



Northern Ireland
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Training and Support Programmes for Women in Politics

1 Introduction

On 10 March 2014, the Northern Ireland Assembly resolved¹:

That this Assembly recognises the lack of female representation in politics and public life; further recognises the positive outcomes that result in tackling this inequality, when support and training programmes are put in place to encourage more female candidates to stand in elections; and calls for the introduction of a training and support programme to encourage more female candidates to stand for election.

In the light of this motion and in the context of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee review on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly², this paper summarises some general principles on training and support programmes for women in

¹ Private Members' Business, 10 March 2014: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Reports-13-14/10-March-2014/#5>.

² Assembly and Executive Review Committee, Review into 'Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly': <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Committees/Assembly-and-Executive-Review/Reviews/Women-in-Politics-and-the-Northern-Ireland-Assembly/>.

politics and gives an overview of some such programmes that have been used in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

2 Training and Support for Women in Politics

Training and support initiatives for women in politics have been recommended as a mechanism³ for increasing the representation of women in political life, both for representatives and electoral candidates. Such training and support can take place within legislatures, within political parties or within communities to encourage more women to come forward⁴.

In broad terms, encouragement, specialist training and programmes to locate women as potential candidates are seen as 'positive action' measures that political parties themselves can undertake⁵. Training for women in or entering politics is a 'facilitation measure' to increase the participation of women⁶.

To expand the pool of women available to enter political life, there needs to be access from an early age to work patterns that are conducive to leadership. Specialist training in community-based organisations can be used to develop skills such as⁷:

- Understanding the concerns of women
- Gendered political awareness raising
- Lobbying
- Networking

Once involved in politics, there are certain strategies that have been proposed in order to make an impact⁸:

1. Learning the Rules – to understand how the system works and use it more effectively
2. Using the Rules – to seize opportunities to participate and to raise issues
3. Changing the Rules – to use political capital for further advancement and to help change processes to assist new generations of women to progress

³ For an overview of mechanisms for increasing female political representation see Research and Information Service Research Paper 9/14, *Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly*, 3 September 2013:

http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RalSe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf.

⁴ Pippa Norris and Mona Lena Krook (2011), *Gender Equality in Elected Office: A Six-Step Action Plan*, Vienna: OSCE, pp.40-2: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/78432?download=true>.

⁵ Joni Lovenduski (1993), 'Introduction: The Dynamics of Gender and Party' in Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris (eds) *Gender and Party Politics*, London: Sage, p.9.

⁶ Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (1993) 'Gender and Party Politics in Britain' in Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris (eds) *Gender and Party Politics*, London: Sage, p.53.

⁷ Nadezhda Shvedova (1998) 'Obstacles to Women's Participation in Parliament' in Azza Karam (ed) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, Stockholm: International IDEA, pp.27-8.

⁸ Joni Lovenduski and Azza Karam (1998) 'Women in Parliament: Making a Difference' in Azza Karam (ed) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, Stockholm: International IDEA, pp.131-51.

For this to take place, capacity building measures to equip women might include the following⁹:

- Orientation in the legislature
- Understanding party processes
- Networking and mentoring
- Joint as well as women-only training
- Voice projection and public speaking
- How to handle the media

However, there are two points to be borne in mind in relation to programmes designed to facilitate the participation of women in politics. Firstly, such measures are only one approach among many and can be seen as a first step. For example, preferential training and hiring was promoted to increase the participation of women in many areas of public and professional life in France in the 1970s and 1980s after the use of quotas was rejected¹⁰. More recently, more direct measures such as quotas have been employed in France due to the slow rate of progress¹¹. Secondly, capacity building for women in areas where there are barriers to participation assumes women to be the 'problem', when it is the environment that is in need of change¹².

3 Examples of Training and Support Programmes for Women

This section provides an overview of three programmes that have been used to build the capacity of women in politics or entering politics:

- DemocraShe, which has been used in Northern Ireland to provide training and development for female elected representatives
- Women in Local Councils, which has been used to build the capacity of women in both political and staff roles in local councils in Northern Ireland
- Women for Election, which promotes the participation of women in politics in the Republic of Ireland

⁹ Ibid., pp.132-4.

¹⁰ Amy Mazur (1991) 'Agendas and *Egalité Professionnelle*: Symbolic Policy at Work in France' in Elizabeth Meehan and Selma Sevenhuijsen (eds) *Equality Politics and Gender*, London: Sage, p.131.

¹¹ See Research and Information Service Briefing Paper 86/14 Act for Real Equality between Women and Men – France, 22 September 2014, p.5-6:
http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/8614.pdf.

¹² For example, see Michael Potter and Myrtle Hill (2009) 'Women into Non-Traditional Sectors: Addressing Gender Segregation in the Northern Ireland Workforce' in *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 61(2), 133-150.

DemocraShe¹³

DemocraShe was established in 2000 with financial support mainly from the USA, associated with the Vital Voices¹⁴ initiative. The focus was on working with women in political parties and was co-ordinated with election cycles. Initially, training was undertaken separately by political party, with programmes designed to need, usually taking place at weekends and evenings. Around 250 women took part, including around half of female Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs).

