



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

## **Assembly and Executive Review Committee**

### **Stakeholder 'Call for Evidence' Paper on Review Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly**

**Section 1**

**Stakeholder Details**

**Contents**

<p><b>Section 1: Stakeholder Details and Guidelines for Completion of Submissions</b></p> <p><b>Section 2: Introduction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Powers</li> <li>• Assembly and Executive Review Committee’s Terms of Reference for and approach to this Review.</li> <li>• Matters Outside the Scope of the Review</li> </ul> <p><b>Section 3: Background</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Women in Politics in the Northern Ireland Assembly</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Section 4: Questions to consider</b></p> <p><b>Section 5: Additional Information</b></p> <p><b>Section 6: Contact Details</b></p>	<p>Page 3</p> <p>Pages 4-5</p> <p>Pages 6-7</p> <p>Pages 8-11</p> <p>Page 12</p> <p>Page 13</p>

Stakeholder Name	Telephone Number		
Belfast Feminist Network	07710939829		
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)		
1 Manse Drive, Carryduff, Belfast, BT8 8RU	Registered Political Party	<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Government
	Academic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Government
	Legislature	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-Government

<b>Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public</b>	x
Grassroots activist organisation	

**Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder**

Belfast Feminist Network began organising in 2010 following a series of discussion groups that revealed a growing desire for a space for open feminist community and opportunities for activism. Since that time the group has grown in number to encompass over 1400 online members and a dynamic and fluid group of event organisers and attendees, activists, protestors, marchers, workshop participants, debaters, creators, performers, crafters, and people who want to meet together to challenge sexism and to change outcomes for women.

**Guidelines for Completion of Submissions**

The Committee would ask that stakeholders submit electronic responses using this pro forma.

Stakeholders should be aware that their written evidence will be discussed by the Committee in public session and included in the Committee’s published Report.

Stakeholders should also be aware that if they decide to publish their submissions, the publication would not be covered by Assembly privilege in relation to the law of defamation.

**Section 2**  
**Introduction**

## Powers

- 2.1. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Section 29A and 29B of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (“the 1998 Act”) and Standing Order 59 which, amongst other powers, provide for the Committee to:
- I. make a report to the Secretary of State, the Assembly and the Executive Committee, by no later than 1 May 2015, on the operation of Parts III and IV of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and
  - II. consider such other matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly or the Executive as may be referred to it by the Assembly.

## Assembly and Executive Review Committee’s Terms of Reference for and approach to this Review

- 2.2. The Committee agreed the **Terms of Reference** of this Review on **24 June 2014** as follows:
- i. **Analyse the key challenges / barriers facing women in relation to entry into politics in Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**
  - ii. **Examine potential existing initiatives which would assist women in relation to entry into politics in this Assembly**
  - iii. **Examine what are the merits of ‘positive actions’ that have been successful within the United Kingdom and Ireland and within other jurisdictions, and to consider their potential impact in the context of Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**
  - iv. **Provide recommendations / conclusions on i to iii above, including initiatives / mechanisms to enhance the role of women already active in the political arena in Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**

## Phase 1 – Review Evidence Gathering

The Review will take evidence on **Women in Politics in the Northern Ireland Assembly** in relation to the **(i) to (iv) above**. This will include evidence from **Assembly Research and Information Services, expert / academic witnesses, a**

public 'Call for Evidence' and from visits to other legislatures.

### **Phase 2 – Consideration and Report**

The Committee will consider all evidence received in relation to **Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly** and report and provide recommendations / conclusions to the Assembly on these matters by in **late autumn 2014**.

