



**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								
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP)	028 9038 0195 07442 498743								
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)								
	<table border="0"> <tr> <td><b>Registered Political Party</b></td> <td><b>Local Government</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Academic</b></td> <td><b>Government</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Legislature</b></td> <td><b>Non-Government X</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2"><b>Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public</b></td> </tr> </table>	<b>Registered Political Party</b>	<b>Local Government</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Government</b>	<b>Legislature</b>	<b>Non-Government X</b>	<b>Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public</b>	
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<b>Academic</b>	<b>Government</b>								
<b>Legislature</b>	<b>Non-Government X</b>								
<b>Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public</b>									
Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder									
<p>Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) was awarded UN Consultative Status in 1999.</p> <p>The main aims of NIWEP are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To capture the position of women in Northern Ireland and to ensure it is represented in international standards and mechanisms</li> <li>To hold government accountable for working towards equality through meeting international standards.</li> </ul>									
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.<sup>1</sup>

#### **3.2 Statistical Outline**

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

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

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

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

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

#### **3.3 Policy**

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

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

These include:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **3.5 Legislative Frameworks**

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

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

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

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

**Section 4**

**Questions to consider**

**(1) Question**

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



Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace" (Beijing Declaration, para 13, United Nations 1995).

Despite this high level declaration it has been difficult for women in Northern Ireland to enter politics. It is well documented that peace processes in conflict-affected states have historically failed to include women or represent women's and girl's interests meaningfully. This has been the experience of Northern Ireland women in the post conflict processes and structures since the peace agreements of 1999 and 2007

Recently new evidence of the incomplete and continuing conflict can be seen in the reports from workshops held with women from across Northern Ireland by a project, Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning which aims to capture the experience of women during the conflict and the period of conflict resolution.<sup>1</sup> Women from some areas have reported:

- High levels of control (through fear and intimidation)
- Local women unable to speak up due to threat of property and personal security
- Women and their families living in fear and silence due to threat of reprisals<sup>2</sup>

This evidence is being echoed by what evidence is being gathered through the present inquiry<sup>3</sup> into what positive actions have been implemented for Women since the Good Friday Agreement (ongoing) with barriers to participation in political life at community, local and regional levels

There is extensive evidence that women are not able to participate in community politics through fear and intimidation and therefore the natural progression to regional politics will not be realised unless the barriers to women's participation are addressed effectively.

Consequently women in Northern Ireland have little or no opportunity to influence and implement the decisions that are made about rebuilding their country and shaping their lives and those of their communities.

Other barriers to participation are the caring responsibilities taken by women. Lack of affordable, accessible and appropriate childcare restrict participation in political life. Meetings are held at times not conducive to those with caring responsibilities. However these barriers can easily be overcome through appropriate positive actions which promote gender equality

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<sup>1</sup> The Women's Resource and Development Agency, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the National Women's Council of Ireland are partners in the PEACE 3 funded project.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/margaret-ward/excluded-and-silenced-women-in-northern-ireland-after-peace-process>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Committee-Minutes-of-Evidence/Session-2013-2014/May-2014/Briefing-from-All-party-Group-on-UNSCR-1325-Women-Peace-and-Security/>

**(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?***

Women must be able to articulate their voice, rights needs and preferences and political parties must hear their voice and act. They should be part of debates for constitution and electoral law, set safety rules for campaigns and all other issues.

To address the serious political constraints on women's political engagement, including the need for transforming political culture, providing political education and ensuring that campaign financing reaches women and that they are protected from backlash and measures are in place to combat gender based violence;

This can be done through: -

- Strengthening judiciary systems based on international judiciary accountability and constitutional change for gender and democracy;
- Providing guidelines for parties and support for election management bodies, and remove barriers for women to have access and share political power starting from manifestos to nomination procedures;
- Establishing effective financing mechanisms before women are nominated, especially internal financial systems;
- Holding all democratic institutions including local councils, political parties, women wings, and civil society, accountable to women, and for meeting commitments to women's rights.
- Developing capacity at different levels

**(3a) Question**

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

Political Parties should have in place policies that ensure the following:-

- that provisions and measures in founding party documents to ensure women's representation in party structures and activities;
- transparent candidate recruitment and/or selection processes;
- clear and transparent promotion procedures;
- equal access to and distribution of party resources;
- Gender-sensitive party culture;
- institutional and regulatory frameworks that address discrimination against women and provide sufficient mechanisms to redress complaints.

This can be done through

- Institutionalizing gender equality within party structures, processes and practices
- Developing a party gender action plan
- Developing rules guaranteeing representation of women in party decision-making Bodies
- Adopting voluntary measures to support women's political advancement
- The use of women only short lists. There is legislation for this, but it is not being used.
- Provision of carers allowance to women and reorganising of meeting times to suit carers needs
- Attendance and priority at the All Party Groups on Gender related issues such as Women Peace and Security

**(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?***

Women's contribution to local community work needs to be recognized. The lack of women in political life means that gatekeepers of power remain male and they decide on projects and funding. Therefore women's issues remain marginalized. The current levels of fear and intimidation that prevent women being involved in community politics also need to be addressed. Without a voice at local community level, women are less likely to become involved at regional level politics.

The use of quotas could be considered for decision making bodies.

CEDAW recommends the use of "special temporary measures" to improve women's representation.

Aspects of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement that haven't been implemented are those that impact on Women – decision making, the Civic Forum and the Bill of Rights.

#### (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)?***

A recent Westminster Inquiry into Women in Parliament looked at three areas :

- Supply: Why do so few females wish to participate in electoral politics;
- Recruitment by parties and
- Retention of women who have stepped into the political arena.

The All Party Group recently published its results into an APPG Inquiry is to increase the numbers of women in Parliament. They recommended a Women and Equalities Select Committee tasked with the remit of addressing discrimination wherever it is found, including in Parliament as a way of selecting and retaining women in parliament. Such a body exists in many other Parliaments, frequently taking the form of a Committee or Women's Caucus.

These suggestions could be used in the Northern Ireland Assembly.



**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)

**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**