Initially, the programme consisted of the following themes, delivered by specialist trainers:

- Confidence building
- Electioneering
- Campaign training
- Fundraising
- Public speaking
- Media training

Later the programme developed through learning and content included the following:

- Combining elements, such as confidence building with media training
- Doorstepping
- Videovoxing
- Written press skills
- Scenarios and role plays using actors

Experience of the programme suggested that residential settings were the most effective.

The programme did not continue due to limitations in resources.

Women in Local Councils¹⁵

The Women in Local Councils initiative was launched in January 2006 and comprised a range of events and measures to raise the profile of women in local councils. These included the following¹⁶:

¹³ Information from Bronagh Hinds, co-ordinator of DemocraShe, 14 October 2014, except where other sources are cited.

¹⁴ Vital Voices is an NGO committed to promoting women in leadership internationally: <http://www.vitalvoices.org/>.

¹⁵ Information from Diana Stewart of the Local Government and Staff Commission 23 October 2014, except where other sources are cited.

¹⁶ Women in Local Councils – making a difference, Annual Report of Activity 1 January 2006 to 31 December 2006.

- Declaration of Principles – this was to be signed by each of the councils committing them to a principles of equality and the promotion of a culture in which women feel able to participate fully
- Change Champions – nomination of Champions within each council, the five main political parties and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
- Gender Action Plans – three templates were developed: for council staff, for political representatives and for political parties
- Website – a dedicated information portal was developed to support the initiative¹⁷

Currently, the Local Government Staff Commission facilitates an Equality and Diversity Group. There are Women in Local Councils events each year around International Women's Day and there is a network of party and local government staff equality and diversity champions across the local councils of Northern Ireland¹⁸. The main focus of the initiative is being taken forward within the councils.

Part of the process of nurturing a supply of women into politics was a shadowing/mentoring scheme, where women who had demonstrated an interested in politics through community-based projects (in this case, via Women into Politics and the Women's Resource and Development Agency) were matched with local politicians. Mentors received a one-day training course for effective mentoring and mentees received training on local government structures.

Women for Election¹⁹

Women for Election was formed in January 2011 and launched on International Women's Day 2012²⁰ as a not-for-profit, non-partisan organisation whose vision is of an Ireland with balanced participation of women and men in political life. Work towards this goal is undertaken through the following initiatives²¹:

- A tailored political training programme
- A network of political women
- Advocacy
- Activities to overcome barriers to women's participation

The training programme works at three levels through the following elements:

¹⁷ At the time of writing, the website address (www.womeninlocalcouncils.org.uk) was no longer available.

¹⁸ Equality and Diversity, LGSC website, accessed 17 October 2014: <http://www.lgsc.org.uk/new-initiatives/equality-and-diversity/>.

¹⁹ Information from Michelle O'Donnell Keating of Women for Election 17 October 2014, except where other sources are cited.

²⁰ Women for Election (2013), *Women for Election*, Dublin: Women for Election, p.3.

²¹ 'About us', Women for Election website: <http://www.womenforelection.ie/about-us/>.

1. INFORM²² is a programme that works in universities to engage young women and encourage them to participate in politics through events, workshops, mentoring, a peer group and media campaigns
2. INSPIRE²³ is a one-day programme designed to provide an introduction to political life for interested women, looking at confidence, campaigns and communications
3. EQUIP²⁴ is a three-day residential programme designed to provide practical training for female candidates in the run-up to elections, covering core campaign skills such as:
 - Public speaking
 - Canvassing
 - Campaign planning
 - Campaign management
 - Budgeting
 - Fundraising
 - Media
 - Personal wellbeing and resilience

The initial INSPIRE programme comprised six one-day events each of three modules (confidence, campaigns and communications) in Cork, Galway, Dublin and Limerick, attended by almost 300 participants. The programme involved core skills training and presentations from female politicians on a cross-party basis²⁵.

More recently, the ENGAGE programme has been developed with a focus on the general public, encouraging people to vote, to discuss politics and to consider becoming involved in politics.

Beyond the development of skills for politics, which are equally applicable to men and to women, the organisation aims to address specific barriers women face, including the following:

- Confidence – It is not that women are unconfident, but women and men have less confidence in the face of new situations. For women, the practice of politics is less familiar because of the predominance of men and therefore need confidence-building measures.

²² INFORM, Women for Election website: <http://www.womenforelection.ie/our-programmes/third-level-program/>.

²³ INSPIRE, Women for Election website: <http://www.womenforelection.ie/our-programmes/inspire/>.

²⁴ EQUIP, Women Election website: <http://www.womenforelection.ie/our-programmes/equip/>.

²⁵ Vicky Kavanagh and Sharon Pia Hickey (2013), *Evaluation of INSPIRE Programme*, Dublin: Women for Election.

- De-mystification – The practice of politics is often associated with a closed circle of knowledge, mostly confined to men. Knowledge and understanding of how politics work creates opportunities for women to participate.
- Sustaining the pipeline – Work has to be undertaken at all levels to create interest in politics, encourage women to participate, equip those entering politics and to support them while they are there.