

Monday 16 August, 2021

For Immediate Release

## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

### **EOC is an independent body.**

The Equal Opportunity Commission (the ‘Commission’) wishes to address reports in the print, electronic and social media that suggest that it has prevented Ms Veera Bhajan from taking up her post as Lay Assessor at the Equal Opportunity Tribunal (the ‘Tribunal’). For example, in Newsday article entitled, “Former EOC Chairman Embarrassed by Veera Bhajan’s Legal Challenge Against Body” it was stated among other things, “Former Equal Opportunity Commission chairman John La Guerre says he is embarrassed the commission’s tribunal now appears to be involved in issues that seem to entail inequality.”

It is regrettable that the article which quoted the former chairman, provided misleading information that suggests the Commission and the Tribunal are one and the same but this is not the case.

It must be unequivocally stated that the Equal Opportunity Commission is an independent body that is a separate institution from the Equal Opportunity Tribunal and as such, it is not the “commission’s tribunal.”

Both the Commission and the Tribunal were created by the Equal Opportunity Act Chap 22:03 with mandates to enforce that Act, but both are separate and independent from each other and perform distinct functions.

The Tribunal is chaired by a Judge who is appointed by the Judicial and Legal Services Commission. The current Judge of the Tribunal is Her Honour Madam Justice Donna Prowell-Raphael. Apart from the Judge, the Tribunal also consists of two Lay Assessors appointed by Her Excellency the President.

The Commission is not involved in the appointment or functioning of the Judge or Lay Assessors of the Tribunal and cannot speak to recent media reports about Ms Bhajan. The Tribunal is not a part of the Commission, nor is the Commission a part of the Tribunal. The current Chairman of the Commission is Mr HR Ian Roach. The other members of the Commission are Dr Gabrielle Hosein (Vice-Chairman), Mr. John Arnold Mr. Peter Elias and Dr. Krystal-Jane Versammy.

The Commission’s role is to investigate and conciliate complaints of discrimination, whereas the Tribunal’s role is to adjudicate on those complaints that were not resolved. The Commission also

has other functions under the Equal Opportunity Act that is unrelated to the handling of complaints of discrimination. For example, under section 27(1) the Commission is required to:

- I. to work towards the elimination of discrimination;
- II. to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different status generally;
- III. to keep under review the working of this Act and any relevant law and, when so required by the Minister, or otherwise thinks it necessary, draw up and submit to the Minister proposals for amending them;
- IV. to develop, conduct and foster research and educational programmes and other programmes for the purpose of eliminating discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different status;
- V. to prepare and to publish appropriate guidelines for the avoidance of discrimination;
- VI. to do any other thing conducive or incidental to the carrying out of its functions.

The Commission has been involved in a number of public advocacy, information and awareness campaigns. For example, the recent 'Pass the Ball' initiative where the Commission has partnered with sporting bodies and associations in Trinidad and Tobago to discuss racism in sport. The Trinidad and Tobago Olympic Committee (TTOC) has accepted the challenge to continue the discourse and the Commission will partner with the TTOC to host an awareness session on racism.

CAISO Sex and Gender in partnership with the Commission recently launched the Model LGBTI+ Workplace Policy for Trinidad and Tobago to encourage and accommodate worker diversity. While the Equal Opportunity Act does not yet include sexual orientation as a status ground, the Commission is committed to partnering with allies of the LGBTI+ community to support its members and amplify their voices.

The Commission also offers free public education sessions to organisations to discuss among other things, the role and responsibility of the Commission, accommodating those with disabilities in the workplace, creating and maintaining an inclusive workplace, sexual harassment and guidelines to create inclusive policies.

To find out more about the Commission and its work, visit our website at [www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt) or our Facebook page @EOCTT.

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