### **Matters Outside the Scope of the Review**

2.3. The Committee has agreed that the following issue is outside of the scope of the Review:

- **Alternative electoral systems / models**

### **Section 3**

#### **BACKGROUND**

**This section provides some background information on some issues being considered by the Committee as part of this Review.**

**3.1.** The following sections provide information relating to **Women in politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly** drawn from the Northern Ireland Assembly Research & Information Service Research paper NIAR 570-13.<sup>1</sup>

### **3.2 Statistical Outline**

The Northern Ireland Assembly currently has 22 female Members out of a total of 108 (22%), although 20 women were elected in 2011, the net increase being due to two more female than male co-option by a party and independent Member replacing Members since the election. 38 female and 180 male candidates stood in the 2011 Assembly elections (17.4%).

If placed in international perspective alongside national legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly would rank 70<sup>th</sup> in the world. Apart from the Italian regional legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly has significantly lower female representation than comparable Western European legislatures.

The following figures place the Assembly in the perspective of female political representation in Northern Ireland and in general.

- 23.5% of Local Councillors in 2011 were women (compared with 31% in England)
- With 5 of 26 Mayors /Chairs of Councils were women
- 4 of 18 MPs are women (compared with 22% in GB)
- 2 of 3 MEPs are women (compared with 30% in GB)
- 4 of 15 Ministers and Junior Ministers are women
- 4 Chairpersons and 2 Deputy Chairperson of Committees are women out of 18 Committees

The representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland has a direct association with candidate selection. An examination of the 2011 Assembly elections indicates that female candidates generally fared better than their male counterparts in terms of votes won, but the lower numbers elected were more reflective of lower numbers of candidates.

### **3.3 Policy**

The Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, which consists of a range of commitments by governments to address structural disadvantages experienced by women internationally, includes specific measures to increase women's participation in power and decision-making.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly\\_exec\\_review/potter0914.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf)

These include:

*Strategic Objective G.1: Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.*

*Strategic Objective G.2: Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.*

The Belfast Agreement 1998 includes a commitment to *'the right of women to full and equal political participation'*.

The vision for the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland states:

*Men and women will be able to realise their full potential to contribute equally to the political, economic, social, (including caring roles) and cultural development of Northern Ireland and benefit equally from the results.*

One of the Key Action Areas of the Strategy is *'representation in public life/decision-making'*, which is associated with the following strategic objectives:

- To achieve better collection and dissemination of data;
- To achieve gender balance on all government appointed committees, boards and other relevant official bodies;
- To actively promote an inclusive society; and
- To ensure the participation of women and men in all levels of peace building, civil society, economy and government

### **3.5 Legislative Frameworks**

Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly are provided for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. There are no provisions for gender equality relating to elections in the Act.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 amends the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 to exempt the selection of election candidates from the provision of the Order. This enables political parties to use positive discrimination for the promotion of women candidates over men. This provision has been extended to 2030.

**Further information on barriers to women's participation within legislatures; examples of proposals, mechanisms to overcome barriers; quotas and support mechanisms to increase the political participation are set out in paper NIAR 570-13.**

[www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly\\_exec\\_review/potter0914.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf)



## Section 4

### Questions to consider

#### (1) Question

***What are the key challenges / barriers facing women in relation to entering politics in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Northern Ireland Assembly, and what evidence can you provide on this?***

The key challenges/barriers facing women in relation to entering politics in Northern Ireland are demonstrable at different stages.

#### Lack of gender awareness

In the political arena there is a failure to acknowledge the structural gender inequality which impacts upon a woman's choice to enter politics and the outcomes for her if she does choose a political career. In order for women to advance in politics, the Executive, the Assembly and the political parties must understand the ways in which women face discrimination because of their gender. The discussion around women's lack of confidence acting as an impediment to entering politics must be understood as a consequence of structural inequality and not because women lack the relevant competence or skill set.

#### Selection of candidates

This gender blindness is evidenced in how the five main political parties select candidates. This is the most pronounced barrier to women's political participation in Northern Ireland (NI) given the well-established link between candidate selection and representation, and the 'unrivalled control political parties have over legislative recruitment' (Matthews, 2012). In the Assembly Research and Information Service Paper '*Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly*', Potter stated that the representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland has a direct association with candidate selection. Following an examination of the 2011 Assembly elections, Potter stated that female candidates generally fared better than their male counterparts in terms of votes won, but the lower numbers elected were more reflective of lower numbers of candidates.

