

Presentation to the Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage
and the Gaeltacht

IRISH EQUITY



November 23rd 2017

The Irish Equity group was established on January 16th 1949 to organise and represent actors in the Republic of Ireland with the objective of securing decent working and living conditions for actors. On September 9th 1979 the Irish Equity Group merged with the then ITGWU (now SIPTU) and became the Cultural Division of the ITGWU. This Cultural Division also included the Association of artists in Ireland led by Robert Ballagh, the Society of Irish Playwrights with John O Donovan and the Association of Irish Composers.

Currently Irish Equity sits within the Arts & Culture Sector of the Services Division of SIPTU and the day to day work is overseen by an Executive Committee of Equity members who are elected at the AGM of Irish Equity. During all of this time the union has not only been concerned with a narrow focus of wages and conditions but also with the quality of life for actors at work and in society.

It was no surprise then when, in more recent times, anecdotal evidence of bullying and harassment started to come our way that this matter was discussed frequently and at length by the Executive Committee of Irish Equity. Subsequently a decision was taken to undertake a survey of workers in the arts to get a snapshot in time of the actual experience of people working in the various disciplines in the arts. This survey was put together in 2015 and went live on line in early 2016.

There were 285 responses to the survey, over 63% of respondents were female and over 80% were between the ages of 25 and 54, with 62% describing their working situation as freelance. Over 57% of respondents said they had experienced bullying in the course of their work with almost 74% confirming that they did not report this behaviour to anybody. The effects of the bullying are quite significant with symptoms ranging from anxiety and depression, feelings of dread, not wanting to go to work and sleeping problems among the number of symptoms described.

Irish Equity were very concerned with these findings, and while we do not assert that the survey is large, overly formal or academic, we certainly do assert that the information gathered is extremely useful in giving a picture of real life experiences for workers in the arts.

We published our survey along with good policy guidelines and circulated it to Equity members and various funding bodies. Our intention was to engage the funding bodies in a conversation about our concerns around the findings and to ask for their support in finding ways to take measures to change what we believed to be a workplace cultural problem within the arts.

We were disappointed with the outcome of these engagements. Our position was as follows;

1. The level to which applicants for public funding have awareness and good policy/procedures needed to be established.
2. Having good policy and procedure in place should be a qualifying criteria for public funding.

3. Where organisations were identified as not having these policies and procedures, the union, the organisation and the funding bodies should co-operate in assisting them with developing same.

While generally sympathetic to the argument, for the most part the funding bodies that we spoke to did not see it as their role to interfere in the governance of organisations to this extent.

The exception to this was the Dublin City Arts Office, who were quick to acknowledge the survey outcomes and were agreeable to working with the union to endeavour to create cultural change.

The union agreed with the Arts Office that a broader engagement with the industry was required and we then reached out to Screen Training Ireland and Screen Producers Ireland to discuss the possibilities around holding an industry seminar on dealing with bullying and harassment at work and on promoting good practice. This event was organised over the Summer and took place on November 10th in the Dublin City Arts Office building in Foley Street. This was a successful event with 50 people from theatre, film and tv present.

While this was an instructive and informative event for those participating, on its own it is not enough to create the kind of attitudinal change that is required. Irish Equity are of the view that a number of actions need to be taken including the following.

1. While Irish Equity welcomes the initiative taken by Minister Heather Humphries including the engagement with the heads of eight leading theatre organisations to discuss ways to create a change in culture for the arts, a base line needs to be identified. By this we mean that if this is to be a credible exercise with real and lasting outcomes then, in the first instance the Minister should satisfy herself those 8 organisations are currently operating good practice on issues of bullying and harassment. This is essential if these organisations are being asked to take a lead on this matter.
2. There should be direct co-operation and engagement between Irish Equity, arts organisations and training bodies to develop and monitor best practice in the industry.
3. The Minister should encourage theatre organisations to establish an representative umbrella body who can engage with stake holders collectively on industry matters in the way that Screen Producers Ireland does for the audio visual industry. This will greatly assist in creating industry oversight and norms.
4. Given the freelance nature of the work for many in the arts, a method of reporting that protects the worker needs to be established. Extending the cover of the Protected Disclosures legislation to cover reporting of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment would provide the required safe space for workers and would provide enough incentive for employers and arts organisations to take on these issues with the level of seriousness that they deserve.

5. Drama Schools and Arts Colleges should develop at least one module on dignity in the workplace and creating positive workplace culture so that the next generation of workers in the arts bring new perspectives on what a dignified workplace means.
6. All applicants for public funding should have to have good practice and policy in place as a prerequisite for access to such funding.

The objective of all of this is to ensure that culture change is achievable and sustainable and to ensure that the message to perpetrators of bad behaviour is clear, - that the workplace is a harassment free zone and perpetrators are not welcome and will be found out and weeded out.