

Changing the Conversation: A Pathways Approach to Increasing Women's Involvement in the Green Party in Northern Ireland

1. Introduction

As a socially progressive party, the Green Party in Northern Ireland recognises that women are under-represented in political decision-making structures and in party politics more generally, and that this has to change. We acknowledge that the UK, and Northern Ireland in particular, is not in the vanguard of women's political participation and that therefore the wider environment in which we seek to promote women's involvement is somewhat challenging.

We also know that we as a party need to do more. Our single MLA is male. In the 2014 European elections, our candidate was male. In the local elections, we fielded 14 candidates, of whom 4 (29%) were women. Of our 5 priority candidates, two were women (40%). Of the four candidates elected, one (25%) is a woman. This is in line with the average of 23% female representation in NI local government. We now have five elected representatives, of whom one (20%) is female. On the administrative side, the Party Leader is male, the Party Chair and Chair of the Young Greens are both female. There are 17 EC members, of whom 6 (35%) are female. The other female officers are the Membership Secretary and the Equalities Officer.

Political rationale, policy aim and objectives

The political rationale for the Strategy is that ***increasing women's involvement is ultimately about challenging ingrained power structures, networks and relationships which privilege men.***

This Women's Involvement Strategy aims to increase the involvement of women in the Green Party in Northern Ireland. It sets out a series of policies and related actions in order to:

- Ensure the party presents itself as 'woman friendly' in recruitment literature and other publicity
- Actively welcome new women members and create an environment in which women are encouraged to participate in both administrative and electoral roles at local, regional, national and international levels
- Provide suitable training and support to allow women to become active at the level that suits them
- Adopt a mixture of targets and quotas to support structural change

- Take decisive action on sex discrimination and violence against women, wherever it occurs.

This document is only about women, but *the same approach could be applied to other underrepresented groups and we resolve to do so in future*. We recognise the phenomenon of intersectionality, through which some women will experience multiple forms of discrimination through their class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability or other elements of their identity or lifestyle.

2. Why is it important to involve women in politics?

There is still a need to counter the argument that if women appear to choose not to become involved in politics to the same extent as men, then that should be accepted. Reasons why it is important to take steps to increase women's participation include:

- **Social justice:** all groups in society should be able to participate in politics
- **Legitimacy of the political process:** legitimacy is enhanced by a broad reflection of the composition of the population
- **Experiences and priorities:** all groups should see their identities, perspectives and priorities reflect in the political process
- **Appeal and relevance of politics:** is enhanced by the involvement of all groups¹
- **National and international policy:** such as the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement (1998) and Northern Ireland's Gender Equality Strategy, recognise the right of women to political participation
- **Expediency:** A review of the 2011 Assembly elections found that women candidates generally gained more votes than their male counterparts, with the low overall numbers elected due to the lower number of candidates².

Six points from our own consultation.....

- **Low levels of women's involvement is a problem for men as well as women:** the whole party needs to own this issue and be part of addressing it. In particular, it requires leadership from elected representatives, key officers and the EC.

¹ Durose, C., Gains, F., Richardson, L., Combs, R., Broome, K. and Eason, C. (2011) *Pathways to Politics, Research Report no. 65*, London: Equality and Human Rights Commission
http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/documents/research/pathways_to_politics.pdf

² Northern Ireland Assembly (2014) *Assembly and Executive Review Committee: Stakeholder 'Call for Evidence' Paper on Review [of] Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly*
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Assembly-and-Executive-Review/reviews/Women-in-Politics/AERC-call-for-evidence-final.pdf>

- ***Lack of involvement is not just about childcare or caring responsibilities more generally:*** if this were so, there wouldn't be a problem with the number of women in politics, for example half of the House of Commons or the Dáil could be female. But they would be without dependents. Although we need to provide practical support for people with caring responsibilities, it is also to the point that....
- ***Women are excluded from informal networks*** and this can lead to them being overlooked, for example when appointments are made informally. This is why we need targets and quotas, although they should not be necessary in an ideal world. They will make women feel GPNI is serious about their involvement and may encourage some women to come forward who otherwise would not.
- ***Many women do lack confidence because they are not used to being in leadership positions:*** so they need to be asked and encouraged to do things... sometimes repeatedly. This is why mentoring and role models are important, for example no all male panels in public meetings.
- ***Although women are interested in all areas of policy – not just ‘women’s issues’, there is often a different perspective on policy from female experience*** and this need to be included in policy development. However, we should not assume that women always agree about everything!
- ***Violence against women is real:*** Sexual harassment and worse can occur even in progressive parties and other environments. The most important aspect of promoting women's involvement is that it must be safe for women to participate.