The candidate selection process is considered gender-neutral, however, we argue that candidacy requirements and the decentralised nature of selection acts as barriers to women candidates being selected. The under-representation of women in the NI Assembly, as a result of the failure to take affirmative action to counter the gender imbalance prevents the next generation from having political female role models to aspire to. It is worth noting that out of the five main parties in the Assembly, Sinn Féin is the only party that takes affirmative action to address the gender balance.

#### The political environment

The political environment of the NI Assembly, mainly the adversarial nature of politics, acts as a barrier preventing women from choosing a career in politics. Research by Rosenthal (2001) suggests that women's conflict resolution styles embody democratic ideals and that women tend to work in a less hierarchical, more participatory and in a more collaborative manner than their male counterparts. Furthermore, women are routinely undermined by the behaviour and comments of male politicians

which, when combined with the combative nature in which debates are carried out and views are expressed, can deter women from entering politics. The Assembly Code of Conduct is in place to prevent such occurrences and should be more stringently implemented, with the real threat of serious penalties if not adhered to, and a culture created that is supportive of women with grievances reporting them.

#### Childcare facilities

The lack of childcare facilities in Parliament Buildings and the late Assembly debates can also deter women from entering politics given that the vast majority of single parents in NI are women, and women are much more likely to have more childcare responsibilities than their male counterparts.

## (2) Question

***Can you provide evidence on initiatives which demonstrates positive outcomes to encourage more women to pursue a career in politics which could be applied to the Northern Ireland Assembly?***

The initiatives that have demonstrated positive outcomes elsewhere have included positive gender discrimination in each of the political parties' selection process; a mandatory gender balance on Assembly committees; childcare facilities and 9-5 parliamentary hours; community leadership training for women; a mentoring scheme for aspiring candidates and newly elected female political representatives; and gender and diversity training for all MLAs.

#### Selection of candidates

We believe that women's political participation must be made a priority among all parties in Northern Ireland, and demonstrated through affirmative action to address gender imbalance in their candidate selection process. Following an examination of the 2011 Assembly elections, Potter stated that female candidates generally fared better than their male counterparts in terms of votes won, but the lower numbers elected were more reflective of lower numbers of candidates. We believe this is the most pronounced barrier to women's political participation in Northern Ireland (NI) given the well-

established link between candidate selection and representation, and the ‘unrivalled control political parties have over legislative recruitment’ (Matthews, 2012).

The candidate selection process is considered gender-neutral, however, we argue that candidacy requirements and the decentralised nature of selection acts as barriers to women candidates being selected. The under-representation of women in the NI Assembly, as a result of the failure to take affirmative action to counter the gender imbalance prevents the next generation from having political female role models to aspire to

There should be a gender balance on the Executive Committees of each party, there should be gender awareness training made mandatory for all positions of power within the party, and selection processes of candidates should be held to the same scrutiny as public appointments. We recommend that there is external verification that parties have adhered to their selection process in order to ensure it is fit for purpose and does not act as a barrier for women seeking a career in politics.

Sinn Féin is the only party of the five executive parties in the Assembly that actively positively discriminates on the grounds of gender. Although the party could arguably come under criticism for the extent of involvement of the central party in candidate selection, it is at this point where Sinn Féin adopts the most strident approach often rejecting selection lists if they do not include female candidates. Sinn Féin also implement quotas in internal party positions which includes gender equality provisos for every internal election and an imposed 50–50 gender balance on its National Executive. Such measures ensure that the barriers that exist for women aspiring to a career in politics are positively countered.

