



**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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Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)			
6 Mount Charles Belfast BT7 1NZ	<b>Registered Political Party</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Local Government</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>Academic</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Government</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>Legislature</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Non-Government</b>	x
	<b>Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public</b>			<input type="checkbox"/>
	WRDA is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity and operates within the community/voluntary sector.			
Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder				
<p>The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation whose mission is to 'to advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social, and cultural conditions'. The organisation was established in 1983 and works with women's groups from all traditions in the most severely disadvantaged communities, and from urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland.</p> <p>We work from the grass roots to the highest levels of policymaking and politics, providing advocacy and lobbying support. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 500 members comprised of women's groups, organisations, and individual members. We engage in lobbying and advocacy work, putting women's issues onto the political agenda. We manage Womenslink, the e-list for the sector (180+ subscribers) and the Women's Policy Group e-list (61 subscribers) &amp; NI Women's Budget Group e-lists.</p> <p>Our commitment to women's empowerment is most evident in our Community Facilitator training programme, which enables grass roots women to gain a Level 3 Certificate in Learning and Development, thereafter obtaining employment with our social enterprise, delivering our health programmes.</p> <p>Over the last 2 and a ½ years the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland have been partners in a Peace 3 project that aims to capture the experiences of women living through conflict and through the subsequent period of conflict resolution and peace building.</p> <p>The aim has been to learn from the experience of women who have lived through these processes and to try to identify ways in which to make a positive impact. Over 1,000 women have been brought together on a cross community and a cross border basis and they have had an opportunity to exchange learning with women from other conflict areas through the Foundations for Peace Network.</p> <p>Key issues were highlighted in different workshops which took place throughout Northern Ireland and in border county areas. These were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence, safety and security</li> <li>• Decision making and representation</li> </ul>				

- Women’s rights are human rights – women and social justice
- Women and the legacies of the past
- Women and institutional change
- Women making a difference

Reports were produced from the different workshops/conference & disseminated on our/partners websites & shared through social media.

- Following the conference held last October on Women-Dealing with the Past, the views expressed were discussed & relayed to Megan O’ Sullivan re: Haass/O’Sullivan talks.
- The conference held in March this year titled Haass/O’Sullivan; What women think, copies of this report was sent to British/Irish govts, & OFMDFM and so far replies have only been received from the Brit/Irish govts, disappointing that our First Ministers haven’t replied.
- These views were feed into & influenced the development of the Strategic guide & Toolkit which was launched at our final event ‘No Peace without Women’ was held in Crumlin Road Gaol on 27<sup>th</sup> June.

This guide will assist the public sector to enhance the protection of women’s human rights & advance gender equality as central to building peace & development. The Guide will also assist the realisation of the peace commitments & benefits of the Belfast/GFA by women & society generally, through the effective application of the SPIRIT & principles of UNSCR1325 on Women, Peace & Security. It is a unique guide that translates the international women, peace & security framework into a domestic application in NI/Ireland. A copy of the Strategic Policy Guide & Toolkit and briefing papers are attached.

In this response to the call for evidence re: Review on Women in Politics & the NI Assembly, I will be drawing on the work of the project discussed above and from the 1,000 participants and the reports produced from all the workshops and conferences which are available from downloading from our website [www.wrda.net](http://www.wrda.net)

WRDA also held a Focus group on Women in Politics & the NI Assembly on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2014 which 30 women attended and I have collated their responses as evidence for this submission.

### **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.<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**

<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)

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/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?***

**Adversarial Setup of politics** NI conflict led instead of reconciliatory or cooperative  
**Politics seen as male dominated** stigma (women seen as not as smart rational enough, enough)

#### **Glass ceiling**

- Men
- Employment legislation
- Childcare

#### **Need for more structural support**

**Childcare** too expensive, lack of availability, low wages of childcare staff

**NI culture** women are carers (so if there are two careers in a family women tend to be the one to step back and pick up family responsibilities)

Still a lot of **employment discrimination** relating to pregnancy

There is an issue of **lack of confidence** for women

Politics can be **perceived as “men led”** and biased against women

**Lack of leadership** from current parties

Due to **stereotyping** women can be seen as crazy, irrational, aggressive rather than ambitious in a work situation while men seen as passionate, ambitious, rational, and not child carers –

**Quote: “Women now have the right to have 2 jobs i.e. raising a family and working”**

Here raising a family is not seen as valuable while Sweden values parents bringing up children. For example the best support for children is where women and men both play a role and the state supports this.

