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PRESS RELEASE

Expecting Equality

Equality Commission Investigation into Pregnancy and Maternity in the Workplace

Half of the women who responded to an Equality Commission investigation into the employment experiences of pregnant workers and mothers in Northern Ireland believe that their career opportunities have been negatively affected by their pregnancy or maternity leave.

That is one of the findings of 'Expecting Equality: a Formal Investigation under the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976', which the Commission is presenting at a conference in the Titanic Building in Belfast today.

Dr. Evelyn Collins CBE, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission, said: "Over one third of the women who talked to the Commission about their experiences said that they had been treated unfairly or disadvantaged because of their pregnancy or because they took maternity leave. They believe this affected their finances, their career opportunities, their status at work and their health. This is not acceptable, forty years after the introduction of legislation in Northern Ireland to provide protection from sex discrimination in employment".

The type of unfair treatment reported varied, including termination of employment, having their role changed against their wishes, and losing out on salary increases or bonus payments in comparison to their colleagues.

"That said, it is encouraging that almost half the women who responded to this investigation thought their employer had been supportive during their pregnancy, and on their return to work, and we know that there are many employers who want to do their best for their employees, who follow good practice, and have effective policies in place for pregnant members of staff," Dr. Collins said. "The conference will hear from employers about what has worked for their organisations and the practical support for pregnant women and mothers in their workplaces."

Of the employers surveyed in the investigation, the majority said that they provide support for pregnant employees and new mothers. They referred to policies and practices they had in place including flexible working arrangements, childcare vouchers and return to work incentives such as phased return and bonus payments.

Some employers also identified challenges associated with managing pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work. Difficulties in providing for staff absences were a concern to small businesses in particular.

“The results of this investigation highlight the need for an increased focus on ensuring that workplaces are fairer for, and more supportive, of pregnant employees and new mothers,” Dr Collins concluded. “We have made a number of recommendations in the report, to improve access to advice and information for employers and for employees, to improve employers’ practices and to highlight the economic benefits of utilising and retaining the skills and experience of pregnant workers and new mothers. We also want to encourage employers across all sectors to show leadership at a senior level to gender equality and to building an organisational culture that promotes gender equality in the workplace.”

Download the formal investigation reports:

- [Expecting Equality - Summary](#) (pdf, 1.3mb)
- [Expecting Equality - Full Report](#) (pdf, 5.9mb)

Note: to Editor

- Sex discrimination is consistently the second most commonly reported form of discrimination that the Commission receives every year, after disability discrimination. Last year, 87% of sex discrimination complaints to the Commission were to do with employment or the workplace. Pregnancy and maternity issues top the list of employment sex discrimination complaints every year.