#### Mandatory gender balance in committee chairs

A mandatory gender balance in committee chairperson and deputy chairperson roles should be considered by the Assembly. In Rwanda, men and women play a leadership role in all parliamentary committees. If the chair is female, her deputy is male and vice versa. This structure is designed, in part, to ensure women have the opportunity to contribute their lived experiences to committee considerations. (Markham, 2014)

#### Childcare facilities

Introducing childcare facilities at Stormont could encourage more women to pursue a career in politics. Research cited in Markham’s report ‘*Strengthening Women’s Roles in Parliaments*’ stated that when women entered South Africa’s first post-apartheid parliament, they initially experienced difficulty balancing family and political duties. Women fought to eliminate evening and night-time parliamentary sessions, which conflicted with family responsibilities. They also instituted childcare services in the parliamentary building which eventually was used by both men and women for their families. This could also serve to encourage younger people of both genders into politics in Northern Ireland.

#### Leadership training and development

In a recent forum the Belfast Feminist Network held on women’s political participation in Northern Ireland, Isobel Loughran of the Women’s Resource and Development Agency stated that she was ‘shocked’ by her experience of providing community leadership training for women. Ms Loughran stated that women were so far removed from considering community and political leadership. Therefore to encourage more women to pursue a career in politics, the NI Assembly should participate in leadership development programmes from the community level and upwards to encourage women into community leadership positions and local councils, and consequently ensure there is a supply of

women from all sectors of society represented in the NI Assembly.

The 'Women in Public Life' development scheme introduced in the National Assembly of Wales to increase female political participation ahead of 2016 elections, provides training and development for 10-12 women with a view to participation in public life. This, or a similar scheme should be considered by the Northern Ireland Assembly. It must be noted that this was initiated by the Welsh Assembly where women already make up forty percent of elected members.

#### Mentoring

As cited in Markham, women interested in pursuing a career in politics could also gain from mentoring and networking with women who have previously served in elected office. Such connections provide quick access to rules and procedures, especially informal norms that enable effective legislating and invaluable support to new MLAs or potential MLAs entering the institution. Mentoring could serve to make a career in politics more accessible for aspiring female politicians and an easier transition for newly elected members.

#### Importance of descriptive representation

There is a distinction between women's issues and women's perspectives. Women's issues are those that mainly affect women. Women's perspectives are women contributing their perspectives on all policy. Gender and diversity training for both male and female members, and a strict enforcement of the code of conduct in parliamentary proceedings could both serve to encourage more women to enter a career in politics which would lead to women's perspectives being shared on all policy. As cited in Markham (2014), continuous training on gender analysis could positively influence the political focus on women's issues from both male and female members and on the impact that policy and legislation will have on women. This could also serve to improve the confidence that women have in the political process thereby encouraging them to actively participate within it.

### **(3a) Question**

***What policies should political parties have in place to increase the number of women candidates in Northern Ireland elections?***

All political parties in Northern Ireland should prioritise the political participation of women. Evidence cited Q2 points out that when women are included in the political process, countries experience higher standards of living, and positive developments are evidence in education, infrastructure and health. These are objectives that every political party in Northern Ireland, regardless of ideology, are working towards.

### Candidate selection

We believe that affirmative action taken to address the gender imbalance of the political institutions in Northern Ireland should be introduced when selecting candidates for election and in recruiting for the internal power structures of the party. There should be a gender balance on the Executive Committees of each party, there should be gender awareness training made mandatory for all positions of power within the party, and selection processes of candidates should be held to the same scrutiny as public appointments. We recommend that there is external verification that parties have adhered to their selection process in order to ensure it is fit for purpose and does not act as a barrier for women seeking a career in politics.

Sinn Féin is the only party of the five executive parties in the Assembly that actively positively discriminates on the grounds of gender. Although the party could arguably come under criticism for the extent of involvement of the central party in candidate selection, it is at this point where Sinn Féin adopts the most strident approach often rejecting selection lists if they do not include female candidates. Sinn Féin also implement quotas in internal party positions which includes gender equality provisos for every internal election and an imposed 50–50 gender balance on its National Executive. Such measures ensure that the barriers that exist for women aspiring to a career in politics are positively countered.

