

First Work & Welfare Meeting

14th November 2020

First meeting on Work, Welfare & Earnings

Chair

Following part one of our meeting on equality in the workplace, we're going to hear now from the rapporteur from each of the 11 breakout groups who will present the three key findings from their group's work today.

As you know we're recording this feedback session and we will upload it on our website. We're trying to maximize the transparency of the process as we move along.

So first of all I want to thank you for stepping forward to be the rapporteur for your group and we look forward very much to hearing the outcome of your discussions today.

So let me call first from Breakout Group 1 please.

Breakout Group 1

We would like to suggest that zero hour contracts be abolished and legislation be made for a minimum working hours' requirement across all sectors, perhaps closer to 20 hours a week. If a low time contract is accepted from both sides, employer and employee, but an individual usually works far more hours, that this extra work can go towards being used for more job security, for example redundancy or in extraordinary times like we're living in now with Covid-19.

We would also include and encourage more flexible working hours, for example parental leave not only offered but mandatory. Perhaps too covering system for someone who is in a carer's role to be fully supported in their extra means family-friendly policy.

For our second point, we would suggest for a move towards transparency for companies and organisations that they must report employees pay by gender along with reporting the progression into senior roles, mirroring the Gender Pay Gap Information Bill 2019. We would suggest, where a gap exists, that companies and organisations must explain why a gap exists and what steps are being put in place to resolve the matter. We would also suggest a series of penalties for companies or organisations who do not strive to resolve this gap.

Lastly, we would like to address the segregation of children in our schools. We feel we should be moving away from segregating children by gender and from religious-based ethos into a national ethos. We feel by doing so we allow children access to all subjects encouraging girls to take part in STEM subjects and giving boys an opportunity to take subjects like home economics.

Chair

Okay, that's great, very succinct thank you very much. Now we're going to come next to Breakout Group 2 please.

Breakout Group 2

Firstly, we would like to recommend a reporting process or a publication, a way that companies and organisations would bring transparency to their commitment and their achievements in narrowing the gender pay gap, in achieving gender equality, dignity at work policies and respecting diversity within their organisations.

Secondly, we would recommend a move to a living wage and access for those particularly in non-unionized workforces to have a voice or a mechanism for accessing the same rights or collective bargaining or a similar process that those in unions currently have too.

Then we would also like to recommend progressive family and care and supports for all caring, not just childcare, including publicly funding childcare which will allow the government to leverage its influence there in achieving better pay and in a mostly feminised workforce there in childcare. Also along those lines that government contracts and public contracts would meet a charter on gender equality so that contracts are no longer just cost focused but look at the broader issues, such as gender equality, and leverage influence in that way.

Chair

That's great, thank you very much. Again, 3 well-made points. Next from Group 3 please.

Breakout Group 3

Our group's first point is to introduce a living wage and so introduce a minimum working hours requirements.

Our second point was a publicly funded childcare with contribution from parents perhaps. Maybe attaching the crèches to schools so the child is starting at the age of two, and going right away and the benefit of that obviously is that you can start gender education earlier as well.

Then our third point is collective bargaining and gender pay reporting for any company with more than 25 employees.

Chair

Okay thanks very much. We're beginning to hear certain themes coming through across the different groups but with some differences as well. That's what makes it interesting.

So let's hear how Group 4 got on.

Breakout Group 4

The first point we have is a publicly funded childcare, improved access and affordability for childcare universally, so childcare would be our priority.

The second one would be the living wage. Increase the national wage to the living wage, maybe take a look at the system of the German's and the German system for the medium wage and implement the procedures they have adopted and also to abolish the zero hour contract.

Thirdly, the education and mentoring so kind of amalgamated these two. Open schools and employment, addressing segregation in schools, stereotyping needs to be addressed, tackle education system and ensure equal angles both for female and male, maybe more career guidance given for equal opportunities but also in employment mentoring employees to maybe give them even more progression and opportunities within the employment. Just at the end, consideration of the abolishment of same-sex schools, so hopefully I got that across.

