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PRESS RELEASE

**Equality Commission Calls For Action On Race
Discrimination Laws**

Today (21st March) is International Day Against Racism and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has spoken of its concern that black and minority ethnic people in Northern Ireland have less protection against discrimination, harassment and victimisation than people in Great Britain.

“The Equality Commission has been increasingly concerned about shortcomings in Northern Ireland’s race legislation” Eileen Lavery, Head of Advice and Compliance at the Equality Commission said today. “There are no quick or easy answers to eliminating inequality and deep-seated prejudices like racism. We must all be prepared to deal with the unwelcome fact that many people experience daily abuse because of their race and it is important that we try to eliminate such prejudices at all ages and in all parts of life. “

“One of the Commission’s duties is to keep equality legislation under review and to work towards eliminating discrimination. We want to ensure that people in Northern Ireland have no less protection from discrimination than people in Great Britain and we have made submissions on this important issue to Government, to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and to the Council of Europe under its Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.” Ms. Lavery said.

The Commission has urged the harmonisation of the law so that all individuals have the same level of legal protection against discrimination and harassment on grounds of colour and nationality as there is on grounds of race, ethnic origin and national origin - a measure already in place in Great Britain.

“The drive for greater equality can also be helped by improving information about the composition of the workforce on the basis of ethnic origin and nationality. We do not have accurate information on the numbers of migrant workers and new residents. Gathering this would enable a more accurate assessment to be made of fair participation in employment of minority ethnic people.” Eileen Lavery said. “OFMdFM last year published Guidance on Monitoring Racial Equality, designed to assist public bodies improve service delivery and equality for minority ethnic and migrant populations living here. We have also urged that the monitoring information already gathered by all employers under the Fair Employment monitoring regulations be extended to include information on nationality and ethnic origin.”

Other areas where the Equality Act 2010 has strengthened race equality legislation in Great Britain, but not in Northern Ireland, include a greater discretion for employers, service providers and public authorities to take positive action in pursuit of race equality; stronger powers for employment tribunals allowing them to make recommendations which benefit the whole workforce; extended protection for local councillors against racial discrimination; and strengthened protection from victimization for black and minority ethnic pupils in schools .

“ The current situation, where we lag behind Great Britain in a number of areas of equality law, imposes a particular disadvantage for minority ethnic people,” Eileen Lavery said. “The Equality Commission is committed to ensuring that our equality legislation meets the needs of all people in Northern Ireland, is consistent and that it takes account of our changing society. We will continue to engage with government, equality groups, political parties and people throughout our community to make this a reality.”

Notes

357 (around 12%) of the initial enquiries the Equality Commission received in the past year were from individuals who feel they have experienced race discrimination.

In the last year, 65 individuals applied to the Commission for assistance. The number of racial discrimination cases currently being assisted by the Commission is 45.