



**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

Women's Forum NI	Mobile: 07592520344		
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)		
C/o Agape Centre 238-266 Lisburn Road Belfast BT9 6GF	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 - X Voluntary Organisation		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder

Women's Forum Northern Ireland is an "umbrella" body for women's organisations in the Province. Currently, it continues to represent a broad range of constituent organisations and hence approaching 100,000 women across Northern Ireland.

It is an apolitical and anti-sectarian voluntary organisation which seeks to enhance the role and influence of women in the life of our society, to empower individuals to achieve change and to promote equality of opportunity for women. This is reflected in the Mission Statement: "Women in Harmony – Achieving Change" and in the current Aims and Objectives

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 570-13.¹

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 governments to address structural disadvantages experienced by women internationally, includes specific measures to increase women's participation in power and decision-making.

¹ 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

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?

Behaviour of Assembly members

The behaviour of Assembly members is frequently intimidating and creates a negative perception which makes women wary of putting their heads above the parapet.

Evidence: – Women’s Coalition members will confirm the aggression aimed at them; aggression which ranged from loud, abusive comments such as, ‘If the heat is too great go back to the kitchen,’ and well documented evidence of patronising behaviour towards them and subsequent female MLA’s. Not many women or men would be prepared to persevere in local politics as Anna Lo has done or Naomi Long MP.

Electoral Apathy and Disillusionment

Historically women did not go into politics or decision making because of the obstacles of adequate childcare and anti-social hours. Those women, now elderly or in middle age, unless they have played an active rôle as party members, would find it impossible to get onto party lists and they become involved in voluntary women’s organisations as an alternative.

How many young women apart from the party faithful and some community activists actually turn out to vote? How many, when asked, will say that they are disgusted with politics in Northern Ireland and see no reason to vote or become involved in decision making? They say that the parties have nothing to offer and that control is in the hands of two parties which oppose each other.

Media Coverage of Women in Politics

Media coverage of women in politics is frequently biased. Inappropriate reference is made to their appearance, what they are wearing etc.

Evidence: Media reporting, radio & TV, and newspapers.

Responsibility of Political Parties

Political parties must be more pro-active in bringing women into the process. Although there has been some improvement, not enough women are being selected as candidates for their Parties. Most women wait until they are asked or approached.

Evidence: 'Women into politics' conference at QUB 2011. All of the female politicians who spoke at the conference confirmed that this was the case.

(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?

It would be a helpful exercise if all female assembly members could be asked to complete a questionnaire indicating how they came to be interested in politics, how they became candidates, how they faced the challenges of gender inequality, how they juggle caring responsibilities, what training they found particularly beneficial etc. The outcome of this research might encourage more women to pursue a career in politics.

The setting up of bodies such as The Gender Advisory Panel and the All Party Group on UNSCR 1325 are steps in the right direction.

We would also direct you to the many initiatives and projects of UN Women (formerly UNIFEM,), the UN organisation dedicated to gender equality and the advancement of women, to train and prepare women for decision making responsibility.

For example, see <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/7/global-forum-on-women-in-parliaments-in-rwanda> Following extensive training programmes by UNIFEM, women in Rwanda hold an unprecedented 63.8% of seats in its lower house, sealing its place as the world's only majority female parliament.

Currently UN Women is working to raise awareness of the need to involve women in decision making in the Pacific islands where there are currently fewer female representatives in parliament than in Saudi Arabia. It could be argued that neither example is relevant to Northern Ireland but in both examples quoted, preparatory work was key to achieving the desired outcome. In these widely different countries the first step was to identify the issues affecting women. For example the key issues affecting women in the islands of the Pacific are

domestic violence often exacerbated by natural disasters, the difficulty of obtaining legal aid and virtually no representation in politics. As the issues are addressed, the women become progressively more involved in finding solutions and go on to play an active part in decision making.

The issues affecting women's interest in politics in Northern Ireland are listed in our response to Question 1. Until these points are addressed we believe that there will be little progress in attracting women to a career in politics.

(3a) Question

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

- Political parties need to have a strategy that ensures that female party members are actively encouraged to put themselves forward as candidates
- They must convince women that they *can* make a difference
- They must provide more confidence building and assertiveness training for women
- They need policies to create a functioning, forward looking Assembly which will encourage women (and men) to take an active part in decision making
- They should set up programmes for schools, programmes with particular emphasis on girls, which focus on social issues in Northern Ireland and the importance of playing an active part in decision making in order to improve our society

(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?

Assembly behaviour

The conduct of Assembly and Committee meetings should be critically examined and a code of behaviour imposed which requires MLA's to show respect for each other regardless of gender or party. Voters want to see genuine debate, courtesy and less petty point scoring. . This type of debate *is* possible as there is ample evidence of positive consultation in the voluntary sector where trained facilitators do not permit verbal abuse. We would suggest that this responsibility falls to the Speaker who should have more authority to insist on common courtesy.

Look at other countries

People come to Northern Ireland from all over the world to learn about conflict solving initiatives and our observers travel the world sharing our experience. Observers known to our members have reported on many examples of good practice that they have seen in Rwanda, East Timor, Vanuatu where women are playing an increasingly active part in decision making yet such information is not being shared with the Northern Ireland Assembly or they are simply not interested. Research in countries emerging from conflict shows that women are going into politics because they want to get things done, repair the damage but while our Assembly continues to play the blame game and live in the past, we believe that women will continue to feel that there is no rôle for them in Northern Ireland politics. The short but difficult answer is – fix the politics.

(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)?

That female assembly member interact with women's organisations and women in the wider arena.

'Confidence building' mentoring should be provided for those women who feel that a lack of confidence is a barrier.

We would put it on record that we greatly appreciate the work of those Northern Ireland women politicians who have engaged with Women's Forum and our member organisations. They have repeatedly gone the extra mile and impressed us with their heavy workloads, stamina and dedication. It is by engaging with the community that women in the political arena will win support and attract other women to become engaged.

(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.

We would again refer you to our responses to Question 4.

At present, due to the gender imbalance within the NI Assembly and voter apathy, decisions affecting the majority of the people in Northern Ireland are taken by only a small minority of the population.

Only when there is a more civilised approach to debate and general behaviour ensuring that women are fully accepted as equals and not just ‘the token female’, will the rôle of women in politics be able to develop and progress.

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

Thank you for your submission