



Evelyn Collins, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, speaking at the International Business Women's Conference organised by Women in business NI - May 13, 2014

Panel discussion: Playing our part in creating a new economy - what more can we do in private and public and third sectors to ensure a sustainable and vibrant economy for all?

As the lead equality body in Northern Ireland, the Equality Commission welcomes the opportunity to be part of today's debate. We are in a unique position to help organisations go beyond simply complying with the law to developing a culture in which equality is an integral part of their business objectives.

We believe that to ensure our future economic growth it is vital to focus on gender equality. There is compelling evidence from around the world that competitiveness in the long-term depends significantly on how a country harnesses the economic potential of women. For example the Women's Business Council 2013 report, *Maximising Women's Contribution to Future Economic Growth*, argues that equalising men and women's participation rates alone could add more than 10% to the size of the UK economy by 2030.

If we are to have any chance of reaching such targets here in Northern Ireland there must be a radical shift in culture and attitudes. This will involve challenging outdated stereotypical notions about what is "women's" or "men's work" and removing the stigma associated with family-friendly policies such as flexible working and parental leave. It will

also require employers to become more confident about taking positive action to make the workplace more accommodating for women and men.

There may have been considerable progress made in women's equality over the past 40 years; however the fact remains that women in Northern Ireland are still concentrated in lower paid, lower status, often part-time work. They also have higher rates of economic inactivity due to family and home commitments and are less likely than men to start their own business.

While representation of women in the boardroom is improving in the UK since the Davies Review in 2011 - women now account for 20.7% of board positions in the FTSE100, up from 12.5% in 2011 - the situation in Northern Ireland is disappointing, with only 5 of the top 100 companies being led by a woman.

All of this despite the fact that girls here continue to outperform boys in terms of educational attainment.

The time has come for organisations to be proactive in addressing the persistent under-representation of women in management and in certain sectors of the economy.

We often hear that one of the more difficult issues for employers is taking positive action to advance equality for women. We acknowledge that there that there isn't universal support for positive action but we firmly believe it delivers results.

Although quotas are unlawful under sex discrimination law, there are many other measures available. Commission staff can advise on a range of options, for example the use of special training for women

which could lead to opportunities in new areas of work or promotion possibilities, the use of welcoming statements, targeted promotion, work placements and sponsorship opportunities. Positive action measures are most effective where they are built into an Employment Equality Plan and linked to goals and targets.

We know from experience that special measures work. For example the Women in Local Councils initiative saw the number of women Chief Executives within the 26 former Council areas rise from 1 to 6 within a few years as well as an increase in senior managers and councillors. Even more encouraging is the fact that this trend has been sustained in the appointment to top posts in the new Super Councils where 4 of the 11 newly appointed Chief Executives are women.

We are very pleased that the Department for Employment and Learning and the STEM Business Group have recognised the need for a focused effort to address gender inequality in the STEM sector (science, technology, engineering & maths).

The sector currently accounts for 11% of our total employment and has been identified as a priority growth area in the Northern Ireland economy. At present males outnumber females in the STEM industries by 3 to 1. Given significant skills shortages in this area, it is clear that unless special measures are taken to attract more women, the economy will suffer.

The Commission has been working closely with the Department and STEM employers to tackle the problem. Next month we will launch a Northern Ireland STEM CEO Charter. The Charter aims to encourage commitment to best practice, including positive action, as a means of improving gender diversity within STEM businesses.

This is just one initiative aimed at increasing gender diversity in key areas of the economy. Close partnership between government, business and organisations such as the Equality Commission is required to bring about change – change in gendered expectations and aspirations, change in workplace culture, and change in the way work-life balance is managed for both women and men at every stage of their employment. We also need to sell the benefits of gender diversity – it's not only good for women but also good for men and the economy as a whole.

The international perspectives we are hearing at this conference, combined with the contributions of our own leading business people and policy-makers, will send out a strong and clear message. Unless we work together to promote gender diversity, our businesses will be starved of potential talent and Northern Ireland will miss out on the opportunity to capitalise on our best asset – a skilled and flexible workforce to drive our economy forward.

In the words of the Women's Business Council report - "while women need work, work also needs women."