Chair

You did get that across loud and clear, thanks very much. Next we're moving to Group 5.

Breakout Group 5

Group 5 would like to see, in the employment sector, we'd like to see legislation to introduce the transparency of the gender pay gap in companies, blind recruitment where possible and the suggestion of an equality officer as we've seen with Covid officers to support employees in companies and to have someone to stand up and help them in their search for equality.

We'd like to see parental leave for both parents, however that family unit may be made up. The group would also like to see the introduction of the living wage with subsidies from small and medium enterprises.

In education we would like to see education at an early age to reduce gender stereotypes and improve quality, and in the workplace, to roll out seminars or presentations on equality and discrimination. We feel there's a need to remove the unconscious bias and behaviours that currently are taking place in the workplace.

Chair

Thanks for that. I think again that some themes are coming through from almost every group and that's very interesting.

So let's hear now what went on in Group 6 please.

Breakout Group 6

Group 6 decided that we would like to see the living wage rate of pay implemented for everybody and that there should be a universal basic income for people who are not working, for people on disability benefits or illness benefits.

We also decided that all employees should get contracts of employment with information on employment rights, rates of pay etc., but that this should be in plain English that people can understand what they're getting and not in legalese, and that the current laws should be enforced.

We also thought that companies or organisations with 50 or more employees should have mandatory transparent reporting systems in place for all payments made to employees including bonuses, rates of pay and to be reported on a gender basis.

We also, we're sneaking in a fourth one here, that equal emphasis on all types of employment should be given in schools so that children understand the value of all types of employment and that they can make a good income from all types of work, not just the academic work but other work as well.

Chair

Thank you very much again. You're not the only group to put an emphasis on the education side of things as well as picking up common themes and that's very helpful.

Now we come to Group 7 please.

Breakout Group 7

The vast majority of us agreed with the national living wage. Obviously you know, steps should be taken to ensure that it doesn't kind of fall below or near the minimum wage, it actually has to be a distinct separate policy that allows people to literally live. That was virtually unanimous in our group.

The next one was effectively a kind of a national PR awareness changing attitudes campaign that should be directed at career guidance counsellors, teachers, parents, people who influence young people that you know, students in secondary schools in particular themselves, about the choices that are out there. Like one example was given about somebody in the group who wanted to be an electrician but she was told by her parents that that wasn't right for her because she was a girl and she was told to be an instead and now all her electrician friends are making more money. So in other words, you know even things like influencing RTE, you know characters in soaps you know who are doing non-stereotypical roles, be they men or women, you know to actually influence people about the choices that are out there and that they shouldn't be sectioned into jobs for men and jobs for women. So we need a national change of awareness, a serious PR campaign directed at people who are making these decisions or influence the decision makers.

Then thirdly, there was the care workers and you know people living in care, you know low paid care roles, you know say in crèches and childcare units and so forth, I mean they are qualified workers, they have to actually get a level 6 I think to actually work there. They seem to be very low paid and I think you know we want to have recognition for people in low pay who are qualified, who have got certificates so that includes things like security work and other jobs as well. You know that we want them to be paid according to the fact that they are qualified you know to do these roles they've studied to do these roles and so forth.

So that was point three you know. We felt you know pay and recognition given to those you know in those important sectors. You know like if you're working in childcare I mean you have some of the responsibilities of a primary teacher in terms of your duty of care you know, so why shouldn't that be recognized in terms of wages and in terms of general respect for their qualifications.

Chair

Okay thanks very much. That's great to get all of the thoughts from your group.

Now Group number 8 is next please.

Breakout Group 8

Refreshing to hear, like you say, the themes that are kind of emanating from the discussion and like I said it's refreshing to see that other groups have discussed very similar and have similar recommendations.

We decided that our three most important points as we saw them were, in an effort to address low pay and feminised job that we look to have a pay equalisation across industry in recognition of qualifications, because that's what we believed was the right thing to do.

The second recommendation was like most other groups, Group 8 were adamant that the implementation of a living wage is hugely important, while cognizant of the impact on small and medium business but it's something that has to happen and we believe will go a long part of the way in addressing any disparity.

