

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 7 June 2022 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Working Women in Northern Ireland Still Facing Discrimination in the Workplace

Over NISRA's 'Women in Northern Ireland 2020-21' update, published last month, showed that women accounted for just under half of those currently in employment in Northern Ireland.

Women are employed in all sectors and work at all levels and grades.

But yet, repeatedly, year after year, sex is the second most reported form of discrimination to our legal advice team, and within that, issues around pregnancy and maternity are the most common complaints, followed by harassment at work.

In the last two weeks, we have publicised the cases of Susanne Rice and Shauna McFarland whom the Commission supported in their sex discrimination cases against their former employers. Both women wanted to work, but they felt that their experiences at work were unfair and had ultimately cost them their jobs.

Susanne had worked in a senior management position within a company operating in the STEM industry, an industry where men outnumber women by a ratio of 3 to 1 in Northern Ireland. Susanne believed she had been treated unfairly because she was a young woman and that she was made redundant as a result of her pregnancy. Susanne's case was settled for £15,000 against her former employer before it went to court, paid without admission of liability.

Shauna McFarland, who had been an administrative assistant, won her sexual harassment case against her former employer and an employee who had verbally sexually harassed her over a long period of time. The Industrial Tribunal awarded Shauna £20,000 for injury to her feelings. The Tribunal found her male colleague's conduct was "...by any standard sleazy and sustained."

We support and publicise legal cases so that people who may be experiencing discrimination at work know that they can turn to us for help, but also, importantly, to remind employers how to deal with sex discrimination and harassment complaints to keep on the right side of the law.

All employees should be confident that they can raise complaints without fear of being penalised and that their complaint will be dealt with effectively, in a timely and professional manner.

Employers must have policies and procedures in place to protect women from sex discrimination and harassment, and these must be actively implemented.

The Equality Commission together with the Labour Relations Agency has recently published updated guidance entitled '[Harassment and Bullying at Work – Promoting Inclusive Workplaces](#)'. The guidance provides a comprehensive step by step guide to help employers ensure that they have policies and procedures in place and how to use them should they have to deal with complaints of bullying or harassment in the workplace.

The Commission also continues to offer employers training, online advice and support via our employer helpline 028 90 500 600 and we can provide you with model policies that you can customise to suit your own business or organisation.

Experience tells us that discrimination can happen in any sector and at any level. It is important therefore that we all remain committed to creating workplaces that are inclusive and welcoming for all our employees, where they feel respected and valued. This is not only the right and legal thing to do, it makes good business sense too.