



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

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

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Stakeholder Details

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CARLIN HOUSE 4-6 DONEGALL ST PLACE BELFAST BT1 2FN	Registered Political Party	<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Government
	Academic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Government
	Legislature	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-Government
	Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public		
	TRADE UNION FEDERATION		
Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder			
<p>(This box will expand as you type)</p> <p>THE IRISH CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS IS THE FEDERATION BODY FOR TRADE UNIONS ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND. IN NORTHERN IRELAND, ICTU REPRESENTS THE INTERESTS OF APPROXIMATELY 230,000 PEOPLE WORKING IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR WORKPLACES.</p> <p>ICTU HAS A COMMITTEE BASED STRUCTURE WHICH INCLUDES A NUMBER OF EQUALITY COMMITTEES INCLUDING A WOMEN'S COMMITTEE AS WELL AS A DISABILITY, LGBT AND BME COMMITTEE. THROUGH THESE COMMITTEES AND OUR NORTHERN IRELAND COMMITTEE, ICTU CAMPAIGNS FOR PROGRESSIVE WORKPLACE LEGISLATION WHICH PROMOTES EQUALITY. WE ARE PLEASED TO RESPOND TO THIS REVIEW.</p>			
Guidelines for Completion of Submissions			
<p>The Committee would ask that stakeholders submit <u>electronic</u> responses using this pro forma.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>			

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 570-13.¹

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 70th 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

¹ http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf

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.

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/RalSe/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?

(This box will expand as you type)

Attitudinal and organisational barriers can pose separate challenges to women entering politics/holding power, but the combination of attitudinal and organisational barriers pose very formidable challenges, which in turn are further enhanced by the structural barriers in society that women face.

For example, women politicians across the UK have referred regularly to the traditional political culture that curtails their interests and participation – debate verging on harassment; informal male-only networking to make bargains and trade-offs; a long hours culture; and, at times, a cold and hostile environment that saps the confidence of some, mainly women. In addition, because their numbers are low, women can be fatally inducted into a way of working that is unnatural to them in order to survive and thus perpetuate the traditional culture.

A study by the Council of Europe in 2008 concluded that ‘obstacles to participation can be related to electoral systems, but also the functioning of political life and its rites and rhythms, that can still follow a dominant male pattern of social organisation’. The report added that ‘they can also be related to the unwritten traditional rules of political parties which, still too often, tend to function as old boys’ networks. Deeper rooted obstacles are linked to educational, social and cultural factors that still tend to privilege the public/political domain as being mainly a male domain’.

In an interview given by Michelle Gildernew, when she was Minister for Agriculture, she said that ‘the barriers include the reality of life inside political parties and the fact that many women are put off by the confrontational nature of the current political debate. Many meetings are held in the evenings – it does not matter how well remunerated one is if you are going out the door and the children are coming in from school’. (NI Agenda: June 2010)

The dual burden with women still having the main responsibility for caring and domestic responsibilities is a major challenge with the lack of childcare policy and infrastructure overarching issues restricting women’s participation over the years. Women need time and space to contribute and to enable them to take up decision making roles and without proper childcare provision this will not be possible until their children are older. Balancing work and family commitments/caring responsibilities is seen as an individual responsibility, a career

planning responsibility for women and men are not generally called upon to make this lifestyle choice. This can mean that many women enter political life at a much later stage than men who have already moved up the ladder into senior positions in their parties.

For women, particularly younger women, this can also mean a lack of role models, which makes it difficult for them to relate to politics. If young women do not see women, and particularly young women, in Local Government and in the Assembly in substantial numbers there is little to encourage them to enter political life.

The media and the stereotypes it perpetuates can also constitute a challenge to those seeking election. Mainstream media is often prone to cultivating a negative stereotypical portrayal of women politicians, with a tendency to put them down and not focus on political achievement. For example, following the re-shuffle of the Cabinet last July, the Daily Mail dedicated much of its front page and a double spread to dissecting the anatomy, dress and makeup of the women Cabinet Ministers. The paper described Esther McVey, Minister of State for Employment, as 'sashaying into Downing Street while wearing a dress that cinched in her waist and emphasised her bust throwing her blonde mane backwards as in a shampoo advert', and slammed Liz Truss, the new Environment Secretary, for 'looking a little bit like an eighties air hostess'.