Then the third point we wanted to make was that we'd like to recommend or advise that progressive and family policy be developed to include affordable childcare and parental leave and the likes of it.

There was lots of other discussion around abolishing zero hour contracts and the abolition of all unpaid work cos there was some testaments to the unpaid work that the low paid jobs do where people stay on after hours for cleaning duties that would go unpaid and the abolition of that is really important. So yeah like you say common themes to a lot of the groups

Chair

Okay that's great. It's very good to hear both where groups agreed and disagreed, that all helps us build up the overall picture.

Next we come to Group 9 please.

Breakout Group 9

Its common themes again, we start off with number one childcare, to make it affordable, to revolutionise the policies, practice, procedures and increase state funding, to increase the substance support of childcare particularly for low paid, disabled or certain minority and migrant workers, to look at that piece.

Then on number two, we have a strap line to explain, educate and enforce, the three E's we're calling them, and we're saying that there has to be explanation and education for all employees and employers around terms and conditions, work practice etc., and on the enforcement side we'd like to see an ombudsperson to take forward any issues in relation to terms and conditions and work practice and gender equality.

As a side-line to that we want to see company accounts. Companies and corporations, big and small, have to produce accounts annually. Within their company accounts, we want to see potentially a piece on the gender pay gap and gender equality practices within that company and that could be submitted back to the ombudsperson or that particular office.

Then our point three is to look at applying the appropriate pathway and support to increase the minimum working wage to the living wage and also as other members have called out, or tables, to put in place practices and supports for small term businesses. As we say there's the Small Firms Association employ 97% of people in Ireland, small businesses of 10 to 15 to 20 people, supports are in place for them if we are really serious about implementing a standard or a bar of standard for the living wage. That's it from us.

Chair

Okay great thanks very much. Again very clear and precise. So Group 10 please.

Breakout Group 10

Under childcare, we'd like to see some reform of the sector and we'd like the government to have a long hard look at the insurance costs and maybe introduce tax allowances or tax breaks for parents and for the right of the employees to be able to organize and be recognized by their employers.

On the living wage, we'd like to see a move towards the living wage, maybe inflation-proofed and abolish zero hour contracts and wage transparency.

And on the third point, we have either a Minister or an Ombudsperson appointed for equality. And that's about it.

Chair

Okay again thank you very much. That was very clear and we know exactly what your group wants to recommend.

And finally, to Group 11 and thank you for your patience.

Breakout Group 11

So Group 11 on childcare, we determined that we'd like to see more government intervention in the form of subsidies and tax credits or perhaps even state-run facilities to help parents offset the costs of childcare.

On education, we would like to see education throughout all levels of schooling and workplace on removing gender stereotypes, providing disability awareness, sharing caring roles between both men and women and improving visibility on how people can gain assistance if they're experiencing discrimination or exploitation in the workplace.

And on working and the living wage, we would like to see more security in place for contracts and the removal of zero hour contracts. We'd also like to see a review for a path to move the minimum wage to the living wage, while having supports employed in place to prevent job loss and helping small firms engage with the process. We'd also like to see some enforcement of regulations that are already in place to help with these things. And that's it from Group 11.

Okay. Well a very big thank you to all of you and I think there we have a very good harvest with very concrete recommendations with nuances from different groups, so that will help us to build up a composite picture.

So I want to thank each of you for your continuing commitment and ongoing engagement and for volunteering to present your breakout group's conclusions, first of all to the rest of the Assembly, and then to the wider world because this session is being recorded and it will be uploaded on the website in the next couple of days.

Chair

So thank you very much indeed for all of that. As I said, the work continues. We're now in a rhythm of meeting roughly once a month so the next meeting is on the 5th of December and the emails and the videos will be coming out to you week by week as previously.

But as I promised, we're going to send you slightly less for next time around so you can have a little bit of a pre-Christmas break and we'll resume with part two of our very interesting discussions on work on the 5th of December.

In the meantime, take care of yourselves and we look forward to seeing you all again on the 5th of December.

Thanks very much. Take care, bye.