



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly:  
Research and Information Service Briefing

6 May 2014



Turning back to the main paper, I will briefly summarise the extent of female representation in the Assembly in comparative perspective; what are considered to be the causal factors for that; and some suggestions that have been made to increase representation. I should just note briefly that there are two forms of representation. One is descriptive representation, which is the actual number of women represented in a legislature. The other is substantive representation, which indicates that women's views and issues are being dealt with by the legislature. We deal mostly with descriptive representation, which tends to count women. Substantive representation refers to whether women's issues are actually being dealt with in the legislature.

There are currently 22 female MLAs, which is 20% of the Assembly membership. The rise to 22 is due to the recent co-option of Claire Sugden. Comparative figures in the papers show that the Assembly has the lowest representation of women among the legislatures on these islands, except for Dáil Éireann. However, there will be a quota of 30% for the next Dáil election, suggesting that that position will change somewhat. Barriers to women's participation have been summarised as three sets of key questions. The first is political barriers; the notion of a masculine model of politics and the question of whether the practice of politics itself happens in such a way that puts women off participating; party factors and whether women feel that they have a place or are encouraged in parties; cooperation with community organisations and whether there are links with organisations such as women's groups to nurture and encourage future female politicians, and electoral systems. Studies have shown some systems to be more conducive to electing more women than others. I will mention that a bit later. It is not always conclusive.

The second set of barriers are socio-economic questions and financial resources. The reality is that political life may require a degree of economic independence or resourcing. Research has shown that women are more susceptible to poverty and suffer disproportionately from economic inequalities. There is the so-called dual burden; women tend to have primary responsibility for caring obligations in the family, such as children, older people or family members with disabilities or illnesses, leaving fewer opportunities to pursue a time-consuming career such as politics. With regard to education and training, women tend to be steered away from areas that are more aligned to politics, such as management and leadership, economics, business or law, and towards caring, clerical and cashiering jobs.

The third set of questions is around ideological or social barriers. Women and men tend to be socialised into a pattern that politics is a male domain, which can deter women. There is a lack of confidence. I do not necessarily mean a lack of assertiveness, though — there are plenty of assertive women around — but a sense of exclusion or of a lack of transferable life skills sets to politics. There is the perception of politics and whether political culture, such as the adversarial nature of debating, deters women. Then there is the role of media and whether the image of politicians is a male model.

So, various methods have been suggested for increasing the participation of women, many of which can be used in combination. I will just summarise the breadth of them and perhaps focus on a couple of examples that may be of interest to the Committee. The first is electoral systems. Some models for elections are considered to be more conducive to greater female representation, such as proportional representation and larger district magnitudes. However, that is not always conclusive. It does not always happen that way.

The second is party policies. Party methods of candidate selection, training, support, organisation or party cultures can either encourage or deter women.

Then there are quotas, which come in different forms and different percentages. The UK currently has voluntary quotas that parties may apply by law. Voluntary quotas with penalties is the system that is used in the Dáil, where parties lose a proportion of funds if they do not meet the quota for candidates. There are hard legal quotas, where a list is rejected if it does not have a certain proportion of women, such as in certain elections in France. Clearly, that works only with a fully proportional system. Then, there are seat quotas, such as in Kosovo. Where those are applied, women are guaranteed a proportion of seats regardless of whether there are men with more votes.

There are parliamentary procedures. The operation of a legislature can be reviewed to examine whether it attracts or deters women. I will come back to that point in one of the examples. There are support mechanisms. Direct support to women, such as training, personal development, mentoring or resources can be used to encourage women to stand as candidates and, crucially, play a part in the retention of women in politics, which can apply to women who are already elected, women in parties

or outreach, such as investment in community-based initiatives to encourage and support women to consider entering politics.

I will concentrate on two specific examples which may be of interest to the Committee. The update paper briefly mentions actions taken in the National Assembly for Wales. Female representation in Wales has fluctuated in recent years. After a high of getting to the 50% mark, now, 40% of Assembly Members are female. The Speaker of the Assembly, Dame Rosemary Butler, instigated an initiative in 2012 called Women in Public Life, which was aimed at the elections in 2016. It is, therefore, a long-term programme with a specific aim and buy-in from the key elements of the legislature. The initiative has included the creation of a "Women in Public Life" web portal; a seminar series to raise awareness of the issues and to look at the options for increasing and sustaining female participation; a conference to draw together the outcomes of the seminar series and raise awareness; and a development scheme for individual women with a view to participation in public life. One of the outcomes is expected to be the formation of a women's caucus or cross-party group. The key elements of the initiative are its long-term aims, the involvement of the Assembly as a whole, and the multidimensional nature of associated actions that are crafted to local conditions.

