

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 23 November 2021 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Race and the workplace

“I lost my career to racism”. Six simple words, in a powerful testimony given by former Yorkshire cricketer Azeem Rafiq to a Commons Select Committee last week, has highlighted once again the massive impact of racism in the workplace.

Our workplaces are very different from that of thirty years ago. Many of us now work alongside colleagues who hail from around the world. It is refreshing that people of different nationalities and ethnic minorities continue to choose to come here to live and work amongst us.

In fact, many of our industries and public services simply couldn't function without their much-needed skills. Their valuable contribution to our workforce is vital to Northern Ireland's economy's success and prosperity.

Together with our partners Business in the Community, we recently met with a group of major employers and industry representatives from across Northern Ireland including All State NI, Liberty IT, and Translink, to talk about issues around race in the workplace, as part of a new initiative. We heard first-hand how they are working to promote race equality in their workplaces and some of the issues they have faced.

The insights and examples provided by some of Northern Ireland's leading employers were really helpful. Importantly they see racial equality and diversity and inclusion in the workplace as critical to their success.

But unfortunately, we know that prejudice, racial discrimination and harassment occur in workplaces across Northern Ireland. Calls to our discrimination advice line regarding racial discrimination equate to approximately 9% of all enquiries received.

We have supported legal cases of individuals who experienced discrimination at work because of their race. A Polish Chef was racially harassed by a co-worker simply because she didn't like the fact that he'd come here to work; he was awarded just over £15,000 by an Industrial Tribunal. An Eastern European woman who had lived and worked here for a decade who came to us about her difficulties in the culture of overt and casual racism in her workplace and her case settled for £8,500.

These types of behaviours are simply not acceptable and must be challenged by employers. Policies and procedures are key to building more inclusive and

respectful workplaces. Recent research by Savanta reports that, in the UK, Black (42%) and Asian (36%) employees are significantly more likely than white employees (26%) to have left a job due to the lack of workplace diversity & inclusion.

In addition to advancing racial equality in the workplace because it is the right thing to do, there are strong economic reasons for it. The McGregor Smith Review on Race in the Workplace (2017) states that inclusive organisations, which attract and develop individuals from the widest pool of talent, consistently perform better. Ultimately, this equates to a happier, more productive staff team and a more profitable business.

Research carried out by Business in the Community in Great Britain has shown that race equality in the United Kingdom will potentially bring a £24 billion per year boost to the UK economy. So, for many reasons, it is important that we get this right.

The Commission is committed to helping employers address issues of race in the workplace. Together with Business in the Community, we are currently developing a training programme for employers regarding race in the workplace as the next stage of our new initiative. This new training will be available to all employers over the coming months.

Race in the workplace is not a new issue in Northern Ireland, employers have been dealing with these issues for many years – but now is the time for action to eradicate racism from our workplaces and promote the benefits of diversity and inclusion. We can do this together, if we all play our part.