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Press release

Time for positive action on women's role in the economy

"It is time that businesses and the public sector became more proactive in tackling the persistent under-representation of women in management and in key sectors of the economy," Evelyn Collins CBE, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, said today.

Speaking at the international business women's conference in Belfast, organised by Women in Business, Ms Collins said that government and business must be prepared to use positive action to increase gender diversity to boost economic growth and to bring about change.

"We need change in expectations and aspirations, change in workplace culture, and change in the way work-life balance is managed for both women and men at every stage of their employment," she said. "We also need people to realise that gender diversity is good - not just for women but for men also and for the economy as a whole."

There is compelling evidence from around the world which shows that competitiveness in the long-term depends significantly on how a country harnesses the economic potential of women. Equalizing men and women's participation rates could add more than 10% to the size of the UK economy by 2030, according to a recent report by the Women's Business Council.

Evelyn Collins said: “If we are to have any chance of achieving such a target in Northern Ireland there must be a radical shift in culture and attitudes. We must continue to challenge outdated, stereotypical notions about what is “women’s work” or “men’s work”. Employers need to become more confident about taking positive actions, adopting family-friendly policies such as flexible working and parental leave which bring benefits to women and men and to the workplace generally.”

Ms Collins urged employers to contact the Equality Commission for practical advice on positive action measures, including the use of targets and timetables, to increase gender balance in their business.

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