

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 6 July 2021 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

STEM Careers – Open the door to women

Last week, we ran a seminar in partnership with WomensTec for employers in construction and technology about how they can encourage and support women and girls into their industries.

You might ask why they would bother?

Given the skills shortage we are experiencing, particularly science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills, it makes sense to encourage the widest pool of talent and improving equality of opportunity for girls and women and access to these industries can help with this.

Under-representation of women is a serious issue in STEM industries – there were a few figures shown at our seminar– Emer Murnaghan from the Women in STEM Steering Group reported that only 15% of STEM jobs are currently being done by women, and the decline in girls participating in core STEM subjects between GCSE and A Level/FE in NI is 65%, compared to only a 6% drop off for boys.

Engineering and technology are relevant to almost every economic activity and the skills and experiences they bring can be relevant in many other settings too. My own background in civil engineering and building surveying gave me skills I still use every day - the ability to think methodically and to manage projects, problem-solving skills, the ability to work to deadlines and within budgets and the ability to maintain an overview of entire projects while not losing sight of the detail.

People with STEM skills have a wide choice of job roles and STEM employers offer some of the highest starting salaries. The average starting salary in science in Northern Ireland in 2019 was £33,636. People with careers in science report their careers are fulfilling.

It is vital that women have equal opportunities to access these careers. Whilst there is recent evidence of change, young women are still less likely to choose to study STEM subjects at further and higher education compared to young men and thus their availability for high-level STEM jobs is more limited than men's.

The lack of women in STEM industries isn't about women's capability, it is about subject choices. From 2016 to 2019, only around a third of A levels taken by girls were in STEM subjects, whereas almost half of A levels taken by girls were in the

arts and humanities subjects – the opposite is the case for boys, with almost half of A levels taken by boys being in the STEM subjects and less than a third in arts and humanities. That said, 2018/2019 data shows female A level students outperforming boys in all STEM subjects except biology and computing.

Recent University of Ulster research shows that both Apprenticeships NI and the new Higher Level Apprenticeships 'exhibit unmitigated occupational segregation' and perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes that disadvantage women in economic and labour market terms. The research also makes recommendations that would help change that picture.

Employers have a significant role to play. Using the positive action provisions of equality law can help develop an inclusive environment where everyone feels that they can contribute and be recognised for their abilities. At the seminar we heard from four large employers – Gilbert Ash, BT Openreach, the Housing Executive and the CITB, who are all engaging in good practice.

Some already contribute to initiatives to encourage women to consider careers in STEM and non-traditional careers – for example, those organisations who are working with us to promote STEM careers to young women and girls by taking part in recording a series of podcasts which we plan to publish in early Autumn.

It's great that so many women who are already working in STEM fields speak up and become role models and mentors and also that, at a policy level, WiSTEM is working with the DfE to ensure STEM women's inclusion in the 10X Economy, Draft Skills Strategy and Economic Recovery Action Plan. Young girls should grow up believing there is a place for them in STEM industries and should feel inspired to reach their full potential in STEM careers. It's important that we create a more inclusive industry for girls and boys in which to work. That's a job for all of us – employers, Government, policy makers, careers teachers and of course women themselves.