



**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**

**Section 1: Stakeholder Details and Guidelines for Completion of Submissions**

Page 3

**Section 2: Introduction**

Pages 4-5

- Powers
- Assembly and Executive Review Committee's Terms of Reference for and approach to this Review.
- Matters Outside the Scope of the Review

**Section 3: Background**

- **Women in Politics in the Northern Ireland Assembly**

Pages 6-7

**Section 4: Questions to consider**

Pages 8-11

**Section 5: Additional Information**

Page 12

**Section 6: Contact Details**

Page 13

Stakeholder Name	Telephone Number		
Claire McGing <a href="mailto:claire.f.mcging@gmail.com">claire.f.mcging@gmail.com</a>	+353 86 334 2812		
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)		
<b>Home address (Preferred):</b> Woodtown Kilmore Kilcock County Meath Republic of Ireland  <b>Institutional address:</b> Department of Geography Maynooth University Maynooth County Kildare Republic of Ireland	Registered Political Party		Local Government
	Academic	X	Government
	Legislature		Non-Government
	Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public		
Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder			
<p>I teach political/electoral geography in the Department of Geography at Maynooth University, County Kildare, and have particular expertise in women’s political representation across the island of Ireland. My work is mainly concerned with institutional and cultural barriers to gender equality in political life, including the role of candidate selection, political party cultures, and the PR-STV electoral system.</p> <p>My research has been published in prestigious journals such as <i>Political Geography</i>, the <i>Journal of Women, Politics and Polity</i> and <i>Irish Political Studies</i>, and I have also contributed to a number of edited collections. South of the border, I often discuss Irish politics and gender politics in the national media and my research has informed policy-making on legislative gender quotas for Dáil elections. In January 2012 I was invited by the Department of Justice and Equality and Minister of State Kathleen Lynch to address a government conference in Dublin Castle on how to elect more women, sharing a platform with the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and various other political leaders and representatives.</p> <p>Below is a full list of my research publications to date:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• McGing, C. (Forthcoming) ‘Women’s roles in Irish political parties: continuity and change’, in: <i>Irish Feminisms: Past, Present and Future</i> (Arlen House/Syracuse University Press).</li> <li>• Buckley, F., Mariani, M., <b>McGing, C.</b> and White, T. (Forthcoming) Pathways to Dáil Éireann: Are male and female candidates similarly well-situated to win election?, <i>Journal of Women, Politics and Polity</i>.</li> </ul>			

- Buckley, F., Mariani, M., **McGing, C.** and White, T. (Forthcoming) 'Women's political representation in Ireland: From the marginalisation to gender quotas', in: *Towards 2016: Old and New Irelands* (European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies).
- Buckley, F., Mariani, M., **McGing, C.** and White, T. (Forthcoming) 'Gender and electoral success in Ireland', in: *Gendering Ireland, c. 1880-2012* (Cambridge Scholars Press).
- McGing, C. (2014) Guest editorial: Towards a feminist electoral geography, *Political Geography*.
- McGing, C. (2014) Report: The 2012 Children's Referendum, *Irish Political Studies* (advanced online access).
- McGing, C. (2014) 'The single transferable vote and women's representation in Ireland', in: *Politics and Gender in Ireland: The Quest for Political Agency* (Routledge).
- McGing, C. (2013) The single transferable vote and women's representation in Ireland, *Irish Political Studies*, 28 (3), pp. 322-340.
- **McGing, C.** and White, T. (2012) Gender and electoral representation in Ireland, *Études Irlandaises*, 37 (2), pp. 33-48.
- Buckley, F. and **McGing, C.** (2011) 'Women and the election', in: *How Ireland Voted 2011* (Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 222-239.

### **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/RaSe/Publications/2014/assembly\\_exec\\_review/potter0914.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaSe/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?***

Party selection processes, particularly if undertaken at a local constituency level, pose particular difficulties for women wishing to enter politics. Research by Neil Matthews (QUB) shows that selectorates for Legislative Assembly elections usually expect potential candidates to have some level of political experience, whether it is a history of service in local government and/or a strong record of party activism. Very rarely will a candidate for Stormont come from nowhere – most have undertaken some form of political ‘apprenticeship’ beforehand, as is the case in many other jurisdictions including the Republic of Ireland. The electorate also respond better to candidates with names and faces they recognise. As a result, aspirants require resources like time, funds and networks to launch a successful selection bid. Given the persistent sexual division of labour in Northern Irish society, where women remain less likely to participate in work outside of the home (at least on a full-time basis) and are still the main carers of children and/or elderly parents, they possess less of these resources in the first place.

International research also suggests that women party members have less confidence than men in seeking a nomination to run and that, where candidates are selected using One Member One Vote rules, perceive themselves (whether rightly or wrongly) to have less grassroots support.

My own research concludes that incumbency also poses a barrier to full gender representation – where there is little parliamentary turnover, there is less ‘room’ for political parties to place new women on the ballot paper or, if they do, for them to win a seat. For example, over 90% of incumbents that ran in the 2011 assembly election were returned to office. Furthermore, the vast majority of incumbents are male, further perpetuating the cycle of gender inequality. Term limits could be considered.

