



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly:
Professor Yvonne Galligan, Queen's University
Belfast

24 June 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Stephen Moutray (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Ms Paula Bradley
Mr Gregory Campbell
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Raymond McCartney
Mr Seán Rogers
Ms Caitríona Ruane

Witnesses:

Professor Yvonne Galligan Queen's University Belfast

The Chairperson: I welcome Professor Yvonne Galligan to the Committee and ask her to begin her presentation.

Professor Yvonne Galligan (Queen's University Belfast): Thank you very much, Chairperson and members, for the invitation to speak to this issue.

I prepared a paper on academic models of good practice in other legislatures and how they might be adopted in the Northern Ireland Assembly. That was my focus in addressing the Committee's review. I reviewed a wide range of academic literature and reports from other Parliaments and international bodies that have been dealing with the issue of women in politics.

In broad terms, supporting women in politics in a parliamentary setting is usually considered under three headings. The first area is about ensuring that equal opportunities for women and men are provided in a parliamentary setting and in the working procedures of legislatures. The second area looks at the space and scope for the articulation of women's interests and the representation of women's concerns on the parliamentary agenda. The third area deals with the outputs of parliamentary and legislative processes, which is the production of legislation that is sensitive to the needs, interests and perspectives of women and men in the community.

My briefing paper took those three areas and examined different measures that are either recommended in academic literature or used in practice in other Assemblies. With internal parliamentary working procedures, that entails examining the way an Assembly or legislature works and the scope for the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities for elected representatives. That can be not only related to maternity and paternity leave but broadened to incorporate other caring

responsibilities that women and men, as elected representatives, may have and that members of the parliamentary support service may also have.

There are issues about a Parliament as a workplace. Good practices to combat sexual harassment and to address women's under-representation in Assembly structures are part and parcel of that.

As for the space for women's concerns on the parliamentary agenda, there appear to be quite a number of practices internationally, and there is also a lot of thinking on the issue internationally. It appears that the formation of cross-party caucuses of women elected representatives is a mechanism that is often considered with varying degrees of formality. There are certainly challenges in building and sustaining cross-party consensus and caucuses, but nonetheless there are plenty of practices where they can happen and be sustained.

There are other wider cross-parliamentary networks, such as the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians. That provides a space for the articulation, development and pinpointing of specific issues that women parliamentarians can work on together in their own settings.

The final area is, as I said, the production of gender-sensitive legislation, whereby parliamentarians — women and men together — work towards developing policies or being aware of the gendered implications and impacts of the policies and decisions that they take. There are a number of tools for measuring and supporting that, such as gender budgeting, and there are a number of ways to bring a diversity of perspectives into the work of parliamentary Committees and legislative Committees more generally, such as looking at the gender balance in the membership of Committees.

I go through those measures in some detail in the briefing paper. I conclude that the Assembly may wish to pose the question to itself about the extent to which women's issues and concerns are included in parliamentary working procedures, the extent to which there is space for women's concerns on the parliamentary agenda and the extent to which the Assembly is geared to developing gender-sensitive legislation.

Arising from those three questions that the Committee may wish to consider, the level of which will depend on its view, I come to a number of considerations that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee may wish to consider. The first is where the Assembly stands on the three aspects of a gender-sensitive institution that I outlined earlier. The second is the development of an action plan based on the Committee's responses to and views and reflections on the three areas. The third is the possibility of conducting a gender audit to identify problems and issues about women's participation in the Assembly. The fourth is how, on a cross-Committee basis, the Assembly can be fine-tuned in its work as a gender-sensitive body. The fifth is to review Assembly practices for Members and staff on policies and procedures. If there are gaps, what are they? What policies need to be put in place to fill those gaps? The sixth is to explore how to facilitate a gender-mainstreaming view to inform all Committee business so that it takes account of the gendered effects of policy and legislation. The final consideration is to look at the scope for the professional development of MLAs and Assembly staff and how a gender-aware component can be built into that process.

