



**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

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Stakeholder Name

Telephone Number

NIRWN (as member of the Women's Regional Consortium)	02887753389			
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)			
NIRWN Unit 13a Gate C Ballysaggart Business Complex 8 Beechvalley Way DUNGANNON BT70 1BS	Registered Political Party	<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Government	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Academic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Government	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Legislature	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-Government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public			<input type="checkbox"/>
Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder				
<p>(This box will expand as you type)</p> <p>NIRWN (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network) work regionally across rural Northern Ireland to amplify and articulate the voice of rural women at local, regional and strategic level. NIRWN work as a partner within the Women's Regional Consortium.</p> <p>The under representation of women in public and political life is an issue regularly raised by our membership and across the Consortium. NIRWN and WRDA held 2 separate focus groups in direct response to this questionnaire; one rural and one in Belfast to canvass the views and experiences of our membership. Their views are reflected in this response actual quotations from women have been italicized..</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

The Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, which consists of a range of commitments by

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

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/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?

(This box will expand as you type)

Barriers to Being Interested in Participating

The feedback from both of our focus groups identified the **adversarial set up of NI Politics** as a key barrier to women being interested in participating: *'women are simply not interested in the orange and Green of how things work here, women care about health, education, how much things cost'. 'Politics here is conflict led instead of reconciliatory or cooperative'*.

Women are also put off by the **political environment** they felt women are ignored and *'shouted down'* and the perceived aggressive nature of the environment they would be working in is also off putting. The belief was that if there were more female representatives; a **critical mass** that these issues would improve along with an improvement in policies that would have a more positive impact on women's lives.

Young women in particular don't necessarily see the relevance of politics to their lives; they have **apathy** and are **disengaged**. Young women expressed that they felt politics was full of *'old men who just want to argue with each other instead of listening to what people want'*. The older demographic were largely **disillusioned** by what they perceived as the lack of progress made in recent years on *'real issues'* and they felt that *'politicians only want to know what you think when they knock your door once every four years for a vote; they don't care about how they could change things for the better for you, they just want to be sure they are being paid for the next four years, sure with their salaries and expenses they don't know what our lives are like.'*

The perception across the age range of those we asked was that politics is so heavily **male dominated** that it would be very daunting to participate.

Barriers to Participating even if Interested

Lack of Structural support

The lack of flexible, affordable **childcare** was stated by all as a barrier to participation in NI politics. **N Irish culture** our members felt dictates that the women are the primary caregivers (so if there are two careers in a family, women tend to be the one to step back and pick up the family responsibilities). *'Women have the right to have two jobs-raising their family and working' any work you have has to be flexible*. In NI raising a family is not viewed as valuable and is viewed therefore as women's work; while in Sweden the culture values parents raising children. The best support for children is where women and men both play a role and the state supports this.

Travel for our rural focus group in particular was raised as a significant barrier to participation;

rural women felt that particularly West of the Bann travel to Stormont every day in both **financial cost** (of both the travel and the extra childcare); and **time** spent travelling inhibited even thinking of working as an Assembly member.

The **culture of politics** is not family friendly e.g. meeting times, hours worked outside normal office hours etc does not lend itself to family life nor accessing childcare provision.

There is a **lack of training/qualifications** for politicians and the women we spoke to felt that if there was a qualification or suite of small qualifications such as: *'leadership training', 'media training', 'public speaking', 'negotiation skills'* etc that this would help address the **lack of confidence** that prohibits female participation in NI politics.

A proper understanding by our current politicians on what **equality** means:

The 'Gender Equality Strategy' for Northern Ireland² recognises that:

'treating men and women the same – that is being 'gender neutral' - is not the solution to eradicating gender inequality' (p.15) and later:

*'treating men and women the same will not ensure equal outcomes because of the different experiences of women and men and the different economic and social positions occupied by them'*³

Understanding this would make a dramatic impact on how decisions to engage women are made.

(2) Question

² OFMDFM. *A Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2006-2016*. The Gender Equality Unit. 2006

³ Ibid

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)

One participant in a focus group cited a public sector organisation that she currently works for as a good example of **flexible working hours**. There is:

- Agreement that everyone is willing to take on extra work when necessary
- An all women team
- Good leadership

It was agreed that **family friendly practices** of this type would encourage more women to get involved in local councils and the Assembly. Such family friendly practices as: paternity leave; working hours; job role and home working would all be beneficial.

