



**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			
Lynn Carvill	02890 749810			
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)			
WOMEN'STEC 161 – 163, Duncairn Gardens Belfast BT15 2GE	Registered Political Party		Local Government	
	Academic		Government	
	Legislature		Non-Government	
	Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public			X
Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder				
<p>WOMEN'STEC provides training and education programmes in non-traditional work areas for women. Courses include electrics, plumbing, joinery, horticulture and IT. We are currently expanding our services into other non-traditional female work areas eg. STEM. Political decision-making for women remains a non-traditional work area and therefore of great interest to WOMEN'STEC. We are pleased to participate in this very important and timely review.</p> <p>I was recently appointed as Chief Executive of WOMEN'STEC, but previous to joining the organisation I worked as lobbyist for the Women's Sector. A key aspect of my work at this time was to work with and support female politicians in NI and to build alliances to advocate for more women in political decision-making. To this end I collaborated with a variety of organisations and institutions to host conferences and seminars on the issue e.g.:</p> <p>'How to Elect More Women in Northern Ireland' (2011) with the QUB Centre for the Advancement of Women 'Pop Up Political Academy for Young Women (2013) with Politics Plus</p> <p>Much of what is included in this submission emanates from my previous work with politicians, men and women, in local and regional government across NI.</p>				
Guidelines for Completion of Submissions				
The Committee would ask that stakeholders submit <u>electronic</u> 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

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/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?

Key challenges and barriers facing women in relation to entering politics are well documented and evidenced:

- Childcare persists as predominantly a female responsibility. Childcare and caring generally is a key challenge for women.
- NI is a society emerging from conflict. The persistent adversarial nature of politics here, involving frequent personal verbal attacks is anathema to many aspiring politicians, particularly women. Over the last 20 years blatant sexism has surfaced periodically in our Assembly. 'Politics' in NI is still not viewed by many women as an inclusive environment.
- Although outside the remit of the Assembly, efforts by political parties to recruit and select women must be viewed as the single biggest barrier to women's participation in politics. At the 'How to Elect More Women in NI' conference in March 2011, all of the female politicians, when asked the question said they had been 'asked' to run for election by senior party members— one female politician was asked 5 times before she agreed. Men are also 'asked' but the challenge in relation to this issue is that men are asked much more frequently than women.

(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?

The provision of training for aspiring politicians is a crucial support and in the past has demonstrated positive outcomes. The training offered by DemocraSHE during the 1990s is viewed incredibly positively by those who participated on the programme.

There is also a raft of evidence in existence that shows female role models and a higher visibility of women in politics encourages younger women to consider a career in this area. The assembly could ensure that links between young women and female politicians are promoted eg. Embed the Pop-Up Political Academy for Young Women in a programme of events to encourage young women into politics.

Many politicians begin their political career by being 'asked' to run for election. It would be useful if the Assembly could provide supports to existing female politicians and to political parties to open up politics and provide outreach services where aspiring politicians (particularly female) can be identified.

Evidence across the world in relation to this issue demonstrates the most effective way to enhance female political representation is to introduce a gender quota system.

(3a) Question

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

- A voluntary gender quota system for candidate selection.
- A gender action plan with actions and targets monitored by the Party Executive.
- A resourced and structured women's group/committee as a sub-committee to the Party Executive.
- A designated women's officer
- Resourced and specific training for female party members
- Active outreach services to recruit female party members

The political will of Party Leaders in relation to resolving this issue cannot be underestimated.

(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?

The most effective method to increase women's representation in the NI Assembly would be the introduction of gender quotas. The Assembly working with political parties could introduce a 'shadowing/internship' scheme specifically aimed at women.

I would refer you to the other recommendations outlined in this submission – all of which would potentially lead to an increase in women's representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

(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)?

It may be an idea to survey current female MLAs with a view to ascertaining what support/network opportunities they would like.

Providing networking opportunities for female politicians both internally and with other legislatures could also be useful. There are various examples of good practice across other legislatures that could be examined more closely.

(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.

- The Northern Ireland Assembly could negotiate and implement a Gender Action Plan.
- A 'Code of Conduct' could be devised for Assembly business that includes clear principles in relation to non-tolerance of discriminatory behaviour (to include sexism). Breaches of the Code of Conduct should be met with stipulated penalties.
- The Assembly could implement/lobby for family friendly policies to be introduced, such as paid maternity / parental leave.
- The Assembly could lobby for the introduction of job-sharing possibilities for MLAs

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.

In conclusion, **WOMEN'STEC** would reiterate that we very much welcome this review.

While the NI Assembly can go some way to resolving this issue, it must be noted that political parties themselves wield much of the power in terms of increasing the number of women in politics. They decide 'who' they field as candidates and options open to the electorate are already substantially decreased on election day.

In the 2011 Assembly elections there were 5 constituencies where only one female candidate featured on the ballot paper (Foyle, North Down, South Antrim, Strangford and West Tyrone). In the constituency of Newry and Armagh the electorate were faced with an all-male ballot paper.

WOMEN'STEC do not want to see this scenario repeated in 2016.

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