

News story: Mind the gap

When (some) women first won the right to vote on this day 100 years ago, the idea that they would also have a hand in drafting legislation was laughable.

That they could be responsible for creating laws to protect women against sex discrimination, as well as discrimination on the basis of other 'protected characteristics', such as disability and race, was beyond the realm of most people's imagination.

Yet lawyers from the Government Legal Department (GLD), who advise the Government Equalities Office (GEO), do exactly that.

An average day at the office for Anna Fairclough, a GLD lawyer who advises GEO, could involve briefing Ministers to respond to questions in the House of Commons, working with policy colleagues to make sure press lines are legally accurate, or drafting regulations to help close the gender pay gap.

Recently, Anna's team has also helped to draft guidance on dress codes for employers – something which, in the future, will help those asked to wear inappropriate clothes at work. The team was also closely involved in implementing the Secretary of State's 2017 commitment to provide free abortions in England for women from Northern Ireland.

"If you look at the recent controversies around equal pay at the BBC and the President's Club – it's obvious there's still quite a long way to go," says Anna, whose remit also includes issues relating to trans and non-binary people.

The Representation of the People Act 1918 gave certain women the right to vote: to qualify, you had to be aged over 30, a property owner, married to or a member of the Local Government Register, or a graduate voting in a University constituency. Eight and a half million women met these criteria – but that number still represented only 40% of the total population of women in the UK. The Act opened the door to full suffrage, which was achieved a decade later. In 1928, the Equal Franchise Act led to all women over 21 being able to vote with the same requirements and rights as men.

The Government Equalities Office works on a number of important programmes to address gender inequality and supports the Home Secretary in her role as Minister for Women and Equalities, supported by GLD lawyers.

One of the biggest projects last year dealt with by GLD lawyers advising GEO was drafting the Gender Pay Gap Regulations. The regulations ensure large employers are bound by law to publish data publicly on differences in average pay between men and women – guaranteeing that they can be held to account on this issue.

"That's a massively important step towards identifying the gender pay gap, and the drivers of that inequality, and making sure that this is front and centre of people's minds." Anna says. "It's great to work on something that's

so progressive – we're the only country in the world to require such extensive public reporting of gender pay gaps.

"It's brilliant working on things that are high-profile and interesting to talk about. They're topical, exciting. And it's great to be in a position to have a positive influence on the way society develops."

GEO lawyers also assist in work with an international flavour, such as scrutinising the legislation and policy of British Overseas Territories to test compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, so as to extend the Convention to protect women in those territories.

In the future, Anna anticipates the team will be able to go even further in advancing equality for women: "I expect there will be further work to raise awareness of acceptable dress codes and treatment of women at work, as well as projects to increase women's political participation at every level and to encourage women to return to work after career breaks. I'm keen to see how the first year of gender pay gap reporting plays out, and how employers start making positive changes to reduce the gap.

"The past few months have seen a sea change in attitudes to women, and hopefully we'll be working on projects that aim to seize and build upon that mood."