Clear job role In the Scottish Assembly there is a clear job role which is outcome focussed rather than the situation here which is process focussed-attending meetings but no outcomes. It was felt a clear job role would help women see that it was a job they had the skills and experience to deliver on.

Positive Action Measures such as those used to achieve religious balance in the PSNI should be used to work towards gender balance in our political structures. This worked too for the DPP's (now PCSP's)

Norway enforced Y3 critical mass

Dow Jones in the USA top companies must have a woman on the Board.

Boards of Industry given 5 years to address their gender balance.

(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)

Shadowing

Gender Champions

Youth Groups

a. Training

b. Awareness raising with young women (need to see the relevance to their lives)

Women Caucuses

Women only lists (in some constituencies)

Quota System

Actively seeking out potential female candidates and supporting them. *Women are 50% of the population, we all have at least one very competent, capable woman who shaped our lives; it is lazy to state that there are not enough women of 'merit' putting themselves forward. They may not be putting themselves forward for the reasons outlined in Q 1 but they exist so Parties must find a way to actively seek them out and encourage and support them into politics.'*

Positive action Measures should be implemented even for a specific time period.

(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)

N/A

(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)

Job Roles: Criteria and Person Specifications

Quota System

Support System (Childcare, flexible working etc)

Gender Champions

Shadowing

Working with Community and schools to promote women and the role of women

Suggestion that training is a need for both women and men going into politics: there are currently no criteria for politicians so the current 'meritocracy' is basically the 'old boys' network'.

(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)

Shadowing visits to other parliaments

Shadowing successful women e.g. in local councils

Setting up **Focus Groups**

Women's Networks

Funding for **best practice research** with community focus

Structural support

Political Leadership Programmes (e.g. Washington DC)

Training on equality for young men and women

Problem is that women need to fall in with party views which may be anti –quotas

There needs to be a gendered lens on any support systems and way of working

Media promotion of the positive role and contributions our female politicians are making.

(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)

Quotes From our Focus Groups:

We all need to realise that women need to go into politics to bring about change

Some women don't know how to take the next step into politics

Women are the leaders in their local communities; most C/V organisations and initiatives are being led by women; they have the skills.

Politics needs to be on the career prospectus in schools and opportunities need to be

provided for young women

The existing parties could promote women's role within their own party.

Not all the female politicians even recognise the barriers that other women face because they have the background, education and support that means they don't understand; this can be the most damaging of all.

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.

(This box will expand as you type)

Short/medium/long term targets should be set for each initiative selected e.g.

ENGAGING THE WOMEN'S SECTOR		
SHORT TERM	MEDIUM TERM	LONG TERM
Map the existing sector	Train 6 Groups of x12 women in Leadership Skills across NI in Year 1 and the same for Year 2	Aim to provide x12 opportunities for those who have completed Leadership Training to work shadow a female politician for e.g. a 4 week period
Organise focus groups to discuss initiatives that may work e.g. Leadership training	Organise a female politician guest speaker to present to each group	Have a dedicated concurrent Training support programme run by the women's sector and supported by the political parties leading to a 10% increase in female candidates

Engage the Women's Sector; the sector is very effective at engaging women which is a good place to start.

A **Civic Forum** could be an effective way to engage women in political life.

All new Council structures such as: Local Action Groups; Peace III/IV Partnerships; Community Planning Fora etc should be gender balanced. This would allow local women involved and interested in community activity to experience working at Board level with Councillors and observe the role of local Councillors. Women should be supported into these decision-making spaces and supported when on them through all the aforementioned barriers: travel, childcare. Flexibility etc.

Our members felt that it is imperative to address female representation and hope those reviewing this take on their views regarding the Impact of **Women's Under Representation** which are:

- **Lower Quality Decisions-** Greater participation from people of all backgrounds – genuine diversity at board level – means greater accountability and a more highly functioning democratic process.
- **A perpetuation-**Low level of female participation in any area of work has the effect of embedding and multiplying the problem of low female participation. Most obviously, it sends a message that certain jobs are not for women and limits the number of available female role models.
- **The multiplier effect-**Low levels of female participation has a multiplier effect which can undermine the attempts of some to achieve equal participation.
- **Lower representation groups-**Women from ethnic minority backgrounds and women

with disabilities are just almost invisible at public and political level.

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

Thank you for your submission