



15 March 2011

International Women's Day

*View from the Chair. Business Newsletter 15 March 2011
Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.*

Last week we marked the one hundredth International Women's Day; and it has prompted analysis and reflection on the degree to which a century of campaigning and commitment has had an effect. Of course, much has changed in the intervening years. Then, no woman had cast a vote for, been elected to or taken a seat in Westminster; the presence of women had yet to be felt in Parliament, pulpit or police force. Now, no woman feels that any avenue in life can or should be closed to her.

And yet, all is not as it may seem or as the law says it should be. There is still a need to combat persistent patterns of inequality. Every year, hundreds of women contact the Equality Commission to complain of sex discrimination. Over two thirds of those queries are related to employment; and the three most common issues concern pregnancy or maternity, equal pay and harassment or other unfair treatment at work. Discrimination because a woman is pregnant or has children is the most frequent cause of complaint. Cases publicised by the Commission during the Festival Week which marked the centenary included a Tribunal decision which found that a woman suffered discrimination simply because she had a baby and child-care responsibilities.

It is unconscionable that, after one hundred years of campaigning and thirty five years of sex discrimination law, so many women still find that the greatest difficulties they encounter with their employers are over one of the most natural, and socially essential, facets of life – having a family. If we are ever to achieve true equality at work for men and women, and achieve a balance for both men and women between the personal and professional, between work and family, then this must change.

The choices people make regarding family life, particularly having and caring for children, still have a major impact on women more than men. And they are often cited as reasons why the greater participation of women in all manner of businesses and professions has not been reflected by their presence at the highest levels – in the boardrooms, consultancies or, in law, as partners, Q Cs or on the Bench. But this argument lacks conviction and is, in truth, more an excuse than a reason.

It is also argued that, as the light from the distant star shows us a world that was, so too, the balance of high-level positions reflects the entry level gender balance of the professions in the past rather than now: time will move the situation forward satisfactorily. But this argument has looked less compelling as the years have turned into decades with only marginal advances at the top. The suspicion has to be that something else is at work and that informal networks or ingrained social attitudes have enduring influence and adversely affect women's success in applying, or being considered, for higher positions.

This debate is not about some bland mathematical formalism. It is not a mirror image of the "old boys" club. This is about recognising the inherent dignity that resides in every human being. It is about recognising talent and potential wherever they emerge. And it is about setting aside the received prejudice of the past, honouring our rhetoric about the importance of family and seeing it as a shared responsibility between women and men.

If we are to fulfil the vision of those who, one hundred years ago, first claimed a day to set out the challenge of gender equality, it will need a commitment to real change; not just from legislators and institutions, employers and trade unions, but from every one of us.