

***View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; Tuesday 18 June 2019  
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI***

## **Welcoming Women into the Workplace**

Leaving school for your first job is daunting for everyone, but for a young woman moving into a predominantly male workplace, it can be doubly difficult.

Recently a young female engineering apprentice approached the Commission with a complaint of sex discrimination in her workplace. She talked about practical issues such as the lack of a women's toilet with sanitary disposal facilities, an absence of appropriate, separate changing facilities and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) that fitted. She had concerns about the on the job experience that she was offered, which was more linked to administration - an area not relevant to the practical experience required to fulfill her college requirements. She also claimed that she experienced sexual harassment from two, more senior, male employees.

It was good to learn that her employer responded to her concerns positively – for example, by investigating the harassment claim and promptly implementing the investigators' decision. This is vital, as how any harassment complaint is handled sends a powerful message to employees about how seriously the issue is taken by management.

In any workplace, it is important to ensure all staff in the organisation are aware of what is considered to be acceptable language and behaviour. This is an area where senior staff and line managers must lead by example and set the tone for the organisation. This approach doesn't only apply to how employers treat women, but mean creating a good and harmonious workplace for all staff.

Some of the young woman's concerns involved very practical issues in areas covered by Health and Safety law and were capable of being addressed in ways that did not involve significant financial expense. Compliance with these, including having the right policies and practices in place to include women and girls in the workforce, would mean, for example, that dignity issues such as the provision of changing places, women's toilets and PPE that fits safely and properly would not arise.

The skills shortage in engineering is a real issue. The Royal Academy of Engineering reports that an additional 87,000 graduate level engineers are needed each year between now and 2020, but the higher education system is producing only 46,000 engineering graduates annually. This suggests that the UK has a long way to go to fill this predicted skills gap. From this point of view, the importance of encouraging as many young people as possible into engineering is obvious.

A key focus of the Commission's work over the next three years will be encouraging the improvement of opportunities for women to work and progress in their careers, especially in predominantly male areas where there has been consistent under-representation, such as manufacturing, transport and communication, energy and water and construction.

It is important that, once parents and teachers have inspired young women to take up a career in STEM subjects, employers give thought to what will happen beyond the recruitment stage. Employers should anticipate the particular needs of these new recruits and support them to enable them to get as much out of their apprenticeship or their job as possible. Consulting women about these matters would be a good start.