



Speech by Anna Carragher, ECNI Commissioner
'Are you getting the balance right?' STEM Seminar
Wednesday 26 June 2013

Introduction

The Commission welcomes the opportunity to work in partnership with DEL and its STEM Working Group on this initiative. We are very encouraged by the steps the NI Executive has been taking to grow STEM skills within the Northern Ireland workforce, to help attract more STEM inward investment and expand our local STEM businesses. In particular, we welcome Minister Farry's firm commitment to the project.

You will be aware that women's participation in the workplace and in particular in STEM businesses has been receiving increasing media and political commentary in both the UK and Europe.

This is probably not surprising given the efforts being made to get our economies back in shape. Giving all women the opportunity to achieve their full potential must be at the heart of our approach to economic growth. As Diana Garnham, Chief Executive of the Science Council recently noted, "the world of science and engineering is open to everyone. There's no one type of scientist and no single type of engineering".

The Context

The last 30 years has witnessed many societal changes and in some aspects it has been a story of progress with concrete changes evident in the situation and experience of girls and women – for example women's economic participation rates are now 62% an increase from 42% in 1979. In educational attainment, girls and women are outshining boys and men in most subjects, and there have been some changes to occupations and industries.

But sex inequalities continue to exist in relation to:

- pay, particularly for part-time women;
- in terms of the lack of fair representation of woman at all levels of employment, with a concentration of women in areas of work which are often under-valued, low paid and unskilled;
- the sexual harassment of women at work;
- structural inequalities in the labour market, sometimes referred to as the 'Glass Ceiling' which still make it more difficult for women to participate on an equal basis with men and;

- sex discrimination - sex discrimination complaints are the Commission's second largest area of complaints, 27% last year, most of them about workplace discrimination, this is despite UK legislation outlawing sex based discrimination being in place since 1976, 37 years ago!

But looking forward to day!

In preparation for today's event, I read the report from the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee on its inquiry into Women in the Workplace published just last week. While the report makes interesting, if familiar, reading I think it is worth taking a few minutes to consider the rationale for the inquiry and some of the contents of the report, in the context of today's

Commenting on the launch of the inquiry, the Chair of the Committee, Adrian Bailey, MP, said:

"Inequality has no place in the workplace. Discrimination against female employees is not only unfair to women, it is detrimental to business and damaging to the economy. Complacency, inactivity and stereotyping can all act as barriers to progress. We need to know what steps have been taken to tackle gender inequality, what effect they have had and what more might be done."

The report's introduction quotes from evidence to the inquiry from Rt Hon Maria Miller MP, Women and Equalities Minister which probably sums up the tenor of the report.

"This is still a workplace designed by men for men. There is a great deal that this Government still has to do to make sure that we can allow women to play their full part".

The report recognises that some aspects of women's position in the workplace has changed for the better. For example, the Committee heard from Professor Jane Dacre, representing the Royal College of Physicians, who told them that "60% of medical students are now female. She said "clever girls used to be nurses, now clever girls become doctors".

However, it is clear that often women's chances of achievement are reliant on the type of work that they choose to do, and the context in which they carry out that work. For example, within the medical profession, Professor Dacre noted that 42% of partners in primary care were women, compared with only 8% of surgical consultants being women.

Opportunities available to women depend on many factors - including the level of wages, the choice of work, the flexibility of work on offer, maternity provisions, the cost of local childcare, and the use of fair and open competition in job promotion. These factors are linked by perceptions of how women should be, what careers they should follow, and the roles that men take on.

The Committee concludes that gender stereotyping is still prevalent in our society and that this stereotyping is embedded in the cultural context in which career decisions are made, not from innate differences between men and women.

The Committee quoted Professor Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell, an astronomer at the University of Oxford and Chair of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's inquiry into STEM. The Professor said that culture, not biology, determined women's career choice, and illustrated this view by describing the variation in the number of female astronomers in different countries around the world. Argentina has 37% of its cohort female, whereas Japan has 6%. Local cultural influences dominate. She insisted it is not biology; this is not women's brains. This is the culture in the country—what is considered appropriate for women in that country to do. It was her view that it is our sisters, our cousins and our aunts who determine what is appropriate for women to do, to a large extent. They influence the early decision of girls.

The Committee says that just because it is culture rather than nature that influences career choice does not necessarily make it any easier to change, nor does it mean that all people—men or women—want to change it.

What is needed is the opportunity for girls and boys to make informed decisions about their future careers, based on comprehensive and objective advice. Independent, impartial advice from schools, from parents, and from organisations connected with education and business, is crucial in informing young girls and young boys of the full range of career opportunities open to them.

