



6 July 2016

PRESS RELEASE

Agri body Pays £47,500 in Sex Discrimination Settlements

The Agri-Food and Bio-Sciences Institute has paid a total of £47,500 to two women in settlement of cases they had taken with the assistance of the Equality Commission, alleging they were subjected to sex discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation while working as Assistant Scientific Officers at the Institute.

Carole Daly, aged 29, from Belfast, who commenced work at the Institute in 2009, complained of incidents which took place and treatment she received in the laboratory at Newforge Lane, where she was placed on her return to work from maternity leave in 2013. Hollie Lewis, aged 31, from Bangor, had worked in the Institute since 2004 and, when she was transferred to the same laboratory in 2014, she also complained about her treatment.



Carole Daly & Hollie Lewis

The Institute has paid Ms. Daly £25,000 and Ms. Lewis £22,500 in settlement of their cases.

The two women say that they were consistently treated less favourably by the male ASO and the Senior Scientific Officer and were subjected to abusive conduct by both of them. Though all staff in the laboratory were in fact the same grade, they say that the Project Leader, a Senior Scientific Officer, frequently described the only male ASO as 'the top dog' and said that the other (female) staff were below him. They also say they were shouted at without justification and when they complained repeatedly about the situation their complaints were not dealt with. Both women brought complaints to more senior people in the Institute and eventually lodged formal grievances but these were rejected.

Both women were on sick leave due to work related stress and Hollie has subsequently left her employment under a voluntary exit scheme. Carole has returned to work for AFBI in another department.

Hollie Lewis said: "As a woman working in a technical and scientific role I was very upset to be treated so badly. The situation became so difficult it made me ill and I had to take time out from work. When I challenged this behaviour and tried to have the situation rectified, I felt nobody took me seriously. I am pleased that the Institute has now apologised for the upset and distress I suffered and that it will be reviewing its policies, practices and procedures with the Equality Commission."

Carole Daly said: "I was very pleased to be working in a scientific job, but I never envisaged I would experience the type of treatment that I had to endure. I felt undermined and undervalued. Everyone is entitled to be treated fairly and with respect in their place of work and it is important that employers deal with situations like this and don't allow them to develop. I am happy that the case has now been resolved and I am continuing to develop my career within the Institute."

In both cases the Institute has apologised for the injury to feelings, upset and distress suffered by the women as a result. It has affirmed its commitment to the principle of equality of opportunity in employment. It has undertaken to meet with the Equality Commission to review its policies, practices and procedures to ensure they are effective and conform to equality legislation. It confirms it will implement all reasonable recommendations the Commission may make and that it will provide equality training to all staff which will include their obligations and responsibilities under the Sex Discrimination Order.

"It is unacceptable that, in the 21st century, women can still be subjected to disparaging treatment and find their position in the workplace diminished," Eileen Lavery, the Equality Commission's Head of Advice & Compliance and Legal, said. "The Commission has been a partner in a government-led initiative to increase the representation of women in scientific, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) employments. This work is important but its progress can be hampered if women still, on occasion, encounter bias and harassment in recruitment, promotion and in their daily work in the STEM industries."

"We need to reinforce the core message of 40 years of sex discrimination law," Ms Lavery said. "Women must be equal participants in all employment fields – and be confident that they will be treated with dignity and respect. It is the responsibility of all employers to ensure that, where individuals fail to live up to that standard, action is taken to deal with it effectively."

ENDS