### Mentoring

As mentioned in Q2, political parties in Northern Ireland could promote a mentoring scheme for aspiring female politicians and newly elected members to be mentored by serving female Councillors, MLAs and MPs. This could serve to make a career in politics more accessible for an aspiring politician, and an easier transition for newly elected members.

### Appointment of internal staff

Political parties should ensure that there is a gender balance in the appointment of political advisors, parliamentary assistants and office staff. These roles are often seen as ‘pipeline’ roles from which people go on to stand for election.

### Media representation

Political parties must also be challenged about who they put forward to speak to the media. There is a noticeable gender imbalance in local TV and radio political broadcasting, and it is the responsibility of the parties to select who goes on. Without visible role models, women aren’t able to visualise themselves in these roles.

### Positive discrimination

It is important to recognise the 'merit' argument when discussing positive gender discrimination in the selection of candidates. Positive discrimination could be implemented in a number of different ways, including through '*strong preferential selection*' in which preference must be given to the woman even if she is (or appears to be) the weaker candidate, or through '*weak preferential selection*' in which a woman is selected only if her qualifications are equal to those of the strongest male candidate. However, it is important to note the crucial difference between appointment to the boards of public companies and political institutions.

The Belfast Feminist Network recognises that women are not a homogenous group. Depending on what age women are, their level of education, whether they are from a rural or urban setting, they have been exposed to very different life experiences that has led to different objectives or needs. Political representation by definition should represent the people they serve. Women make up fifty one percent of the NI population and make up twenty one percent of the NI Assembly. Therefore, The Belfast Feminist Network believes that political parties should implement strategies that aim *for descriptive representation* so that all women, regardless of background, have the opportunity for a career in politics.

### **(3b) Question**

***Political Parties are asked to specify what policies and initiatives they have in place to increase women in political life?***

N/A

#### (4) Question

#### ***What 'positive actions' would you recommend to increase women's representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly?***

There is evidence of many positive outcomes when women are participating in the political process. According to Beaman et al (2007), when women are empowered as political leaders, countries experience higher standards of living, and positive developments are evidenced in education, infrastructure and health. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that women's political participation leads to increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines (Rosenthal, 2001) and more sustainable peacebuilding (Chinkin, 2003).

#### Selection of candidates

We believe that women's political participation must be made a priority among all parties in Northern Ireland, and demonstrated through affirmative action to address gender imbalance in their candidate selection process. Following an examination of the 2011 Assembly elections, Potter stated that female candidates generally fared better than their male counterparts in terms of votes won, but the lower numbers elected were more reflective of lower numbers of candidates. We believe this is the most pronounced barrier to women's political participation in Northern Ireland (NI) given the well-established link between candidate selection and representation, and the 'unrivalled control political parties have over legislative recruitment' (Matthews, 2012).

The candidate selection process is considered gender-neutral, however, we argue that candidacy requirements and the decentralised nature of selection acts as barriers to women candidates being selected. The under-representation of women in the NI Assembly, as a result of the failure to take affirmative action to counter the gender imbalance prevents the next generation from having political female role models to aspire to

There should be a gender balance on the Executive Committees of each party, there should be gender

awareness training made mandatory for all positions of power within the party, and selection processes of candidates should be held to the same scrutiny as public appointments. We recommend that there is external verification that parties have adhered to their selection process in order to ensure it is fit for purpose and does not act as a barrier for women seeking a career in politics.

Sinn Féin is the only party of the five executive parties in the Assembly that actively positively discriminates on the grounds of gender. Although the party could arguably come under criticism for the extent of involvement of the central party in candidate selection, it is at this point where Sinn Féin adopts the most strident approach often rejecting selection lists if they do not include female candidates. Sinn Féin also implement quotas in internal party positions which includes gender equality provisos for every internal election and an imposed 50–50 gender balance on its National Executive. Such measures ensure that the barriers that exist for women aspiring to a career in politics are positively countered.

