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[Blog article](#) by **Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

International Women's Day 2023

Every year the Equality Commission supports and celebrates 'International Women's Day'. It is a dedicated date in our annual calendar when we mark the achievements of women across our society, reflect how far we have come and remind ourselves just how far we still have to go to achieve equality for women here.

We know that things have improved significantly for women including in employment. It seems ludicrous to think that, in my lifetime, the so-called 'marriage bar' in the Civil Service and local government, meant that many women had to leave their job when they got married. There is no doubt that the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Order in July 1976 offered much needed protections and changed the situation for women for the better.

But here we are, more than 45 years later, and sex discrimination complaints to the Commission consistently account for over 1 in 4 of all complaints we receive and 27% of those are about potential pregnancy and maternity discrimination.

Here in the Commission, we have particular focus of work on increasing the number of women in employment. We recently supported a woman working in a STEM job who settled her sex discrimination case against her former employer for £25,000 because her employer failed to deal with her flexible working request correctly when she returned from maternity leave.

This new mother had agreed a temporary flexible working arrangement with her manager for a few months to help her meet her childcare needs. Unfortunately, she had to take another short period of leave after her maternity leave and when she resumed work a few weeks later, a new manager insisted that she return to work full-time, five days a week.

Despite making several attempts to find solutions to allow her to continue working within the flexible working arrangement for a few months until she could return to full-time work, she felt that the new manager would not consider or discuss her requests.

After a further flexible working request was declined, her only option was to return to work full-time. This was not possible due to her childcare responsibilities, and she felt she had no option but to resign.

This case is a reminder for employers on International Women's Day that all workers have the legal right to ask for flexible working, for any reason, although we know it is more likely to be requested by women than men for family and caring related reasons.

Employers must give genuine and serious consideration to such requests and in doing so must follow legally enforceable procedures. A failure to do so and/or a refusal to grant a

request without lawful justification could be challenged in an industrial tribunal. We strongly recommend therefore, that employers develop a flexible working policy and procedure which declares their commitment to providing flexible working arrangements and fair and non-discriminatory treatment to those employees who use them or wish to use them.

On International Women's Day we want employers to take the opportunity to remind themselves of the equality rights of their pregnant employees and those on maternity leave and what their responsibilities towards those employees are.

Our comprehensive guide 'Pregnancy and Maternity at Work – a guide for employers in Northern Ireland' is available online and colleagues in our Advice and Compliance Team are available to offer advice and guidance to help employers ensure they are operating within the parameters of Northern Ireland's equality laws.

So, while today is a day to celebrate all the women in our lives, let's commit to supporting our female colleagues every day and work towards eradicating sex discrimination from all aspects of our lives including our workplaces.