The above is borne out by the responses from women in NI who recently attended a number of workshops on the issues of participation and representation held as part of an EU funded Women and Peacebuilding Project. Asked if they thought that women's participation on strategic bodies and in decision making institutions was better or worse than 15 years ago their responses included the following:

- the culture of politics in NI was seen as problematic for women, it is very male dominated and often aggressive and adversarial
- concerns were expressed that women who entered public life 'played the man's game' simply to survive and that there was a need to educate political and public representatives about the difference between aggression and assertiveness
- politics in NI was about 'playing games' and women do not like this – consequently they were more likely to get involved in community action and development (informal politics) rather than formal political life or related decision making agencies
- the women believed that there was a lack of female role models in political life – having more women in politics would make politics more inclusive and transparent
- the overall view was that women have become increasingly invisible in decision making over the past 15 years notwithstanding the fact that there has been some increase in the number of women elected to the NI Assembly. However, with the exception of a very small number of high profile women they tend not to be recognised. Where there was some positive change, it was noticed at Local Government level.
- A number of women expressed the view that although legislation promoting equality has been enacted, attitudes have not changed in any significant manner. Gender specific assumptions prevail and mind sets have not changed. While men have a support system (usually their family) that allows them to become politically active, this can be more difficult for women.

A recent inquiry conducted on behalf of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Parliament (Improving Parliament – Creating a Better and More Responsive House 2014)

found the consistent themes highlighting the reasons why fewer women seek election were:

- increased media scrutiny of MPs and their families
- the poor public perception of MPs
- a lack of readily available information on the role
- a sense that Parliament is not the place for 'people like me' and
- the substantial costs and time demands of seeking election.

(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?

(This box will expand as you type)

There have been a number of strategies developed both by groups in civil society and by political parties to stimulate women's interest in pursuing elected office. While largely reflecting supply-side tactics, these initiatives have also sought to raise broader awareness of the need for more women in politics, and therefore to raise the demand for female candidates. These initiatives were thought to be necessary, not because women lack the skills and qualifications to hold political office, but rather because women as a group have not had the same opportunities as men to access a political career.

For this reason, programmes focused on developing this knowledge form a crucial part of any campaign to enhance women's political representation. The most direct capacity development initiatives in this sense involve training programmes for current or future female candidates, run by political parties or civil society groups.

An example is the *Women2Win campaign* in the Conservative Party, which provides support, advice and training in public speaking and media skills to women who wish to become more politically involved. The group also hosts networking events for women at all levels of politics to meet with one another. Further information is available at: (<http://www.women2win.com>).

A similar initiative was pursued by the Liberal Democrats in the late 1990s whose women's section launched a *50.50 campaign* to get more women into parliament using the slogan 'cash, confidence and culture'. They identified these 3 C's as the three major roadblocks that newcomers face in politics. To this end they set up the Nancy Sear Trust Fund in 1997 to help finance expenses that are often shaped by gender such as child and elder care and travel expenses (to provide cash); developed a programme to shadow MPs (to promote confidence); and encourage the construction of a skills database to recruit to recruit spokeswomen and

candidates (to combat the male dominated culture). (Woodward, A., *Going for Gender Balance*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe 2002)

At Westminster there is an *All-Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Parliament* whose purpose is to increase the number of women Parliamentarians in all parties and to encourage female candidates to get involved in public life and to discuss and highlight the barriers to this. (www.allpartygroupforwomeninpolitics). The APPG has recently published the results of an inquiry to investigate what could be done to create a more aspirational, modern and representative Parliament which addresses many of the issues raised in this consultation. (*Improving Parliament – Creating a Better and More Representative House* (July 2104)

A campaign that has gained some national prominence is the *2012 Project*, a non-partisan campaign initiated by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. (http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/education_training/2012Project/index.php) The campaign is directed at women aged 45 and older, especially those that are in professions that are generally under-represented in politics, such as finance, environment, science, health, technology, and small business. The 2012 Project focuses on older women on the grounds that women of this age are more likely to be at the top of their professions, have fewer family responsibilities (because children may be older) and be financially independent. The project seeks to reach these women at industry conventions through talks led by former female legislators and those who express interest in the project are given information on think tanks, campaign training programmes and fundraising networks that can help them succeed. *Women for Election* is a not-for-profit, non-partisan organisation which offers a tailored training and support programme for women seeking to enter public life; and provides and facilitates a cross-party network of political women, committed to equal representation of women and men in Irish politics. It provides a number of programmes designed specifically to empower women and to help them overcome the challenges they may face when considering a career in politics. It has proved successful in that at least half of the women candidates who ran in the recent local government elections in the Republic of Ireland were alumni.