There are various guides to making legislatures more female friendly. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's 'Gender-Sensitive Parliaments' is one such guide, which contains a wide-ranging list of suggestions, including the following: the promotion of gender equality in the legislature through the implementation of equality policies; rules for gender-neutral language; rules or codes around parliamentary language and behaviour; family-friendly sitting hours; provisions for those with families, such as childcare facilities, parental leave or family-friendly spaces; gender training programmes for all members, male and female; a women's caucus or cross-party group; regularised links with women's groups and other civil society organisations; a review of women in leadership positions in the legislature; a code of conduct to prohibit sexist behaviour; a review of the maleness of the institution, such as working practices, ceremonies, artwork in the building etc; gender mainstreaming in all assembly business; and consideration of the formation of an equality committee within the legislature.

That is a selection of examples of what could be implemented and adapted to the particular circumstances of a particular legislature. Generally, the literature tends to agree that no one method is a guarantee of increased participation, but that a combination is appropriate to particular circumstances. That is a brief overview of the four papers. I am happy to take questions.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you for that, Michael. I will open up the meeting for questions.

**Ms P Bradley:** Thank you for your presentation. As a female MLA, I suppose that I have a greater understanding of some of the things that you have said. However, a lot of it does not ring with me as factual. I did not see too many barriers to becoming an MLA, other than the barriers that I put up myself. The barriers were not socio-economic, related to my party, or any of those things. The barriers were the ones that Paula put up, just thinking whether I could do it or not. It was maybe more of a confidence thing than anything else, and I am a confident person.

I am just a normal Joe Bloggs. I am a single parent, and I had things going against me for many years that would have stopped me from doing many things, but that was not my personality. Therefore, I fall into a lot of the categories that you talked about, but it still did not stop me achieving my goals and doing what I wanted to do. I cannot get my head round why a lot of what you said would stop a female from going into politics, even the issue of a code of conduct. We have a code of conduct here. I sit on the Standards and Privileges Committee, and any sexist comments go straight to the Standards and Privileges Committee, and we deal with them, not that I have come across anything like that.

I was in the police for years, and I have heard more people out on the street giving me sexist comments than I ever heard either in the police or in this Building. We already have a lot of things in place in the Assembly. I am really interested in this, and I want us to look at this to see why we have fewer women here, but there would need to be some very concrete reasons. With regard to the working hours, if you work in the health service, you work really bad hours compared with this place. At least we get home most nights at a reasonable time, and we have every Sunday off. If you work in other jobs, you might work over the weekend. There are lots of different things that should not be barriers. There are other jobs out there that have much more unfriendly hours. I do not know how we are ever going to come to a conclusion on this, albeit I want us to look at it.

**Mr Potter:** Across the literature that contributed to the papers, one can see that there are women like yourself who get through, despite the barriers. A lot of the research looks at women in the community

who are asked about the barriers to entering politics that they see. The papers draw on a broad range of literature across these islands.

**Ms P Bradley:** I represent North Belfast and I do an awful lot of work with women's groups and I give speeches and speak to them. It is the same in this Building because, as one of the few females here, it is the females who are asked to speak to visiting women's groups. It is only after they sit down and speak to me or other females that they realise that I am no different. We need to break that barrier and we need to look at the females in politics and make them better role models for women out there. Most of the people in those community groups, after speaking on a one-to-one basis especially to a female representative, will realise that it is perfectly possible for them to do this job.

The problem is more about breaking down those barriers; it is not the political parties as such because most of our political parties will have a structure in place that promotes women. The DUP has a women's caucus that holds meetings and has a separate women's conference. Even at our main party conference we have a breakout session which is just for the women's part. It is very active and very vocal. I believe that most of the political parties are like that; they will have a stream that women can come through. However, I see the problem as being in the community and how it views politicians as role models. People in the community see this place very differently from the way we see it. We see it as work; we come into work. That is, perhaps, where we need to break through.

