

Current equality legislation lacks the teeth to deliver, says IFUT

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More robust initiatives are needed from government to ensure gender and pay equality, according to Joan Donegan, General Secretary of the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT).

Addressing a meeting on the role of trade unions in equality issues in higher education, UCC, (today, March 7th). Joan Donegan said that all too often our equality legislation lacks the teeth to deliver equality.

“IFUT, as a consequence, is regularly forced to take equality related cases through the labour law process to demand rights that in theory and in law should be automatically granted.

“It is both startling and unacceptable, 45 years after the removal of the marriage bar on women in the civil service and 25 years after the establishment of the Department of Equality and Law Reform, that so many issues related to equal pay and career progression for women remain unresolved,” she said.

International experience, particularly in countries where a level of equality has been achieved, shows that this situation is not unique to Ireland and that setting aspirational or non-binding targets is insufficient to address conscious and unconscious bias against women, Joan Donegan said.

“That is why Iceland, widely regarded as the world’s most gender neutral country, has just adopted legislation to legally enforce equal pay. From January 1st next employers will face daily fines unless independently certified as paying equal work for equal pay; smaller companies must comply by 2021.”

The reason for this highly robust measure is that, despite having equal pay legislation since 1961, over half a century later, Icelandic women still earn on average between 14% and 20% less than men, Joan Donegan said.

“The government here has developed detailed and genuine policies committed to achieving equality, notably the ‘National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017 - 2020’. Minister for Finance and Public Reform, Pascal Donohue, earlier this year also set ‘a target of 50/50 gender balance in appointments at senior levels’ in the civil service.

“But these targets are not mandatory and lack teeth. DPER says it ‘will review the effectiveness of the measures on a regular basis to ensure that they are having an impact over time.’

“The ‘Women and Girls’ strategy is peppered with aspirational language such as ‘encourage female involvement’ ‘supporting a greater focus on women’s

participation’, ‘accelerating progress’ and ‘initiate dialogue between union and employer stakeholders’

“That is why the current initiative by Minister for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell-O’Connor, TD, aimed at delivering practical and definitive action on equality in higher education, is so important and is a model for a national approach.

“As issues of gender equality become more understood and contested, employers and government alike will increasingly have to acknowledge and accept that the cost of denying or delaying equality measures will have an even bigger cost in terms of reputational damage, staff disharmony and related labour court and legal costs,” Joan Donegan said.

ENDS

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