

NUI Galway unions critical of college's new equality taskforce

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Moves by NUI Galway to establish a taskforce on gender discrimination have been strongly criticised by both unions representing lecturers at the university, SIPTU and IFUT.

The taskforce is to be established in response to a recent €70,000 Equality Tribunal award to one lecturer, Dr Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, for gender discrimination against. Both unions are unhappy with the level of consultation by university management in setting up the taskforce.

Late last month, NUIG appointed the taskforce's external chairperson, Professor Jane Grimson, a former dean of engineering and vice-provost at Trinity College Dublin, who NUIG says has a particular interest in the recruitment, retention and promotion of women in engineering and also in academia generally. The remaining members of the taskforce will be appointed in due course, according to a spokesperson for the college.

The college's statement announcing Professor Grimson's appointment said also that its Governing Authority noted various elements of Dr Sheehy Skeffington's claims that had been rejected by the Equality Tribunal as "very sweeping generalisations".

The points rejected by the Tribunal had included: that women do more teaching than men; that men spend more time on research and women more time on teaching; and that leadership positions are awarded on a 'nod and wink' basis.

'DEEP DISAPPOINTMENT'

However SIPTU members at NUIG expressed "deep disappointment" this week, arguing that the taskforce "has been chosen behind closed doors, without reference to any publicised criteria. It is not even clear whether any member of the task force will have a specialised expertise in equality in the workplace."

They pointed instead to their own proposal early in January, which called for a taskforce of independent equality experts whose appointment would be agreed with unions, with procedures that allowed staff and students to meet confidentially with the taskforce.

The union's local committee also pointed to the university's decision to appeal a separate equality decision in respect of another worker, Mary Dempsey who, like Dr Sheehy Skeffington, is also a SIPTU member.

SIPTU's education sector organiser, Louise O'Reilly, also said this week that "the management team that is forming this taskforce is the same one that presided over the incidents of discrimination highlighted by the Equality Tribunal", adding:

"Management has sought to exclude our members from meaningful input into the establishment of this taskforce by bypassing their representative structures. We are now calling on the management of NUI Galway to sit down with our members and agree the most effective way to deal with the deeply disturbing findings of the Equality Tribunal."

LACK OF CONSULTATION

IFUT, which also represents lecturers at the college, welcomed the decision to set up a task force, but expressed "serious concern that the process is being dealt with secretly and without consultation with staff".

The union's deputy general secretary, Joan Donegan, said the task force membership should be agreed jointly with staff unions and while the appointment of a chairman was "welcome in principle", the process of selection "has clearly taken some time and was undertaken without reference whatever to staff".

Ms Donegan also said it was regrettable that NUIG's statement announcing the taskforce chairperson "devotes considerable effort" to undermining the Equality Tribunal's decision, while disregarding the Tribunal's finding that "men are in the minority in the College Lecturer grade (40%) but, significantly, that statistic is almost inverted when it comes to the next promotional grade - 61% of Senior Lecturers are men."

'HIDDEN PROBLEM'

In advance of a meeting in UCC this week on gender discrimination, Ms Donegan said it was a "hidden problem which is forcing many women to 'give-up' on academic progression in the workplace".

She said: "Statistics show that women are being neither encouraged nor facilitated to progress to professorship of senior academic level in our universities."