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PRESS RELEASE

£50,000 for finance manager made redundant after having baby

Ruth Parks, a finance manager, who was made redundant following her return to work after maternity leave, has settled a claim alleging sex discrimination against her employer Noonan Services Group Ltd for £50,000. She took the case with the support of the Equality Commission.

Mrs Parks, from Tandragee, worked as a finance manager for a company which was taken over by Noonan Services Group in 2009. She had wide-ranging accounting duties in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Mrs Parks became pregnant and, in preparation for her maternity leave in 2013, her duties were reallocated across the team. She claims she was reassured that she would not be made redundant, and that her job was safe.

When Mrs Parks re-started work, she alleged that she had a minimal list of duties, her name had been removed from the finance organisation chart, two new accountants had been appointed, the hours of a colleague who had taken over some of her duties had been increased and she felt she was denied access to the finance files she needed for her work.

She brought a grievance which was not upheld and her appeal against this was also not upheld. A series of redundancy consultation meetings were held and Mrs Parks was notified that she had been selected for redundancy. Her appeal against this was also dismissed. She was offered an alternative position within the organization which she did not consider acceptable, and she alleged that she was not considered for a post for which she was well suited which came up while she was on maternity leave.

The company expressed its regret if Mrs Parks suffered any distress and upset by reason of the circumstances of her selection for redundancy and apologised for that injury to her feelings. It affirmed its commitment to the principle of equality of opportunity in employment and undertook to meet with the Equality Commission to review its policies, practices and procedures relating to pregnancy and maternity. The company also agreed to take steps to implement any reasonable recommendations the Commission may make including training for staff.

“When I went off on maternity leave,” Ruth Parks said, “I was happy and felt reassured that I was a valued and respected member of the team. My family life is also hugely important to me and I wanted to have more children. On my return to work it looked to me like I was being painted out of the picture. I could not resume my normal duties and I felt demeaned by the changes that had been made. I was devastated by the way I was treated when I returned to work. I felt I had to take action, not just for my own situation, but so that the same thing doesn’t happen to somebody else.”

Dr. Evelyn Collins, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission, said: “It has to be of concern that cases like Ruth Parks’ are not exceptional, but are in fact all too common. Next year it will be 40 years since the Sex Discrimination Order came into operation, yet a high proportion, generally around a quarter of the complaints which the Commission receives every year, are about sex discrimination and the area of pregnancy and maternity discrimination consistently generates the highest number of these complaints.

“The Commission is currently conducting a formal investigation on the important issue of the treatment of pregnant workers and mothers in workplaces in Northern Ireland, which is due to report in 2016. Around 1,000 women responded to the Commission’s online survey and participated in focus groups to share their experiences and thoughts.

“We have also collected information from employers regarding the challenges they face in managing pregnancy and maternity leave in the workplace and will be consulting further with employers to get their perspective. We are particularly keen to recognise and build on examples of good practice.

Dr Collins concluded: “Despite all the advances which have been made, women will not have full equality in the workplace if they are remain liable to lose their jobs because they become pregnant or can be treated unfairly on their return from maternity leave. All employers must recognise that women have a right to be treated fairly on returning to work after the birth of a child. Many employers do this successfully and, as a result, retain valued staff and encourage greater motivation and commitment.”

The Equality Commission offers free, expert and confidential advice to companies on issues such as pregnancy and maternity rights and responsibilities. Visit the [employers section of the website](#) or phone the employer advice line 028 9089 0888.