



**EQUAL
OPPORTUNITY
TRIBUNAL**
Trinidad & Tobago

ADVANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

International Women's Day has been celebrated for more than a hundred years. It is rooted in the global fight for women's rights to vote and improved working conditions during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At that time, women were denied the right to vote and lacked many basic legal protections. The Industrial Revolution shifted many women from homes into factories and workshops, where they faced long hours without breaks, earned only a fraction of what men made, and were often vulnerable to sexual harassment and other forms of exploitation by employers.

The first International Women's Day was declared in 1910 at the Second International Conference of Socialist Women on August 26, focusing on suffrage and labour conditions. Since then, IWD has grown into a powerful global symbol of women's empowerment. The initial celebration in 1911 laid the groundwork for what the United Nations later embraced and expanded, a global platform championing women's rights, gender equality, and economic opportunity.

The UN officially began marking International Women's Day on March 8, 1975, which was also declared International Women's Year. This set the stage for the Decade for Women (1976–1985), a critical period dedicated to advancing women's rights and equality worldwide. This decade was pivotal in raising global awareness and shaping policies to improve the social, economic, and political standing of women everywhere.

Trinidad and Tobago marked International Women's Year in 1975 with a well-coordinated national program. This included commemorative stamps, radio and television features, documentaries showcasing local women at work, career guidance booklets, panel discussions on women's roles in society, newspaper articles, and a special supplement highlighting women's activities and achievements. The year also saw lectures, seminars, conferences and school interactions with students on equal opportunity for women and the elimination of discrimination.

Among the recommendations put forward by Women's Organizations in 1975 were calls for full legal equality between women and men, with all discriminatory laws amended as soon as possible. They advocated for laws ensuring equal pay for equal work and equal opportunities for promotion for women in the private sector. Additionally, they urged the government of Trinidad and Tobago to establish a permanent national Commission to effectively accelerate equal opportunity for women and support their full integration into national life.

The Equal Opportunity Act which came into being in 2001 established the Equal Opportunity Tribunal as an integral judicial institution in supporting equal opportunity including combating discrimination against women, especially in private sector employment and education. Anchored by this visionary legislation, which has been in effect for 25 years, the Tribunal hears complaints from women who may be victims of discrimination based on sex, victimisation for speaking out against sex discrimination, and offensive language targeting their sexuality. Beyond this, women remain constitutionally protected from discrimination and assured equal treatment in the public sphere.

Fifty years on, the push for women's inclusion in leadership continues to make progress. Barriers are falling, voices are being heard, and protections for women's rights, are firmly established, effective and enforced by the Equal Opportunity Act and the country's Constitution. Today, the Tribunal honours some of the trailblazing women in Trinidad and Tobago's legal community who have 'crashed the glass ceilings' and transformed the judicial culture -

- The Honourable Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, has made history on several fronts: she was the first woman Attorney-General in 1995, the first woman to act as Prime Minister in 2000, and in 2010, she became the first woman elected as Prime Minister and the first woman to lead a political party in Trinidad and Tobago. She made history again in 2025 as the first woman to be re-elected Prime Minister;
- In 2018, Her Excellency Paula-Mae Weekes (Ret'd) was appointed as the first female President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago;
- Madame Justice HH Dr. Jean Permanand (Ret'd) broke new ground as the first female Justice of Appeal in 1993 and later became the first woman to act as Chief Justice in 2001 during her time as a Justice of Appeal.
- HH Madame Justice Maureen Rajnauth-Lee was the first Trinidadian appointed to the Bench of the Caribbean Court of Justice.

This year, the United Nations marks International Women's Day on March 8 with the theme "Right. Justice. Action. For All Women and Girls." Alongside this global message, the NGO community highlights the "Give To Gain" Campaign, reminding us that generosity, whether of time, resources, advocacy, or influence, creates more opportunities. When women succeed, societies flourish.

On this International Women's Day 2026, let's honour the pioneers. Let's strengthen the law. Let's change the culture. And let's give, so we can all gain.

Madame Justice Donna Prowell-Raphael
Chairman, Equal Opportunity Tribunal
March 8, 2026