I conclude this brief presentation by saying that legislatures, elected Assemblies and academic institutions such as universities are looked at by others in society as beacons of good practice. Academia and the Assembly, as a representative body, have a level of responsibility towards wider society to develop best practice to be a role model. If it cannot happen in those arenas, it is much more difficult for it to happen in other arenas in wider society.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Professor Galligan. I will open up the discussion and give members the opportunity to ask questions. Your briefing paper refers to a critical mass of 33% of women being required in a legislative Assembly to have some effect. Why 33%? What is the significance of that? We sit well below that percentage here at the moment.

Professor Galligan: The figure of one third or 33% comes from organisational studies and academic political studies that suggest that an organisation or a body's agenda becomes diversified and more inclusive when the under-represented group, whoever that is, reaches 33% in that group. That is why 33% is seen as a critical mass. It comes from organisational studies that found that agendas widen, broaden and diversify to become more inclusive at that point. That is why I chose that figure.

Mr Campbell: I am sorry for being a bit late, Chairman. Some of the material is very interesting, including interest in politics in Northern Ireland and various changes. I note that the interest in politics

by gender shows significant continuous female under-representation, but for some reason there was a dip or a change between 2005 and 2007. Is there an explanation for that? Do you know why that would have been the case in that short period?

Professor Galligan: I am not really sure what the underlying drivers of those dips were during that period. There was, of course, some instability in the institutions around that time, and that could possibly have been a contributor to public disengagement. The percentage of women interested in politics — around 40% — pretty much remained the same between 2005 and 2007, although there was a dip from 1998.

Are we looking at the same thing?

Mr Campbell: I am looking at the graph, "Why is it an issue in NI?". That seems to show that, while there is a general downward trend between 2005 and 2007 for women, the interest went up from 55% to 64%. I just wondered —

Professor Galligan: It went up from 55% to 64% for men.

Mr Campbell: Did women remain static?

Professor Galligan: Women remained static because, when people were standing back, and there was a little bit of disengagement in 2005, women did not return to engage when the Assembly institutions got up again whereas men did. Men re-engaged and women did not.

Mr Campbell: To what do you attribute the more recent downward trend, which looks as if it is recommencing what it did in 1998 through to 2005 for both genders, or is it just a general political malaise?

Professor Galligan: I think that there is an element of being tired of politics and engaging with the political agenda among women and men at this time. Remember that it is very difficult to sustain the levels of engagement that one found in 1998. The 42% for men is very similar to the level of engagement across the UK. All the Hansard Society audits of political engagement, which do not include Northern Ireland but look across the water, show that the general level of engagement for men is around 40% to 45%, which is very similar to Northern Ireland.

Mr Campbell: Is 25% similar for women?

Professor Galligan: No, it is not. It is a little lower for women across the water — between 35% and 40% — but it is significantly lower in Northern Ireland.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. It is very useful for us to have all these papers. A significant amount of work is involved, and I want to acknowledge that. We had a very interesting visit to the Welsh Parliament about two weeks ago, and we learned about the cross-party group. The Presiding Officer in Wales was very keen on such a group. Will you outline some of its benefits? I do not need it today, but it would be useful to have a comparison with the South of Ireland and the interest in politics there. New legislation on gender quotas means that there is a changing demographic, and the next general election in the South will be very interesting. Will you comment on gender quotas and their importance?

Professor Galligan: Thank you very much for those substantive questions. Other Parliaments with cross-party working have found that they are able to identify issues of specific concern to women in their community — I use the word "community" in the broadest sense. Women, as citizens, in spite of many political or party political differences, can often go beyond those differences to recognise that there are issues of common concern. The implementation of universal credit here, for example, mobilised women across all parties and in the community to express how that policy would impact on them and on their lives. A cross-party women's group is enabled to bring those common issues into the parliamentary or legislative arena and have them discussed there. There are many other examples.

