

## **View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 15 March 2022 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

### **Stalemate for Women**

As the celebrations around International Women's Day come to an end, it is clear that much more needs to be done to improve women's equality, and it seems to me that there are things that have been on our list for a very long time.

Equality between men and women is certainly better than it has been, and there are individual achievements that have broken new ground for women – the appointment of Siobhan Keegan as Northern Ireland's first Lady Chief Justice last year for example, Alison Chestnutt becoming the first woman ever to captain a golf club in Northern Ireland and Jessica Foy becoming the first ever paid woman footballer here.

But still there seems to be a stalemate in moving forward on big issue policy areas that would help thousands of women. We still need a revised gender equality strategy, we need a childcare strategy and we need to move to gender pay gap reporting.

Sex discrimination is consistently the second most reported form of discrimination coming to our advice line every year, and within that, pregnancy and maternity at work is always the most reported issue, followed by sexual harassment at work and then terms and conditions and equal pay. We've made equality of opportunity at work, and welcoming, inclusive workplaces, one of the priorities for our work over the next three years, and women are one of the target groups for whom we'll be working to improve things.

We need to ensure that women have an equal opportunity to get into good and rewarding jobs, and a barrier for many women is the lack of availability of good quality, affordable, flexible childcare. A childcare strategy would be an important enabler for women and for families and we look forward to consultation on this starting in the autumn.

The revised Gender Equality Strategy should have many elements that will help women achieve a more equal representation in the world of work, much of which has been outlined in the Expert Panel Advisory report. It looks at the high level of economic inactivity among women due to family and home commitments, the concentration of women in part-time, low-paid and insecure jobs, and the under-representation of women who are self-employed or in senior positions. The report lists many problems still to be solved – barriers to employment such as gender stereotypes, unaffordable childcare, unequal sharing of caring responsibilities,

segregated labour markets, sex discrimination, sexual harassment, gender pay gaps and low pay.

Gender pay gap reporting legislation is at a standstill; we need to see Section 19 of the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 put into force, and the development of a gender pay strategy and associated action plan. Identifying where pay gaps exist, and why, is fundamental to eliminating the gender pay gap.

On International Women's Day, we can call for movement on these issues, and we can also see what we can do for ourselves. All of us can challenge bias, prejudice and discrimination when we see it. All of us can offer support and empathy when we see inequality, bias and sexism.

A bit belated – but Happy International Women's Day!