

## **International Conference on Manufacturing Led Growth for Employment and Equality**

**Eileen Lavery Equality Commission for Northern Ireland**

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### **Employment and Equality in Northern Ireland:**

This session will provide an overview of the progress made on employment equality for the two main religious/ethnic communities (Protestant and Roman Catholic) in Northern Ireland. It outlines the journey in implementing equality provisions and details the substantial labour market fairness brought about by these protections. It also describes the ongoing social segregation of the communities and the present focus on building good relations, improving educational outcomes and assisting those outside the labour market to improve their employability.

The first employment equality legislation which focused on equality on grounds of religious belief/political opinion was introduced in 1976, following a long campaign for greater fairness for Roman Catholics. This law made religious discrimination in employment unlawful. Determinations of unlawful discrimination were made by the equality body, the Fair Employment Agency, not by a judicial body. By the 1980s, there was significant pressure on the UK government to strengthen the equality protections.

Considerably strengthened Fair Employment legislation was introduced in 1989 . Complaints of discrimination were henceforth heard by a Fair Employment Tribunal and a framework of case law was built up. A new Fair Employment Commission was established. Employers were required to practise equality actively and in particular :

- To monitor the religious composition of their workforce and submit this annually to the Commission
- To regularly review the composition and determine if it represented 'fair participation'
- To take 'affirmative action' where fair participation was not evident.

Employers worked in partnership with the Fair Employment Commission to address any identified underrepresentation. Both religious communities saw an increase in employment opportunities. The historical underrepresentation of Roman Catholics declined. Importantly, segregated employment reduced and integrated workplaces increased. Fifteen years after the legislation, the reports from employers' returns exhibited the labour market participation of the two communities was reflective of those who were available for work; that is, at the level of the economy, 'fair participation', had been achieved. Attitudes to persons of a different religion have also changed; respondents in an Equality Awareness Survey in 2011 reported that they were least likely to mind having a person of a different religious as a work colleague, compared to someone of any other equality group.

Despite the considerable success of the provisions outlawing employment discrimination, Northern Ireland remains a largely divided community. The social mobility chances of people in Northern Ireland

are no longer influenced by their religion. There is still, however, significant segregation of the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities in housing, in schools and colleges and in social activities such as sport.

There are increasing concerns about the lower level of academic attainment in the Protestant community, especially among males. There are concerns about those who are outside the labour market (NEETs – persons not in employment, education or training), and a number of initiatives to improve the employability of those outside the labour market are underway.

The creation of a single Equality Commission was a ground breaking development in 1999. It has responsibility for working to eliminate discrimination and the promotion of equality of opportunity on grounds of gender, religion, race, disability and subsequently also age and sexual orientation. The Equality Commission also has responsibility to oversee statutory mainstreaming duties on public authorities and these will also shortly be extended to focus on promoting good relations in Northern Ireland .

The Northern Ireland equality story is one of major social change. There has been a convergence in the labour market participation of Protestants and Roman Catholics. Employers ensure that there is a good and harmonious working environment where no worker feels under threat or is intimidated because of their religion. There are of course still some issues to be addressed but 30 years after our first legislation banning religious discrimination in work there is clear evidence of a fairer and more equal society.