(We need to have men taking a more active role)

**Difficulty of being heard** as a woman in male dominated meetings

**Culture of politics** not family friendly e.g. meeting times, hours worked nature of decision making

**Current lack of women in politics** – lack of “critical mass” (one third is seen as a critical mass)

**Lack of training** – making meetings work, media training, public speaking

Both Westminster Parliament and NI Assembly are laid out in a way that sets the scene for an

**adversarial approach** compared with Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament which have building layout which mirrors a more cooperative approach.

**Negotiation skills** seen as a sign of Good leadership and are very much valued and respected in work places – except in NI.

### **Apathy**

Young women don't see the relevance of politics in their lives. They see politics as full of conflict.

Young women don't know how to get into politics,

Young women feel disengaged from politics

View of Women in the **Media**

Reluctance of women to adhere/represent **one particular Party** versus the difficulty in being heard outside the current party system.

## (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?***

**Childcare** – variety of childcare - flexible times, crèches, provision for older children 0-16 all needed

### **Flexi working**

One Participant is currently working in a public sector organisation where there is flexibility of working hours. There is:

- Agreement made that everyone is willing to take on extra work when necessary
- All women team
- Good Leadership

Family friendly practices felt this type of model would encourage more women to get involved in City/District Councils and the Assembly.

**Clear job role** The Scottish assembly there is a clear job role that is outcome focused rather than on process – attending meetings but no outcomes)

**Family friendly practices** (Paternity leave) Job role, working hours, and home working Opportunities developed in the Voluntary Community Sector e.g. Children's Law centre, Children's Commissioners Office

**Training at a variety of levels e.g.** First Step awareness raising, e.g. personal development, Shadowing, next step skills, public speaking, negotiation skills,

Specific Training e.g. the model of DemocraShe

Leadership Training

A **Support network** for women

**Career guidance** on politics for young women in schools also an introduction/ first steps to politics in the curriculum

**Awareness raising** – what is politics?

It is not just the NI Assembly but included Councils, Public bodies, e.g. Health Trusts, Housing, & Education.

Initiatives

It is not just Scandinavian countries that have more women representatives Belgium, The Netherlands and African Countries South Africa and Rwanda has most female e representatives – this came about following the Genocide.

Norway Enforced Y3 Critical mass

NI Should be given a timeline – if not doing it will be enforced (by financial penalties) then looked at Boards of industry, given 5 years to address this some companies privatised so they would come out of the FTSE

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

But as well as legislation the barriers also need to be addressed.

Childcare was not assigned a lead department in the assembly (neither Health nor Education wanted it) is it OFMDFM?

*“Do we either bring women into the existing adversarial system or will this culture go on until women come in?”*

### **(3a) Question**

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

Shadowing,

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 (Brings up question of merit...)

### **(3b) Question**

<b>Political Parties are asked to specify what policies and initiatives they have in place to increase women in political life?</b>	
<p>Gender champions can be female or male or both          Shadowing/ training          Quota system (helps to work towards a “critical mass”          Positive Action</p>	

**(4) Question**

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

**Job roles**, Criteria and person specification (politicians “school”)  
**Quota system**  
**Support system** (childcare, working conditions etc. see earlier points.)  
**Gender Champions**  
**Shadowing**  
 Working with **community and schools**  
 Suggestion that **training is a need for both women and men going into politics**  
 Currently no criteria for politicians so the current “meritocracy” is basically the “old boy 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)?***

**Shadowing visits** to other parliaments

**Shadowing successful women** e.g. City 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"*

**(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.***

Greater focus is needed on increasing women's engagement, participation and representation both numerically and in effective influence. Support can take many forms: strengthening existing networks; mentoring younger women; empowering women through appropriate skills to build confidence to actively engage, develop policy and lobby; guidance for women's groups; and more sustainable funding.

## 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.

Civic Forum as a way to engage women into political life  
Quotas in community sector  
Women's sector support e.g. Funding – CEDAW

#### **Quotes from our Focus Group:**

#### **Involving more women in politics is about changing mind-sets**

*“Need to realise that women need to go into politics to bring about change”*

*“Some women don't know how to take the next staff to move into politics”*

*“Politics needs to be on the career prospectus in schools and opportunities for young women”*

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

**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**