimed at eliminating inequalities as well as promoting inclusion via our free public education sessions, live discussions on social media, weekly columns in the Newsday, its website and publishing monthly newsletters.

Information about the Equal Opportunity Act

The act addresses discrimination in four broad categories: employment, education, provision of goods and services, and provision of accommodation. Complaints of discrimination must be based on the status grounds of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, marital status, geographical origin and disability.

Lodge a complaint at the EOC's website, www.equalopportunity.gov.tt or send an e-mail to complaints@eoc.gov.tt if you have been discriminated against