#### Mandatory gender balance in committee chairs

A mandatory gender balance in committee chairperson and deputy chairperson roles should be considered by the Assembly. In Rwanda, men and women play a leadership role in all parliamentary committees. If the chair is female, her deputy is male and vice versa. This structure is designed, in part, to ensure women have the opportunity to contribute their lived experiences to committee considerations. (Markham, 2014) Committees are vital to the accountability mechanism which ensures the effectiveness of our Legislative Assembly and it is only right that men and women should be afforded equal representation in these roles.

#### Childcare facilities

Introducing childcare facilities at Stormont could encourage more women to pursue a career in politics. Research cited in Markham's report *'Strengthening Women's Roles in Parliaments'* stated that when women entered South Africa's first post-apartheid parliament, they initially experienced difficulty balancing family and political duties. Women fought to eliminate evening and night-time parliamentary sessions, which conflicted with family responsibilities. They also instituted childcare services in the parliamentary building which eventually was used by both men and women for their families. This could also serve to encourage younger people of both genders into politics in Northern Ireland.

#### Leadership training and development

In a recent forum the Belfast Feminist Network held on women's political participation in Northern Ireland, a contributor involved in leadership training at community level stated that she was 'shocked' by her experience of providing community leadership training for women. She stated that women were so far removed from considering community and political leadership. Therefore to encourage more women to pursue a career in politics, the NI Assembly should participate in leadership development programmes from the community level and upwards to encourage women into community leadership positions and local councils, and consequently ensure there is a supply of women from all sectors of society represented in the NI Assembly.

The 'Women in Public Life' development scheme introduced in the National Assembly of Wales to increase female political participation ahead of 2016 elections, provides training and development for 10-12 women with a view to participation in public life. This, or a similar scheme should be considered by the Northern Ireland Assembly. It must be noted that this was initiated by the Welsh Assembly where women already make up forty percent of elected members.



### Mentoring

As cited in Markham, women interested in pursuing a career in politics could also gain from mentoring and networking with women who have previously served in elected office. Such connections provide quick access to rules and procedures, especially informal norms that enable effective legislating and invaluable support to new MLAs or potential MLAs entering the institution. Mentoring could serve to make a career in politics more accessible for aspiring female politicians and an easier transition for newly elected members.

### Appointment of internal staff

Political parties should ensure that there is a gender balance in the appointment of political advisors, parliamentary assistants and office staff. These roles are often seen as 'pipeline' roles from which people go on to stand for election.

### Media representation

Political parties must also be challenged about who they put forward to speak to the media. There is a noticeable gender imbalance in local TV and radio political broadcasting, and it is the responsibility of the parties to select who goes on. Without visible role models, women aren't able to visualise themselves in these roles.

### **(5) Question**

***What recommendations would you put forward to enhance the role of women already active in the political arena in Northern Ireland (providing evidence for recommendations as applicable)?***

We believe that political parties have an important role to play in enhancing the role of women already active in the political arena in NI. It is regularly evident that the representation of women politicians in the media is extremely poor. Broadcasters, online and print media should implement strategies towards equal representation of women when seeking out political opinion and input. The media should also be taken to task for unfair or stereotypical coverage of women in the political arena such as commentary that focuses on their clothes or appearance. The government is required to tackle this under their international obligations to end discrimination against women as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Article 5. TV and radio shows that focus on political discussion often seek out gender representation but find that political parties will more often send men as representatives. It is extremely important to challenge this kind of political gatekeeping as women need to see political women as role models. The visibility of women already active in the political arena is vitally important to encouraging further participation from women.

