

ILO Director General's Message

Juan Somavia – May 2003

Freedom from discrimination is an enabling right. Yet, discrimination at work is a daily reality for hundreds of millions of people around the world. They find the doors of opportunity and advancement closed because of race or religion - not talents. Because of age - not capabilities. Because of colour - not competence. And all of this is compounded, of course, by gender discrimination.

This hard truth is at the heart of the ILO's new global report on discrimination at work.

The report shows that workplace discrimination takes many forms. It details how women everywhere earn less than men, even when they are equally or more qualified. It highlights how women, minorities, people with disabilities and older workers are more likely to be unemployed - and out of a job longer. It illustrates how people with disabilities and migrant workers are often the last hired and the first fired. It documents that women and men who suffer from discrimination tend to get trapped in dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs.

The report also makes clear that discrimination comes at a heavy price. For individuals, it erodes self esteem and breeds a sense of frustration and powerlessness. For enterprise, it undermines productivity and saps potential. For society, it perpetuates poverty and social exclusion and can lead to destabilization.

We have made progress. Today, formal condemnation of discrimination is virtually universal and action to stop discrimination at work has been taken in many places. But we have a long way to go on the road to equality. Let me briefly mention three key points from this report.

First, the workplace is a strategic entry point for tackling discrimination. Drawing on the strength of the community of work and a process of dialogue, there is great mobilizing potential to fight discrimination in and through the workplace. Well defined institutions, processes and practices govern the labour market. They can help achieve diversity with social justice.

Second, the challenge is greater because we are dealing with a moving target. Over time, old forms of discrimination, such as race, sex or religion, acquire more subtle expressions; and "new" forms, such as discrimination based on age or disability emerge.

Third, everyone has a role to play. Governments, employers, workers, and citizens all have a stake in achieving equality at work. We need to take deliberate and sustained action at many levels and in different areas that connect with the workplace. We must be able to assess progress and monitor new forms of discrimination. And we have to be strong and persistent advocates.

Simply put, discrimination has no place in the workplace. Economically, socially and politically, we simply cannot afford discrimination at work. It's time to end it - once and for all.