

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 73

Women and the right to work

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“The feminine genius is needed in all expression in the life of society, therefore the presence of women in the workplace must also be guaranteed.”

The Church recognises not only the right of women to work, but also their invaluable contribution to the well being of a well functioning society. History has given us many examples of women's sterling contribution in the workplace, at the national, regional and international arena.

Locally, there are many examples. The Public Service in recent times has seen many women rise to the ranks of Permanent Secretaries. Private sector executive positions, which were once the domain of men, have seen women as part of this clique.

A look at some of our construction sites in Trinidad and Tobago reveal a number of women engaging in work that would traditionally have been only done by men. On the political front we have Eugenia Charles, Portia Simpson, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher and Mother Teresa, to name a few - women who have made great contributions to the world.

The *Compendium* reminds us that “the first indispensable step in this direction is the concrete possibility of access to professional formation.” Access to professional formation in the last two decades has been increasingly evident with increasing numbers of girls and women making strides in education.

In the Caribbean, the gender composition of the university campuses is evidence of this - so much so that there is now concern about males accessing these opportunities; that discussion however is for another article.

It must be noted, however, that while there has been an increased number of girls and women enjoying their right to education, the United Nations still saw it necessary to have as one of its Millennium Development Goals “Promote gender equality and empower women”; the target being to “eliminate disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015”.

The fact is, in some parts of the world there are still social attitudes that prevent girls from being educated because it is perceived that it is better to invest in a boy's education because of their economic role, whereas girls' education is less important because their domestic role does not earn an income. Fortunately for us in the Caribbean this is not a common belief.

In addition to access to professional formation another important issue is the recognition and defence of women's rights when they are actually part of the workplace. “The recognition and

defence of women's rights in the context of work generally depend on the organisation of work, which must take into account the dignity and vocation of women, whose "true advancement ... requires that labour should be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them (*Laborem Exercens*). This issue is the measure of the quality of society and its effective defence of women's right to work."

This highlights the need for particular attention to be paid to critical human resource issues. Will women be forced out of positions because they are pregnant or require maternity leave after they have had their babies?

While this may not be a major issue in the formal sectors of the economy, it can be a major issue in small businesses and the informal sector. Also, with increasing numbers of women participating in the work place and the need to preserve family life, are organisations ensuring that no one (both men and women) works beyond what is necessary? There is now a need for adequate familial support.

"The persistence of many forms of discrimination offensive to the dignity and vocation of women in the area of work is due to a long series of conditioning that penalises women, who have seen 'their prerogatives misrepresented' and themselves 'relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude (*Letter to Women*).

These difficulties, unfortunately, have not been overcome, as is demonstrated wherever there are situations that demoralise women, making them objects of a very real exploitation. An urgent need to recognise effectively the rights of women in the workplace is seen especially under the aspects of pay, insurance and social security (*Familiaris Consortio*).

It must be noted that this is a topic that requires extensive discussion that cannot be addressed in one article. Other key points that may be discussed in relation to this issue include:

1. Women's ability and right to participate in traditional male jobs
2. The glass ceiling – career advancement
3. Same pay for the same work
4. Sexual harassment in the work place
5. The trafficking of women

Next week we look at Child Labour