3. Policy proposals

It is suggested that a number of new policies are adopted, within a Pathways approach in order to encourage women to become involved to the level that suits them. The policies are:

Communications, policy, recruitment and general campaigning

(i) All strategies at local and regional level to present GPNI as a woman-friendly party and to ensure women are included in all publicity

Mentoring, training and support

(i) A Women's Forum with an automatic EC place and right to nominate, along with a budget (some of which will have to be raised by the group); women only

(ii) A Mentoring Scheme, run through the Women's Forum and including women external to GPNI if they have appropriate experience e.g. for elected representatives

(iii) Acknowledge that women may have a different path of political involvement due to caring responsibilities, in particular they may take an 'activist break' and should be encouraged to return

(iv) Caring costs to be paid for all official meetings (includes for male carers) and crèches for all General Meetings

Candidate selection

(i) Contested selection meetings to include at least one female candidate, or nominations process to be extended by a further 2 weeks

(ii) Local groups and GPNI EC to ensure selection processes are run in a non-discriminatory fashion and Selection Conventions to include at least one female GPNI EC observer OR Women's Forum observer

Structural change through targets and quotas

Targets:

- 50% women members
- 40% women officers in local groups [move to quota in 2 years]
- 40% women on EC

Quotas:

- At least one woman in all policy forums
- Leader and Deputy Leader must include at least one woman
- 33% women in priority seats and 40% women candidates overall; in elections where there are only 2 target seats, at least one candidate must be female [builds on existing 40% target overall]
- At least one of EC Chair Secretary and Treasurer should be female

Evaluation

(i) Annual evaluation by Equalities Officer in conjunction with EC and Women's Forum

(ii) EC ultimately responsible for implementation and annual report to AGM.

Resources

(i) Women's Forum to have a small budget from the EC and to fund-raise separately

(ii) Central budget to pay for carers' costs/ crèche

(iii) Women's Forum and other supporters to research other sources of funds and practical support including working with other Green Parties on these islands and with local groups outside GPNI where appropriate.

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Note: This approach to party development is in no way intended to devalue the contribution of women who choose to limit their involvement due to other commitments. Rather, it is intended to support and encourage all women members to make the contribution they feel is best for them.

Pathway level	Related policies	Evaluation at AGM
1. Encourage women to join GPNI through presenting us as a woman-friendly party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EC Communications Strategy to take into account need for relevant stories and use of women members for quotes etc. • Recruitment material to specifically encourage women (and other underrepresented groups) • Local groups and GPNI EC to consider initiatives to involve women as part of their recruitment and communications strategies • Establishment of regional Women’s Forum including EC place and right to motions etc. – to be publicised in recruitment material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased no. of women joining • Target of 50% women members
2. Welcome women members and encourage them to get actively involved at local level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All new members (not just women) to be actively welcomed by local group and encouraged to get involved – part of membership strategy. Could include a women’s event • Local groups to periodically review suitability of meeting places, times and content • Carers’ costs to be covered at all official meetings – if agreed, need also to agree cost ceiling and process • All women members automatically to be members of the Women’s Forum and added to mailing list • Opportunity to join Women’s Forum mentoring scheme and training events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turnover of women members • Take-up of carers’ costs for local meetings • Examples of good practice to be shared • Take-up of mentoring scheme and training • Target of 40% women in administrative positions in local groups [we actually have a quota for this – move to quota in 2 years]

Pathway level	Related policies	Evaluation at AGM
3. Encourage women to take up regional level posts or above within GPNI (EC, Young Greens, Women's Forum, policy forums etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All local and regional groups to actively encourage women to stand for regional bodies • Regional groups to periodically review suitability of meeting places, times and content • Women's Forum mentoring scheme and training events • Carers' costs • Women's Forum to have nomination rights to AGM • GPNI EC to take action to ensure quota is met 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take-up of carers' costs, mentoring scheme and training • Quota: At least one woman in all policy forums • Target of 40% women on GPNI EC and quota: at least one of EC Chair Secretary and Treasurer to be female • Quota: Leader & Deputy Leader to include at least one woman
4. Encourage women to stand for election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All local and regional groups to actively encourage women to put themselves forward as candidates; Women's Forum to organise appropriate training for potential candidates • Mentoring scheme - including possibility of approaching external mentors sympathetic to GPNI with experience of electoral politics • Contested selection meetings to include at least one female candidate, or nominations process extended by a further 2 weeks • Local groups and GPNI EC to ensure selection processes are run in a non-discriminatory fashion; Selection Conventions to include at least one female GPNI EC observer OR Women's Forum observer • Carer's costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take-up of carers' costs for regional level meetings • Take-up of mentoring scheme and training • Quota of 33% women in priority seats and 40% women candidates overall; in elections where there are only 2 target seats, at least one candidate must be female [builds on existing 40% overall]
5. Support women in high profile elected or administrative positions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's Forum, mentoring, carer's costs and training as above • Support and advice from Media and Communications Director 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turnover of women in high profile positions
6. At all stages – take action on sex discrimination & violence against women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include general policy on harassment and sexual violence in GPNI Constitution 	