

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 22 November 2022 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Women in construction – barriers still to overcome

I spoke at an event last week with the construction industry on the promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion, and what I heard from participants, brought me back to the early part of my career.

I am a civil engineer and building surveyor by profession. I was the only female student on my university course and during my subsequent career, being the only female in my workplace became the norm for me. This gave me first-hand experience of the challenges faced by woman in a male dominated sector. It was evident to me last week that women in these industries still face many of these challenges, years later.

For example, women often find themselves as the only female onsite. They have difficulty finding suitable tools and the required personal protective equipment, as much of this kit was originally designed specifically for men. Other challenges continue to include the lack of toilet facilities for women on sites and what has been described as hostile banter or macho culture.

The construction sector is the third largest employer in Northern Ireland and a significant contributor to our economy. NISRA reports the sector grew by 8% last year and accounts for over 36,000 jobs, but it remains a traditionally male dominated sector.

For our construction industry to thrive, it needs to attract more women. We know from Women's Tec that girls make up less than 1% of apprenticeships in construction related roles here. The Chartered Institute of Building reports that women make up 15% of the UK construction industry, with approximately only 2% working onsite.

Industry leaders, key players and employers across the sector here, are well aware of the issues facing women accessing the sector. The Construction Industry Training Board NI (CITB NI), the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) and the Equality Commission are actively working in partnership to promote and integrate equality, diversity and inclusion across Northern Ireland's construction sector.

But is the tide also starting to turn more widely? If we look at enrolment in STEM subjects, the very subjects required to access job roles in the construction sector, things seem to be improving. In the UK, there has been a 31% increase in entries from women and girls to STEM A-levels between 2010 and 2019. While the number

of young women taking Mathematics and Further Mathematics, has increased by around 2.8% and 3.9% respectively.

In higher education, the number of women accepted onto full-time STEM undergraduate courses increased by 50.1% between 2011 and 2020 in the UK. Within the same period, women entering full-time undergraduate courses taking STEM subjects increased from 33.6% to 41.4%.

Together we need to harness this interest in STEM subjects. It's vital that girls and women with an aptitude to STEM subjects are inspired to see careers in the sector as an attractive option. We need to challenge gender stereotypes and encourage women and girls to seriously explore careers in construction. It is an industry that offers: good careers, opportunities to travel and gain experience and lifelong skills that can provide employment security and flexibility.

Our partnership work to promote and integrate diversity and inclusion across the sector is key to achieving this. By adopting this, companies can significantly boost their brand and reputation - presenting your company as a desirable place to work. It will help you attract top talent from more diverse pools.

Diversity and inclusion can also lead to higher employee engagement and better employee retention, happy employees will stay longer with a company, resulting in lower turnover rates. Importantly, it will help us all to ensure we are operating within Northern Ireland's anti-discrimination laws. A win win for everyone.

I have no doubt encouraging more women into the construction industry will have a positive impact on Northern Ireland's future prosperity and growth. We will continue to work with CITB NI and CIOB to ensure this happens.