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[Blog article](#) by Kathryn Barr, Senior Policy Officer, Equality Commission

The road to gender equality – can equality law reform help?

As we celebrate International Women's Day this week, it's always useful to look back on how far we have come in working towards achieving equality for women in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt we have made significant progress over the last decades. But it is equally important to look forward and ensure we know exactly what still needs to be done.

The introduction of the Equal Pay Act (NI) 1970 and the Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976 were major milestones in the road toward equality for women. They were landmark pieces of legislation. They significantly improved protections for women in Northern Ireland, but like so much of our equality legislation they now offer less legal protections than those enjoyed by our counterparts living in Great Britain following the introduction of the Equality Act 2010.

Here in Northern Ireland, we currently have a patchwork of legislation that's showing some significant gaps and inconsistencies. As a result of these gaps, people living here are unable to challenge some types of discrimination because the laws are simply not there to protect them.

As part of the Commission's work on law reform, we have longstanding recommendations but, really, rather than try and mend a patchwork, we would be better to work towards a Single Equality Act, which would move all our discrimination laws forward at once.

A Single Equality Act would strengthen, harmonise, and simplify protections across all the equality grounds. Our legislation could and should be world-leading, taking account of lessons from Great Britain's Equality Act, but also looking to other countries to make sure we meet the best international standards. Learning from others will help ensure effective equality protections for everyone in Northern Ireland, include stronger provisions in relation to sex discrimination and equal pay legislation.

So, what needs to change? As part of our statutory remit, the Commission keeps all equality legislation under review and makes recommendations for change. For example, reforms we wish to see in relation to our sex discrimination legislation include:

- prohibiting sex-based discrimination and harassment by public bodies when carrying out their public functions;
- protecting against combined discrimination such as when an older Asian woman is discriminated against due to a mix of her age, gender and race;
- providing stronger protection for employees against sexual harassment by a third party, such as a customer, clients or visitors.

While looking more broadly at equality legislation that would improve protections particularly for women, it is also important that [gender pay gap reporting](#) regulations are introduced –

these should be accompanied by a gender pay strategy and action plan. Such a strategy should look at structural factors within society and the workplace, like gender stereotyping; education and career choices; caring roles; and the concentration of women in part-time work, especially where they are at risk of low pay.

Northern Ireland's Employment Act 2016 made provisions for these regulations, as well as a strategy, but due to the lack of a functioning NI Executive we are still waiting for this to be enacted.

So, as we celebrate International Women's Day, please take the time to [read our recommendations relating to gender policy positions and more broadly, equality law reform](#). Let's commit to work together to improve, strengthen and simplify all our equality legislation for the betterment of everyone who lives here.

Happy International Women's Day to you all!