The report recognised that there were many excellent and diverse initiatives in the STEM field and suggested that the key is to share good practice across these initiatives and to look to other measures that have proven success in delivering an increased take-up by women in certain professions.

The report also encourages increased use of 'Positive action' measures. It quotes the example of the Women into Construction project, which increased the number of women construction workers who worked on the Olympic site increasing employer willingness to invest in training.

This is something the Commission would encourage and what I would like to focus the last section of my speech to.

Employers

The Commission is only too aware of the problems that businesses face; declining budgets, tighter margins, greater customer expectations and in the private sector probably decreasing returns. Equality can seem like a luxury that your business cannot afford but it makes business sense to recruit and retain the best staff and to be seen as an employer of choice in a competitive market.

The Commission also recognises that attracting women into STEM careers is not for employers alone. We have heard this morning about the role of education, careers advisers and indeed government in trying to break down the barriers facing women entering careers which are by their nature, and have been over many years, the preserve of males.

However employers do have a significant role to play in attracting women into STEM careers and in ensuring that their working environment is welcoming to both women and men. We encourage all employers to put gender equality into practice both formally and also through the unwritten practices. Equality needs to be embedded into the values of the organisation and in the attitudes of all levels of staff.

We would encourage employers to put a good Gender Action Plan in place in order to take appropriate “positive action” measures. I would like to stress that positive action should not be confused with the concept of positive or reverse discrimination.

In legislative terms, when the sex discrimination legislation was passed, the Government recognised that special measures were required to counteract the effects of past discrimination.

The Sex Discrimination Order therefore allows a number of positive action measures. For example, employers may, under Article 49, provide encouragement or special training for one sex to take up work in areas where they are under-represented.

“Encouragement” could mean including a statement on an advertisement to attract applications from the under-represented sex. This is already widely used. Special training, either in house or externally, could give the under-represented sex access to new areas of work or promotion possibilities.

The aim for employers, will of course be, to attain a ‘critical mass’ of women in non-traditional roles, where it is seen to be the norm for women to apply and work in key STEM roles. In order to get to this position, much needs to be done, for example sharing good practice so that employers can readily consider what works, and what works less well; considering mentoring roles for women to encourage greater confidence among women.

The positive action strategies which emerge will clearly depend on the issues identified but some examples will include introducing flexible working arrangements, parental leave, job sharing, childcare provisions, career break schemes and any other creative ways of promoting gender equality. It will of course be essential to monitor progress, against any targets and timetables for change.

The Commission

The Equality Commission can offer you practical support to help you do all this. Our work with employers and business people is a key area of work and one to which we allocate significant resource.

Much of our general work with employers includes support in relation to confidential one-to-one advice and guidance through an employer advice line; gender equality training for businesses and organisations; downloadable publications which cover a range of gender equality issues including policies on harassment and equal pay. Over the last 13 years we have seen an increase in contact from employers across the sectors, of different size and locations, who are prioritizing fairness as part of their drive to be great places to work and who want to work with the Commission.

The Commission works with employers across all sectors. This has included the development of initiatives designed to encourage more women into the construction sector and an initiative in the local government sector with councils to increase the proportion of women in senior positions. This in particular was very successful.

In relation to taking forward work with employers, who wish to embrace good practice in this area of equality, I would note that a copy of the “CEO Charter – Advancing Gender Equality in Science, Engineering and Technology” is included in the information packs today.

The Commission would be keen to partner with DEL, the STEM working group and employers to develop a specific Charter of Good Practice for Employers wishing to advance gender equality in STEM subjects NI.

We also facilitate networks of employers in NI, where employers with some common interest come together to develop and share good practice. Again, the Commission would be open to facilitating a network of STEM employers working, if this would be of assistance.

Conclusion

There are two sides to this equation. We need to encourage young women and girls to choose science and research for their studies and careers plus we need to encourage employers to make changes so more women to pursue science careers.

It is important that everyone in our society has an equal chance to develop their full potential and benefit from training and employment opportunities and this means harnessing the skills, creativity and talents of everyone, including women. Ensuring that women are economically active at all levels and particularly in the STEM sector, is more than just a gender equality issue, it is a broader economic issue and one which has huge consequences for our future and prosperity and growth.

The Equality Commission are committed to playing their part in addressing the underrepresentation of women in the STEM industries and will facilitate wider discussions with other key stakeholders, but we are also committed to working with you - the employers in developing workplace initiatives to further promote the role of women in your industries.

I appreciate engaging in the discussion today. Investing in these sectors – ensuring the best talent is available and able to flourish - will pay dividends for our country for many years to come. The Commission looks forward to jointly working for a better future, a more competitive future, for our children, and for Northern Ireland.