

19/11/2013

ARTICLE

Diversity in the workplace matters

View from the Chair, published in the News Letter, Tues 19 Nov 2013

Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commissioner NI

Thursday 21st November sees the Third Annual Women in Business Awards take place. This year, the Equality Commission will again sponsor one of the categories, the Award for Diversity in the Workplace. Last year's winners, Catherine Flynn from Formula Karting and Jill Minne from Belfast City Council, exemplify women who have made a real difference in addressing diversity in the workplace.

However, despite some excellent practice and several decades of equality legislation, there still remain a number of significant issues facing women in the field of employment in Northern Ireland. For example, when we consider men who present as unavailable for work, only one in twenty link their situation to family or home commitments. In any comparable group of women that figure rises to more than one in three. It is clear that the availability of good quality, affordable childcare plays a significant part in a woman's ability to enter or stay full-time in the workplace. Our childcare costs in Northern Ireland come in at around 44% of an average income, which is almost four times the EU figure of 12%. Indeed in a recent piece of research commissioned by the Equality Commission around two-thirds of all mothers said that the cost of childcare had influenced the hours they worked. Alongside the need for our Assembly to legislate for more affordable, quality childcare, employers can assist by developing more flexible working arrangements for female workers.

Again, despite the fact that females leave school with better qualifications than males, are more likely than males to enter further and higher education and continue to have 80% of purchasing power, they still remain under-represented at senior management

and board level in Northern Ireland. So although the workforce comprises over 50% of women, they tend to hold lower paid jobs, many of which are temporary and part time, and where hourly rates are 90% of their male counterparts. This situation does not position women in a place where they can best realise their potential as significant contributors to our economy.

The Women in Business awards allow us once again both to profile good practice and raise awareness of the need to continue to work towards providing a workplace where equality of opportunity is a central tenet.