

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 19 January 2021
Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Encouraging women in Northern Ireland to climb the STEM career ladder

We recently welcomed Yelo, a local electronic test equipment manufacturer based in Carrickfergus, as the latest company to sign the Commission's STEM Charter.

Northern Ireland continues to have an under-representation of women across our STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) industries. Women are currently outnumbered by men in these industries by a ratio of three to one.

The Commission along with partners including the Department of the Economy developed the STEM Charter back in 2014 to help to improve the gender balance across STEM industries and have been working with a range of companies on this initiative since then. By signing up to our STEM Charter, companies are making a formal but voluntary commitment to take steps to try to recruit and retain more women in this field.

We welcome and encourage this commitment by the STEM signatories including YELO, to supporting gender diversity and equality and to increasing the participation and progression of women in its workplace.

There is no doubt that under-representation of women across the STEM industries raises an important gender equality issue but it goes further than that.

Northern Ireland needs to develop the very best pool of STEM candidates for its present and future economic prosperity and growth. In these uncertain economic times following Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic we need to encourage more people, especially young girls and women, to explore the opportunities available in the STEM industries.

To achieve this we must increase the number of girls and young women studying these subjects while at school as a part of their future career path. I qualified and worked as a civil engineer when that was still extremely unusual – and still decades later the idea that careers such as engineering are not for girls still exists.

In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, we must continue to look forward and plan our recovery, and as part of this we need to identify what skills and talents our economy needs to make it successful.

We will continue to encourage everyone, but especially women, to realise what great opportunities are offered by the STEM industries in Northern Ireland. Changing attitudes is never easy at any level but the Equality Commission can help.

We can offer practical support and are developing a STEM Employers' Equality Network, where good practice, advice and guidance on workplace gender equality issues are shared. [Visit the website](#) for more information on the STEM Charter, the Yelo story and a case study on Judith Bell, an electronics engineer working in R&D at Yelo.

The last word goes to Judith Bell: "There is such a diverse range of disciplines in engineering. I'd encourage anyone, regardless of gender, to get involved, especially creative folk, problem-solvers and those of us with a million and one questions about how the world works."