

Gender Attitudes in the Workplace

View from the Chair, Business Newsletter, 16 March 2010

Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Last week we marked International Women's Day, and the Equality Commission highlighted two cases where women who complained of sexual harassment in the workplace were paid substantial sums in settlement. It is interesting that the cases both involved women who work in what have usually been regarded as predominantly male occupations – one is a bus and lorry driver, the other a manager in a car sales business.

That element in the cases marks a considerable change which has taken place in the thirty-five years since sex discrimination law was first introduced in Northern Ireland. Women are increasingly key participants in all kinds of workplaces where they were previously never seen. This has had a considerable impact on women's expectations – particularly the legitimate expectation that all occupations, careers and professions are options for them.

Of course, the fact that we are discussing this in the context of cases alleging sexual harassment points up the sad fact that some men still hold attitudes which we hope would have been discarded decades ago. Some people, even those who would personally distance themselves from the most crude and objectionable examples of sexist behaviour, may still make assumptions about what is "men's work" or "women's work" and act accordingly. Phrases such as "if you're going to work in here you will have to get used to it" are not an acceptable response to a woman who finds herself faced with discrimination and harassment in any workplace – whether it is an office, or a building site, or a bus depot.

There are clear legal protections for women against all kinds of sex discrimination, be it harassment, discriminatory recruitment and employment policies, or on equal pay. The Equality Commission provides advice, training and guidance to help employers ensure that they don't discriminate against women, and we also support women who have been treated unfairly to take cases which will establish their rights. So long as old attitudes persist, however, which are demeaning to or patronising of women, discrimination will continue to occur and will have to be challenged.

It is sometimes said that the law cannot change people's minds, only moderate their behaviour; and that is probably true in the short term. There is a great benefit, however, to changing behaviour when it is so clearly wrong and

damaging as sexual harassment is. And when that behaviour is challenged consistently and publicly over a prolonged period, then attitudes do change.

Thirty-five years of sex discrimination law have reshaped the public perception of what is acceptable. People may dispute cases on the facts, but no-one, employer or employee, is now prepared to defend, or even admit to being unconcerned by, proven acts of sex discrimination or sexual harassment.