**(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?***

Dedicated training programmes for aspiring women politician have proven beneficial in many countries. These types of initiatives allow women to develop the confidence to run, as well as educate them on campaigning techniques, media performance, fundraising, and networking-building. Women for Election, for example, offers tailored training to women in the Republic of Ireland seeking to enter political life. Most political parties have funded a number of their women members to participate in these workshops, which have also included non-party women from all walks of life, opening up the traditional routes of candidate recruitment for parties. The group also facilitates an informal network of political women. Their success was demonstrated in the recent local elections in May 2014, when half of all women elected to local



government had been through one of their programmes. For further information about Women for Election, see: <http://www.womenforelection.ie/about-us/>.

A similar initiative would likely prove beneficial in Northern Ireland. As a start, Women Into Politics, a cross-community NGO based in the Shankill Women's Centre in Belfast, could be better funded and equipped to run similar workshops and events at a small scale.

**(3a) Question**

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

No party in Northern Ireland has of yet taken advantage of the [Sex Discrimination \(Election Candidates\) Act 2002](#), allowing for British parties to draw up all-women candidate shortlists (AWS) for elections. AWS address the pre-selection level: only women can contest for party nominated in designated constituencies, usually 'open' ones or where an incumbent is retiring. The success of such measures can be seen in the UK's Labour Party which elected one-third women MPs to Westminster in the 2010 general election. This was significantly higher than the Conservatives (16%) and Liberal Democrats (13%), neither of which applies AWS. Northern Irish parties could adopt similar methods, alongside additional supports for women members and candidates such as training programmes, mentoring schemes, and ring-fenced campaign funding. Particular emphasis should be placed on putting women forward for local elections as this would create a 'pipeline' of experienced women to run for higher-level offices like the Assembly.

If they don't already, parties could employ a dedicated women's officer based in party headquarters to overview gender equality strategies/policy and to provide formal and informal support to female candidates. Beyond electoral politics parties should also strive towards full equality in internal decision-making spheres such as national executives and influential constituency positions, as well as their youth wings.

**(3b) Question**

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

*Not applicable.*

**(4) Question**

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

- The use of all-women shortlists (discussed above), particularly by the largest political parties.
- Though likely controversial, mandatory gender quotas, similar to that recently introduced for elections to Dáil Éireann, should be considered. Parties would be legally obliged to run a certain proportion of women candidates and a certain proportion of men candidates or else face sanctions. In the Republic, non-compliance means by parties means a cut of one-half of their annual state funding. For further details about the legislation, see research undertaken by Professor Yvonne Galligan (QUB), Fiona Buckley (UCC) and I:  
[http://www.academia.edu/4339586/Legislating\\_for\\_Gender\\_Quotas\\_in\\_Ireland](http://www.academia.edu/4339586/Legislating_for_Gender_Quotas_in_Ireland).

**(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)?***

While particularly difficult in an ethno-nationalist political environment like Northern Ireland, a cross-party women's group could be formed at Stormont to allow women MLAs of different parties to discuss their shared gendered experiences, to form friendships and networks for informal support, to encourage other women into public life through conferences/workshops, and to lobby for the increased attention to women's issues and perspectives in decision-making. Groups like this in other parliaments act to target the informal 'old boys network' already entrenched in parliamentary politics.

At a party level all leaders should better promote women's promotion to influential Stormont positions such as ministries, committee chairpersons and party spokespersons, as well as encourage them to undertake more media work for exposure.

**(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.***

- Zero tolerance of sexist comments/actions in the chamber and committee settings, with those who do reprimanded.
- Employ the use of teleconferencing for MLAs with young children if they have no other reason to be at parliament that day, particularly new mothers.
- Promote family-friendly working hours for MLAs (and civil servants). Ensure all meetings end as scheduled. Importantly, make sure representatives are well equipped to deal with large caseloads from their constituents.

## **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.

Although I understand the electoral system is outside the scope of this Review, my own research suggests that the single transferable vote (STV) - at least as used for the Legislative Assembly with six seats per constituency - is generally favourable to female representation. Though the Northern Ireland electorate at large does not discriminate against women candidates (in fact, female contenders in all major parties apart from the DUP outpolled their men colleagues in the 2011 elections), women are more likely to take the final seats than men, particularly non-incumbent women. I would argue that the workings of STV are largely 'women-friendly', at least in comparison to First Past the Post and other single-seat systems. Again, the main problems lie with candidate selection processes and political party cultures.

If required I am available to discuss this with the Committee in more detail, or the research findings are available online at the following addresses:

- <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07907184.2013.818536?queryID=%24%7BresultBean.queryID%7D#.VARSNfldViM>
- <http://www.democraticaudit.com/?p=1243>

## Section 6

### Contact Details

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

The Committee Clerk  
Assembly and Executive Review Committee  
Room 241  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

**Tel:** 028 90521787 or  
028 90521928

**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**