Whilst it is difficult to quantify direct impact on encouraging women to enter into politics, Congress recommends that the NI Assembly examine initiatives which have been run by Civil Society organisations. Congress, for example, has been running a successful *Women and Leadership* training programme for a number of years. Originally funded from the EU Special Support Fund for Peace and Reconciliation, the programme was developed to encourage more women to play an active part in their unions, particularly in leadership roles. It was one of a number of positive action initiatives introduced by Congress to address the under-representation of women in the decision-making bodies within Congress and its affiliates. These also included reserved seats on Executive Committees; Women's Committees and Conferences; childcare facilities at Conferences; Branch meetings held at hours that suited women; women only-training programmes; gender equality audits; and a condition for affiliation to Congress that all union rule books contain a commitment to gender equality. In addition, many unions have now introduced mentoring programmes. Participation in the labour and trade union movements has proved to be a well tested route for women and men to enter into politics, as evidenced by many Labour politicians with a trade union background.

DemocraShe is another example of a civil society organisation established to foster women's participation and leadership. It offers a non-partisan programme of individual and organisational capacity building to support women in all political parties – public policy forums,

social and economic issues, media/PR seminars, selection and election procedures, strategic campaign management, fundraising techniques and networking skills. Over three election cycles it trained 250 women and helped to increase the number of women elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly and local government. For example, over the training period women in local government increased from 14% to 22%.

The above examples are representative of a myriad of courses and initiatives, *Women into Politics* being another, which have been developed and run by women's organisations for many years.

Congress would also recommend that the Committee examine a recent report produced by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Whilst the report comments on the area of public appointments rather than entry into political office, Congress believes that having experience of public appointments is another crucial route for women to consider entering into political life.

In the report, *Under Representation and Lack of Diversity in Public Appointments*, the Commissioner recommends a number of strategic measures to increase women's participation on public bodies including making board diversity a matter for public policy and setting measurable goals along with an overall framework for action by the Executive and Departments and monitored and reported on annually. Congress believes that adopting and **implementing** the measures recommended by the Commissioner would assist in creating a public policy arena where it is understood and clearly articulated that positive actions will be taken to ensure that women (and other under-represented groups) are appointed to public bodies.

Congress believes that high profile role models are of vital importance in relation to encouraging women to engage with politics. In this respect, we would point to the role of the Wales Assembly's Presiding Officer Rosemary Butler, who has run a Women into Public Life campaign over the last number of years and who has also been made a Dame for her role in helping to promote diversity. See <http://www.womenmakingadifference.org.uk/wipl>

Congress is impressed by the resources which have been dedicated to this Campaign, as evidenced by the women making a difference website and understand that at 41.6%, Wales has the highest proportion of women in power – compared to a mere 19.4% in Northern Ireland (source, Sex and Power, who runs Britain 2014 Sex and Power was researched and written by the Centre for Women & Democracy on behalf of the Counting Women In coalition (CFWD, the Electoral Reform Society, the Fawcett Society, the Hansard Society and Unlock Democracy).

(3a) Question

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

(This box will expand as you type)

Each party should develop an Action Plan designed to ensure gender equality in elected office with clearly specific performance targets and should review and monitor the participation of

women t all levels in their respective parties.

The issue of candidate selection has been identified as one of the most important obstacles to women’s political participation. Congress believes that all political parties have transparent and fair procedures which encourage a more diverse pool of candidates. We would recommend that there should be a review of internal candidate recruitment processes with each party including fast track strategies in party rule books and regulations to allow for specific measures to achieve equality for nominated candidates. There should also be training for all those participating on selection committees.

In addition to the Assembly introducing quotas as a temporary special measure (see 4 below) we would recommend that all parties introduce voluntary positive action measures, for example, via their selection procedures by ensuring that at least one woman is selected for every constituency and equitable placement of men and women in winnable seats and throughout party structures; and monitor and enforce selection complaints and appeals procedures.’

There is evidence that parties are already standing women in winnable seats, at least some of them are. For example, although fewer women stood in the 2011 Assembly election than in the 2007 election, more women were returned. This is an important factor in increasing women’s participation.

We would also recommend capacity development to strengthen the skills and resources of women in the pipeline for elected office, including mentoring programmes, skills and media training and funding for women candidates, including dedicated campaign funds for women candidates to help them raise their profile and campaign effectively.

