

Flexible hours and pay transparency needed to close gender pay gap^[1]

Female empowerment 'key theme' for government, says Flanagan

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Flexible working hours across all sectors, complete pay transparency and a new approach towards maternity and parental leave is urgently needed if Ireland is serious about closing the State's gender pay gap, a conference on pay equality has heard.

More than 130 politicians, senior policymakers, business representatives, trade unions and academics gathered in Dublin on Wednesday to discuss the findings of a public consultation held in 2017 to tackle the gender pay gap.

The results show non-transparency in pay structures, childcare responsibilities, unconscious bias and occupational/sectoral gender segregation are believed to be the main contributing factors to the large pay gap between men and women in Ireland.

Minister for Justice Charlie Flanagan told the symposium that female empowerment was one of the "key themes" for the Government in 2018. "It is my intention and the intention right across government that we will continue to plan for a multi-faceted response, from investing in childcare to legislation to improved paid parental leave. I'm anxious that on the 100th anniversary of the women's vote that we can begin to report real progress and can continue to narrow the gap."

Heather Humphreys, Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, agreed that 2018 should be the year to build a more equal Ireland. "In spite of progress that has been made men are still being paid 13.9 per cent more than women. This is not a woman's issue, it is an issue that effects all of society. We need women not only to work but to work in quality employment and to become leaders. It's about encouraging more women to have the courage to put themselves forward."

Submissions

Nearly half of all submissions to the public consultation cited the disproportionate share of caring responsibilities taken on by women as one of the primary factors contributing to the gender pay gap. The consultation recommends that paternity leave be extended to one month and that shared parental leave should also be considered.

More than a third of submissions also cited the 'feminisation' of certain sectors as a causal factor in the wide pay gap, while a quarter warned that the lack of women in senior positions was a major push factor for unequal pay.

Orla O'Connor, Director of the National Women's Council of Ireland, told the symposium that more flexible working hours, both in the private and public sector, were needed so that parents could properly balance their day between work and caring for children. "Flexibility must not mean insecurity or part time work. We must make flexibility the norm in work. We need significant investment in affordable childcare so that it does not become the predominant factor in women's career decisions."

While changes are needed at legislative level, Ms O'Connor underlined the need for a cultural shift in how Irish people perceive women as the primary child carers. "We need to bring about a much greater awareness in terms of the sharing of care work ... showing that it is a positive thing to take time off to care for your children rather than it being seen as negative."

Punishing women

Patricia King, general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, echoed these comments by calling for an overhaul of maternity leave which she said currently punishes women for temporarily leaving the workplace up until they receive their pension. Ms King expressed despair at the current support system for women who take time off to have children, adding that Ireland is "still run by a male dominated society".

Responding to calls from participants in the symposium for pay audits across all sectors, Maria Hegarty from Equality Strategies reinforced the need to publish this data in "an educational way".

“It needs to inform people within the company, the decision makers. Otherwise it’s just seen as data. How can I use that data to make real change, that’s the key task.”

Dr Kara McGann, senior policy executive with Ibec, stressed the need to change the language around job advertisements to avoid alienating qualified women. “Language has to be gender neutral. We need to be clear in job descriptions about what’s essential. This isn’t just a female issue, it’s a strategic business issue.”

Schools must also reassess how they promote certain subjects to teenage girls and boys, added Dr McGann. “The roots of segregation lie in our education system ... we need to encourage more females into male dominated industries and vice versa. We need stronger career guidance and awareness of gender stereotyping in the teacher training curriculum. If we don’t know our biases we’re likely to be setting ourselves up for failure.”

-reprinted from The Irish Times

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