



EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Submission to Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry: Fathers and the Workplace

February 2017

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Equality Commission highlights below a number of recommendations in terms of the role that government, employers and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland can play to support fathers in the workplace to fulfill their caring responsibilities.
- 1.2 This includes action to encourage flexible working practices and the equal sharing of family roles / responsibilities between women and men including through the implementation of the Work and Families Act (Northern Ireland) 2015¹; to implement an effective Childcare Strategy that ensures appropriate, affordable and accessible childcare; to tackle gender stereotypes concerning parenting and childcare roles in society; to ensure leadership to build organisational culture that promotes gender equality in the workplace, as well as to support and encourage employers to develop carer friendly policy and practices.
- 1.3 We also highlight the findings and recommendations of research and investigations carried out in Northern Ireland, including childcare research commissioned by the Commission, that outline the barriers faced by parents, including fathers, in the workplace in fulfilling their caring responsibilities.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ('the Commission') is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is responsible for implementing the equality legislation on fair employment, sex

¹ [Work and Families Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#)

discrimination and equal pay, race relations, sexual orientation, disability and age.

- 2.2 We have set out below our recommendations, and highlight specific evidence relating to Northern Ireland, relevant to the questions raised in the Women and Equalities Committee's Inquiry into *Fathers and the Workplace*.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 The Commission has highlighted a number of recommendations in terms of the role that government, employers and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland can play in overcoming barriers faced by fathers in the workplace and to support fathers in fulfilling their caring responsibilities.
- 3.2 In particular, in our *Gender Equality Policy Priorities and Recommendations* (2016)², we recommend that the Northern Ireland Executive takes action to '*encourage flexible working practices and the equal sharing of family roles / responsibilities between women and men, including through the implementation of the Work and Families Act (Northern Ireland) 2015*³'.
- 3.3 In our *Shadow Report* (2013)⁴ on the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), we recommend that the CEDAW Committee '*asks Government to increase the number of affordable and accessible childcare places in Northern Ireland, supporting women's economic participation and encouraging men to share responsibility for childcare*'.
- 3.4 Further, we recommended, in our response (2015)⁵ to the Northern Ireland Executive's consultation on a draft Childcare Strategy (2015-2025) that specific interventions be included in

² ECNI (2016) [Gender Equality Policy Priorities and Recommendations](#). Other recommendations in respect of employment equality between women and men include those relating to: mainstreaming measures for equality between women and men across relevant strategies; eliminating occupational and industrial segregation; promoting workplace equality in roles and pay; addressing organisational culture; reducing sex discrimination, including in relation to pregnancy and maternity; and addressing other barriers to employment. There are also additional recommendations in relation to: tackling gender stereotypes; ensuring gender mainstreaming in education; caring roles and childcare; participation in public life and decision making; gender based violence; social protection; and law reform as well as recommendations relating to institutional mechanisms for gender equality.

³ [Work and Families Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#)

⁴ ECNI (2013) [CEDAW Shadow Report](#)

⁵ ECNI (2015) [Response to NI Executive draft Childcare Strategy 2015-2025](#)

the final Strategy, designed ‘to tackle gender stereotypes concerning parenting and childcare roles in society’.

- 3.5 In terms of promoting gender equality in the workplace, we recommend action to ‘support and encourage employers to develop carer friendly policy and practices, including through the promotion of flexible working practices and the equal sharing of family roles / responsibilities between women and men’⁶.
- 3.6 The Commission has published *A Unified Guide to Promoting Equal Opportunities in Employment* (May 2016)⁷ and, with the Labour Relations Agency, *Flexible Working: The Law and Good Practice – A Guide for Employers*⁸. Both Guides set out how inflexible working practices can cause particular disadvantages for some employees whose personal, caring or family needs conflict with the strict work patterns laid down by their employers⁹.
- 3.7 Further, an *Investigation* (2016)¹⁰ by the Equality Commission into the treatment of pregnant workers and mothers in Northern Ireland workplaces provides powerful evidence for recommendations of the Commission in terms of gender equality generally; including promoting flexible working and sharing family roles, leadership to build organisational culture that promotes gender equality in the workplace and an effective Childcare Strategy that ensures appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare provision.
- 3.8 In addition, specific *research* (2013)¹¹ conducted in Northern Ireland into childcare sets out the issues and barriers faced by fathers in the workplace, including gender stereotypes and lack of accessible childcare, and highlights, for example that, given

⁶ ECNI (2016) [Gender Equality Policy Priorities and Recommendations](#)

Other recommendations uncaring include action to consider the economic impact of paid and unpaid care work and address the undervaluation of paid and unpaid care work; and ensure an effective Childcare Strategy tackles gender stereotyping relating to parenting and childcare roles, encourages positive attitudes to childcare and removes barriers to parental employment.