(3b) Question

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

(This box will expand as you type)

(4) Question

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

(This box will expand as you type)

Congress believes that what is needed is fast track' strategic interventions that can contribute towards the attainment of gender equality in elected office. For example, we would be supportive of temporary special measures, accompanied by timetables and benchmarks, such as quotas to, realise the commitment in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 'to the right of women to full and equal political participation'.

Over the last decade electoral gender quotas have been increasingly used and have proved a successful method for redressing the imbalance of women's historical exclusion from public and political life. Political parties in over 90 countries have now adopted some kind of gender quota for elections to parliaments and legislative assemblies. For example, the introduction of quotas saw an increase in women's representation in Macedonia from 6.7% in 2000 (prior to the law) to 32.5% in 2010 after the change to the law; and an increase in Belgium from 23.3% in 2000 to 33.95 in 2010; in Spain from 28.3% to 36.6% and in Portugal from 17.4% to 27.4%.

Quotas tend to work when tailored to a country's electoral system, enforced with sanctions, accompanied by rules on where women should be placed on parliamentary lists, connected to a meaningful definition of participation and combined with steps to generate political and public support. Obviously quotas on their own, are not a solution to women's underrepresentation, but will open up the door to increased representation and, along with the review of candidate selection as recommended above, help sustain and further increase that representation.

Any such temporary measure would be in line with Article 4 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which emphasises 'temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination' and would also be in line with the Beijing Platform for Action Strategic Objectives G1 and G2. Such quotas generally call for women to form between 25 and 50 per cent of all parliamentary candidates nominated by political parties, and while it would be up to the Assembly to set the target to be achieved, we would recommend aiming for 33% as this is the figure quoted by organisational, academic and political studies as the critical mass at which an organisation's or body's agenda becomes diversified and more inclusive at that point.

We are aware of the arguments that quotas are undemocratic and work against meritocracy. In an ideal world, of course, all candidates would be selected on merit, but at the moment this does not happen. If a constituency party is determined to choose a male candidate then no matter however good a woman candidate is, she will not be selected. Positive action is needed not because women cannot succeed on the basis of merit, but because discrimination means that too often women are not given the opportunity to try.

However, quotas should be seen as only one of a number of measures needed to support women in and into legislatures. For example, between 2007 and 2011 there were 14 co-options in the Assembly, including into 3 seats previously held by women. All 14 vacancies were filled by co-opting men. Parties could have chosen women to fill the seats but they did not do so. We would also recommend, as a positive action initiative, that parties should commit to co-opting women, or at least a percentage of women, whenever men vacate seats.

(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)?

(This box will expand as you type)

While the numbers of women in the Assembly are important, Congress believes it is vital to have women in positions of leadership within the Assembly. They need to be seen in the senior positions, as Ministers, as Chairs of Committees, presiding officer and as Speakers. Among other things, women in these positions present a positive role model to other women. There is concern that where women are involved in decision making bodies/agencies, their level of representation decreases with ascending hierarchy – women become less visible. Visibility could be increased, for example, by the rotation of Ministerial posts and Committee chairs.

Greater visibility for women MLAs can also be increased by including women in all delegations and giving them a prominent role, for example, at press conferences, where they are not just standing behind their male colleague as he speaks but being the one who speaks to camera. Additionally, when the media ask for specific male representative for a current affairs programme, nominating, where appropriate to the discussion/subject matter, a female MLA instead.

However, while it is important that women occupy Ministerial and Committee Chair positions, it is important that these are not just what is seen as the ‘soft’ portfolio areas such as employment and education in contrast to the ‘hard’ areas such as the economy, justice and policing. When women are not seen speaking on these issues, this reinforces the perception that these policy areas which are ‘men only’. There is also a need to match leadership positions with members’ abilities and diverse working experience and preferences should be given to women where qualifications are equal to men, as this can also enhance the role of women.

The role of women can also be enhanced through other measures. Congress would also recommend a Gender Equality Committee or a dedicated Equality Committee that deals with mainstreaming gender in the business of the legislature. This could facilitate a gender mainstreaming view to inform all Committee business so that it takes account of the gendered effects of policy and legislation. This would send out a positive message that gender equality is taken seriously by the Assembly.

We would also recommend enhancing parliamentary research into gender issues. For example, recent research on *Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly* (September 2013) and *Review of Gender Issues In Northern Ireland* (January 2104) are to be welcomed and are useful tools for those working in these areas.