**Mr McCartney:** You said that Leinster House is going to have a quota of 30%, but that is for candidates.

**Mr Potter:** Yes. I can think only of Kosovo as an assembly that reserves seats. There was a lot of opposition to that at the beginning and there was resistance to quotas across the Balkans, but they have got used to it now.

**Mr McCartney:** That means that there would be nearly a dual election. If you were trying to reserve seats specifically, you need a list system.

**Mr Potter:** Yes, you need a list system. The whole country is one constituency, and they have lists and just move down to the next person.

**Mr McCartney:** The 30% quota puts the onus on parties. There is no doubt that — Paula spoke about this — women are under-represented right across the professions; we had a debate recently about senior civil servants. It is, first, about trying to determine the causes and the mechanisms we can put in place.

I am just reading the briefing document; only one woman MLA has been here from the beginning. If you look around, I am not sure how many men there would be, but it is a higher number. It may be a combination of factors such as age, different jobs and different profiles, but it is a question of identifying the barriers. That is part of what this is trying to identify; there are undoubtedly barriers but it is about the methods we employ to tackle them. Have you looked at that? I know that, at the beginning, on reflection, people here would have said that the hours here are more family friendly. You can see that from other legislatures; the late-night sessions here are not as frequent. We might be able to explore things such as that as we go through the process.

**Mr Potter:** Yes, certainly, and Paula is absolutely right as well. We have a lot of mechanisms here, but it might be worth looking at how we do business here to see where the barriers are; we have that start point. The papers draw on literature from across these islands, so we are talking about England and Wales, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland, as well as here. It is a chicken-and-egg situation where, in order to have those role models, how do you get them if one fifth of the current Assembly is female? How do we use those female Assembly Members? We can have them going round the community being good role models, but then they would not be doing their job in the legislature. It is about how we get to that critical mass to have that number of role models; that is the key question.

**Mr McCartney:** I think that is key. It is the critical mass. In the Justice Committee, we have had a number of presentations from the Department on the legal system. Up to a certain level, female representation is fairly good, but it reaches a particular level, and from there on up it becomes very male dominated. It is about trying to find the mechanism. The lower statistical reading does not mean that women are not interested in trying to pursue a career in law but, somewhere along the line, there is a barrier, and it is about trying to find out what the barrier is and how you help to dismantle it.

**Mr Campbell:** It is a very interesting paper. There is one question that I just do not know the answer to. Hopefully, you can help us with it. You said that one of the situations where women were more likely to succeed was when the electoral area was a larger district.

**Mr Potter:** Yes, a larger district magnitude.

**Mr Campbell:** Why would women be more likely to succeed in a larger electorate compared with a smaller one?

**Mr Potter:** I suppose that there is the fact and the explanation. The fact is that it does happen; more women tend to be elected in larger district magnitudes. The assumption is that, where there are one or two people for each constituency, the preference goes to a male or to a sitting member. Very often, sitting members tend to be re-elected, whereas, if you have more seats, there is more likelihood of women being considered. That is the assumption, but, statistically, that is what happens.

**Mr Campbell:** And, statistically, is that what happens throughout Europe?

**Mr Potter:** Generally speaking, yes.

**Mr Campbell:** It was mentioned that there has only been one woman here since 1998. Given the higher propensity for re-election and a more male-dominated electoral society, if those two things continue, it will be more difficult for women. Has any research been done to show that, where there is a greater turnover of candidates in what was previously a male-dominated electoral system, females are more likely to succeed?

**Mr Potter:** Not that I have seen. That is interesting. I will have a look to see if there is anything on that.

**Mr Campbell:** It strikes me that, if there is a greater turnover and parties are turning their minds to increasing the percentage and numbers of females, that gives them more opportunity, whereas if the turnover remains relatively low, females are less likely to be successful.

**Mr Potter:** Yes, I will have a look at that.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I wanted to ask you about the paper that we have just received on candidates for the 2014 local government elections. You are saying that the proportion of women candidates matches the current proportion of sitting women councillors, which suggests that there will not be a significant increase after the elections. What was the situation in the previous local government election? Is there any difference in the percentage of women candidates?

**Mr Potter:** I think that the proportion of candidates and the proportion who were elected was about the same. That is my understanding.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** So there has been no significant change?