It is also important that the roles available in the Assembly such as Committee Chairs or Deputy Chairs are allocated with gender equality as key criteria. Committees are vital to the accountability mechanism which ensures the effectiveness of our Legislative Assembly and it is only right that men and women should be afforded equal representation in these roles. It is also important that women are equally represented in key political negotiations. For example, we observed with dismay that the Cardiff talks organised by the PSNI in May 2013 included only 3 women in a delegation of 30 people. An appropriate response to this from the PSNI would have been to communicate to all the invited political parties and community organisations that they must have women within their delegates. The Northern Ireland Assembly also has key responsibilities for enhancing the role of women who are already politically active by addressing the barriers these women face on a day-to-day basis. These include childcare, working hours, and a pervasive culture of sexism.

#### (6) Question

***Do you consider there are specific initiatives / actions that the Northern Ireland Assembly as an institution should take to enhance the role of women in politics, including a gender sensitive environment – and if so please include your recommendations.***

We recommend that the NI Assembly should address barriers relating to the gendered nature of caring roles that are currently carried out mainly by women. 89% of people who are caring for family members and not in the workplace are women. The majority of this caring work is childcare. In the ongoing absence of a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland the NI Assembly needs to recognise that this issue is currently preventing women, particularly those in a certain age group, from becoming involved in politics. We recommend the establishment of an accessible, affordable childcare facility at Stormont.

It is also necessary to address the expectations placed on both staff and MLAs regarding working hours and the incompatibility with family responsibilities. We believe that the current demands not only prevent women's participation due to the gendered nature of family life, but also perpetuate this division further as men in the political arena are prevented from having meaningful time to invest in their own family roles. We wish to see an approach to political work that recognises the importance of caring work and social reproduction. Policies should be enforced to ensure that MLAs and staff are able to avail of flexible working and family-friendly working practices.

We would like to see further improvement regarding the undercurrent of sexism in the culture of the NI Assembly and its associated bodies. While much attention has been paid in recent years to training and capacity building for women in the political arena, there has been a noticeable absence of training for men in gender awareness that would allow an increased understanding of the impact of male behaviour and the entrenched nature of institutionalised sexism. Many women who have engaged with the NI Assembly and its Committees have experienced dismissive language, undermining comments, MLAs talking and laughing when they start to speak, verbal bullying and a range of other culturally oppressive experiences. We would like to see a two-fold approach to tackling this. The mechanisms already in place such as the code of conduct should be strongly enforced when it comes to complaints of a sexist nature. Secondly, the NI Assembly should engage in an awareness-raising and capacity building campaign on the subject of sexism so as to tackle the behaviour of those who perpetrate it while at the same time creating a culture that ensure all women in Stormont feel they can report such incidents in confidence and that these will be dealt with through the correct procedures.

**Section 5**

**Additional Information**

Please provide any additional information which you believe will be of assistance to the Committee during the course of the Review.

Below are the reports that we have referenced in the document

Beaman, L., Duflo, E., Pande, R. and Topalova, P. (2007) 'Women Politicians, Gender Bias, and Policy-making in Rural India', Background Paper for UNICEF's The State of the World's Children Report, 2007, 11.15-16

Chinkhin, C. (2003) 'Peace Agreements as a Means for Promoting Gender Equality and Ensuring the Participation of Women', United Nations, Division for the Advancement of Women.

Markham, S (2012) Strengthening Women's Roles in Parliaments, Parliamentary Affairs online

Matthews, N. (2012) Gendered candidate selection and the representation of women in Northern Ireland, Parliamentary Affairs online

Rosenthal, C. S. (2001) 'Gender Styles in Legislative Committees', Women & Politics, 21, 21-46

Potter, M (2013) Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly available at <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2013/ofmdfm/10813.pdf>

**Section 6**

**Contact Details**

**All responses should be sent by email please to:**

The Committee Clerk

**Tel:** 028 90521787 or

Assembly and Executive Review Committee 028 90521928 Room 241

Parliament Buildings

Ballymiscaw

Belfast

BT4 3XX

**To arrive no later than Wednesday 3 September 2014 please**

**Email:** [committee.assembly&executivereview@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.assembly&executivereview@niassembly.gov.uk)

**Thank you for your submission**