The role that women MLAs play can also be enhanced through a women’s group or wing

which could publicise what they are doing, for example via a Newsletter on their website and circulated to, for example the media and also to women's groups and other civil society organisations. Regularised links with women groups and cross party networking on behalf of women as a whole is important. Women's groups can help facilitate this by engaging women from across the parties together on issues that are of concern to them.

(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.

(This box will expand as you type)

Promoting women's representation is a multi-faceted process, requiring various strategies to raise awareness of the need for gender balance, to locate and encourage prospective female candidates and to ensure that women receive the resources, skills and tools that can help them succeed in getting elected. However, it is not sufficient to integrate gender equality issues into policies and procedures if women are unable to make their voice heard effectively once they enter elected office. A 2008 IPU survey of parliamentarians revealed that many women continue to perceive the traditional culture, rules and working practices of parliaments to be problematic. (Ballington, J., Equality in Politics: A Survey of Men and Women in Parliament, (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2008). Congress would recommend that the Assembly conduct a gender equality audit to identify problems and issues about women's participation in the Assembly and on foot of this review its internal procedures and institutional facilities to ensure they do not create obstacles to the equal inclusion of women in all decision-making roles.

Moreover new MLAs could face major challenges in learning parliamentary rules, legislative drafting skills and debating procedures, hence parliaments should ensure that new women and men members should have equal access to capacity induction programmes and training.

Legislative bodies are organised around a set of standardised rules, operating procedures and institutional facilities which may generate obstacles to the equal inclusion of women in all decision-making and leadership roles. An OSCE report noted that certain elements of parliamentary culture may deter women from pursuing a political career, like party meetings that take place at night and the lack of childcare facilities. (OSCE/ODIHR, Venice Commission, and Council of Europe, Joint OSCE/ODHIR – Venice Commission Draft Guidelines on Political Party Legislation (Strasbourg 2010). By far the greatest challenge highlighted by the survey was balancing work and family life, and while this is difficult for men, it is doubly so for women.

The Assembly should challenge this by rearranging sitting hours with no late sessions at night or during school holidays and by entitling all members to parental leave. Congress would recommend the introduction of an agreed policy on maternity and paternity leave and that the Assembly could also make particular arrangements for women MLAs returning after maternity leave by allowing proxy votes, votes by phone etc and perhaps, most importantly, establishing childcare facilities in the Assembly. Congress understands that the Wales Assembly has adopted a number of family friendly policies, including a number of guaranteed subsidised nursery places for employees children as well as adopting a number of enhanced measures which have led to the Welsh Assembly being recognised as in the top 10 UK employers, accredited by the Top Employers for Working Families organisation (TEWF), an industry-recognised bench marker for good practice when it comes to providing a working environment that allows for a positive work/life balance.

We would also advocate a gender action plan that would clearly state the Assembly's commitment to gender equality and a clear and detailed set of objectives and processes for achieving this. Under this overarching policy should be a suite of related policies, such as a code of conduct to prevent harassment and the use of derogatory and sexist language.

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.

Despite the concluding observations from the CEDAW Committee in 2008 calling for the ‘full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Northern Ireland’ this issue has still to be addressed by the UK Government. This is an obvious vehicle by which to implement the commitment made by the parties to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement ‘to the right of women to full and equal political participation’. A clear commitment to the implementation on UNSCR 1325 is not only central to increasing women’s participation in political and decision-making bodies, but also to ensure their participation in policies aimed at addressing the legacy of the conflict. The response by Lynn Featherstone (Minister for Women and Equalities) to a Parliamentary Question in 2012 where she stated: ‘Some aspects of UNSCR 1325 such as participation in peace and political processes are relevant to all states and the Government will work towards increasing the representation of women in Northern Ireland in public and political life’ (Official Report [Hansard] 13 March 2012) would appear to open the door to the UK Government taking this approach.

Congress believes it crucial that UNSCR 1325 be actioned in Northern Ireland to implement such initiatives as they need to be underpinned by the status that 1325 would give. Without that status the commitment in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement for the ‘right of women to full and equal political participation’ will remain an aspiration without legal standing or the means to ensure that full and equal participation is build into all the institutions, including the Assembly, directly established as a result of the peace process.

Section 6

Contact Details

All responses should be sent by email please to:

The Committee Clerk
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Tel: 028 90521787 or
028 90521928

To arrive no later than Wednesday 3 September 2014 please

Email: committee.assembly&executivereview@niassembly.gov.uk

Thank you for your submission