**Mr Potter:** There has been an increase in the last couple of elections in Northern Ireland of female representation at council level. So we are on an upward trend. England tends to be fairly steady and has plateaued at around 31%, whereas the others tend to fluctuate quite a bit.

**Ms P Bradley:** I am sorry; I did not hear that question or the answer.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I was just asking about the number of women candidates in local councils compared with the last election.

**Ms P Bradley:** I have noticed that the number in my own council area has gone down since I ran for council. Have we any evidence on quotas that have been in for a longer period? Some are relatively new, and there have not been enough elections to look at how that has balanced out over a 10- to 15-year period. Are the countries that have quotas keeping them at the same level or has the participation of women gone down in the countries in which there have been quotas for a number of years?

**Mr Potter:** Generally, from what I have seen, particularly in the Scandinavian countries, and most post-conflict countries as well, they tend to be sustained. There has been some fluctuation, up and down.

**Ms P Bradley:** So, after a period of time, there is no need for quotas?

**Mr Potter:** I have not come across any examples where a quota has been removed because it has been considered that it is not needed any more.

**Ms P Bradley:** Maybe we have not reached that point yet with some of the countries.

**Mr Potter:** There is a lot of evidence of quotas being introduced that have been very unpopular or have been challenged but where they have got used to them. There is literature around that.

**Ms P Bradley:** It is maybe something that we are not going to know the answer to for a number of years.

**Mr Campbell:** I have a brief question on the issue you raised about the current council candidate list. I suppose it is a bit early, but were you able to do any research on parties' progress on female candidates in 2014 compared with the last time and the time before that to see whether everybody is making progress at different rates or whether some parties have actually regressed a bit?

**Mr Potter:** I have not looked specifically at that. My impression is that most of the large parties have increased their female candidate representation. There are a lot of independents this time round, and independents tend to be male. It is one of those things. I could be wrong on a couple of those, but my impression is that the larger parties are slightly up compared with last time.

**Mr McCartney:** Regarding your table of other national legislatures and where there is a high percentage of women representatives, were the steps taken due to parties or did they put more emphasis on it due to being emerging democracies? What strikes me is that the comparison between what is called "lower" or "single house" and "upper house" is very similar. Therefore, the representation in an elected body and, in the main, all elected bodies, is remarkably similar. We will maybe need to get an explanation for that as we take this forward.

**Mr Potter:** A lot of the national legislatures across the world are post-conflict bodies. In Rwanda, for example, a quota was imposed, which they got used to. It is the same with some of the Balkan countries. However, in countries such as Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, there tends to be a general societal provision, if you like, for female participation across business, politics, and other parts of life. There is a social democratic element there as well. I have not found a formula that fits all. Each context is very different and they seem to achieve it in different ways.

In these islands, the pattern is not followed by our most successful legislature for female representation, which is Wales. They kind of bucked the trend in having specific provisions for women when they reached 50%. I am not sure of the detail on that, certainly in terms of political systems.

**Mr McCartney:** Taking a country such as Sweden, the read-across professions in general would be similar. There is good representation of women in the law, the public sector etc?

**Mr Potter:** Yes. A paper was published in January that looked across all gender issues in Northern Ireland in general. It showed a general pattern of under-representation in positions of leadership in business, the Civil Service and public life.

**Mr McCartney:** If a similar survey were done, again taking Sweden as an example, good representation in the Parliament would be translated across all the professions?

**Mr Potter:** That is my understanding, yes.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Michael, have any surveys been carried out among the female MLAs here on what difficulties or barriers they might encounter?

**Mr Potter:** Not that I am aware of. Some community-based research has included talking to some female MLAs and women at local council level, but I am not aware of a broad survey of all female MLAs.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** There are no more questions so thank you, Michael, for coming along today. It is a very interesting bit of work. I am sure that we will see you again in the course of the review. Thanks very much.

**Mr McCartney:** Gregory Campbell made a point about the candidates in previous local government elections compared with this year. It would be useful to see that information.

**Ms P Bradley:** Information on the results of the forthcoming elections would also be useful. A lot of the smaller parties field a lot of female candidates. I would like to see how many of them are elected. We know how many female candidates there are, but the important bit is how many are actually elected.

**Mr Potter:** Yes.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** OK. Thanks again, Michael.