⁷ ECNI (2016) [A Unified Guide to Promoting Equal Opportunities in Employment \(version 2\)](#)

⁸ ECNI, LRA [Flexible Working: The Law and Good Practice - A Guide for Employers](#)

⁹ In the context of the extension to all employees of the right to flexible working, the Commission has drawn attention to the potential for discrimination if requests from male employees are not given reasonable consideration in line with the legislation, if flexible working patterns have already reached critical mass. ECNI, LRA (April 2016) [Employment Equality Law Update](#) Belfast

¹⁰ ECNI (2016) [Expecting Equality Pregnancy Investigation Summary Report](#) Belfast

¹¹ McQuaid R, Graham H, Shapira M (2013) [Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women](#) ECNI

current unbalanced and poorly compensated parental leave arrangements, together with gender stereotyping, can make it difficult for fathers to take on a sufficient caring role¹². This research outlines the benefits of change both in helping women stay in the labour market and allowing a greater caring role for fathers, and sets policy options, including tackling gender stereotypes and building suitable childcare around parental leave and other supports to both fathers and mothers taking childcare responsibility¹³.

- 3.9 This research also highlights that the lack of men in the childcare professions reinforces the care of children as a female activity¹⁴. In addition, it highlights that certain parents can face specific issues in reconciling work and care arrangements and in accessing childcare; for example, parents of disabled children, of minority ethnic children, parents in rural areas, parents on low income and single parent families.
- 3.10 Further, the Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Finance and Personnel *Inquiry into flexible working practices in the public sector in Northern Ireland* (2014)¹⁵ notes the promotion of gender equality in employment as one of a number of potential benefits of applying flexible working practices in the Northern Ireland public sector. In the light of these benefits, in general, the Committee recommended that the initial outlay for implementing flexible working practices should be seen as an 'invest to save' measure.
- 3.11 More recently, an *Investigation of Gender Equality Issues at the Executive Level of the Northern Ireland Public Sector* (2016)¹⁶ recommended a number of steps to promote gender equality, including promoting the acceptance and use of flexible working and developing a culture which promotes work life balance.

¹² Ibid p86

¹³ This research also highlights that certain parents can face specific issues in reconciling work and care arrangements and in accessing childcare (eg parents of disabled children and minority ethnic children, parents in rural areas, parents on low income and single parent families).

¹⁴ McQuaid R, Graham H, Shapira M (2013) [Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women](#) ECNI (p87)

¹⁵ NI Assembly (2014) [report on the Inquiry into Flexible Working in the Public Sector in Northern Ireland](#), Recommendation 3

¹⁶ Ballantine J, Banks G, Haynes K, Manochin M, Wall T (2016) [An Investigation of Gender Equality Issues at the Executive Level of the Northern Ireland Public Sector](#) The Executive Office

- 3.12 The investigation¹⁷ recommended that public sector organisations should, *inter alia*, develop a gender inclusive culture, specifically promoting the acceptance and use of flexible work arrangements for senior executives and managers and develop a culture which promotes an appropriate work life balance at senior management level¹⁸.
- 3.13 The investigation highlighted, for example, that whilst a range of flexible work arrangements were in place, it was extremely difficult for senior managers to avail of such arrangements; thus indicating a considerable gap between rhetoric and reality of flexible working arrangements at senior level within the Northern Ireland public sector. This view was expressed regardless of gender¹⁹. Also the investigation highlighted poor work life balance within the Northern Ireland public sector which was largely attributed to a long hours culture- a view that was again expressed irrespective of gender.
- 3.14 Other recommendations included for public sector organisations to identify a senior level gender champion and to establish a public sector forum for gender equality.
- 3.15 In terms of future opportunities for gender equality to be advanced in Northern Ireland in employment in general, it will be noted that the *Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016*²⁰ imposes a duty for some employers to publish gender pay information and requires a strategy and action plan on gender pay to be brought forward.

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¹⁷ A minimum of 40% males and 40% females.

¹⁸ The investigation recommended: collection of data on the uptake of flexible working arrangements; identification and reduction or removal of barriers to flexible working arrangements through job redesign including ‘*a debate around the role of home working, remote working and hot desking*’; expressed commitment, guidelines and visible action (such as meeting scheduling) for flexible working arrangements.

¹⁹ Ballantine J, Banks G, Haynes K, Manochin M, Wall T (2016) [An Investigation of Gender Equality Issues at the Executive Level of the Northern Ireland Public Sector](#) The Executive Office. See Executive Summary version at p38.

²⁰ [Employment Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#)