I will move on to women's representation. In the Polish Parliament, for example, the women's cross-parliamentary group worked together to bring the issue of women's under-representation to the legislature and, in 2011, succeeded in changing the electoral law to provide for quotas on the list

system. There is a background to that because it took four attempts. It was not always brought by the women's cross-parliamentary group, but it was the fourth time that it had come before the legislature. The participation of women as a cross-parliamentary caucus in that regard was the issue that finally made it possible for that law to be passed.

One of the concerns that many women have and that underlies the 25% interest that we were speaking about a few moments ago has to do with the fact that many women feel that politics is not a space that holds much relevance for their life. Yet everybody around this table knows that politics and political decision-making are central to everybody's life. One of the reasons why women feel disengaged from politics is that they feel that their voices are not necessarily heard. A cross-parliamentary, cross-Assembly, women's caucus can provide that voice in the Assembly and in the legislative setting, and can do imaginative things with Departments and other Committees in order to be able to bring what women in the community are saying into the parliamentary arena. So, there are lots of imaginative ways of doing it.

I imagine that in Wales there was a lot of energy around this issue because of the fact that women now have a voice and a channel into the legislative arena that they did not necessarily have before, in a structured way.

I will have to come back to the Committee regarding interest in politics in the South by gender, because that will require a little bit of digging around.

On gender quotas and their importance, women's under-representation is a really difficult structural problem for the political system. It is no longer so much about supporting women and providing them with the confidence and supports to run in political life. That is being done and has been done for, I would suggest, the last 20 years in a very sustained and systematic way. Yet, there has not been much of an increase in women's political representation on this island, as a whole.

The quota strategy opens a space for the culture and the structural obstacles to be removed, and for the culture to open up, which means that women get the opportunity to run that they would not necessarily have had before. Gender quotas are a very important instrument in opening that door. I very much see this as a door opening rather than a final solution. We find that when that door has opened, women's representation, after three elections, sustains itself in a more gender balanced way.

There are many other supporting measures that need to be put in place as well as gender quotas. As the Polish experience shows, women's representation went up to 24% in the election following the list quota. There need to be a lot of supports, like awareness-raising, development of women, and encouraging women to come forward, that go alongside the gender quota.

I think that that is why the Women for Election group in the South has been very successful. At least half of the candidates who ran at local government level in the South were alumni, if you like, of the programme. It is making an impact. It is a fast track. It is very good for political parties to have that fast-tracking mechanism and support, because political parties will be looking for women candidates for their quota. So, they go hand in hand.

Mr Beggs: I will pick up on your latter comments. I very much support providing additional encouragement and support for women to have the confidence to put themselves forward, because sometimes that has been a problem. I have recognised some very capable candidates who have not felt comfortable enough to come forward. That support and encouragement needs to continue.

In your document, you said:

"There is scope for gender mainstreaming Committee business, so that outputs are gender-sensitive."

Can you give me an example of where that has worked elsewhere or how it would work practically in some of our Committees? I am on the Health Committee, and we are looking at the June monitoring round bids. How does that issue come in? We are generally interested in everybody's health or everybody's road. I am trying to understand how that mechanism would work.

Professor Galligan: Essentially, gender mainstreaming of Committee business would mean looking at the Committee business and taking into account the needs, interests and perspectives of women and men in that business. You raised the issue of health. Let us say, for example, that there was a

no-smoking campaign — smoking being one of the major contributors to health inequalities, heart disease and all of that. When one looks at that issue with a gender mainstreaming approach, one sees that young women are much more likely to be smokers than young men. Therefore, in any considerations that the Committee may want to make about how resources are distributed, it might say that we need a specific campaign targeted at preventing young women from beginning to smoke, but that we need a specific campaign directed towards encouraging older men to give up smoking. In considering the gendered nature and the impact of the policy on citizens, it can use the resources to target where the actual problems are between women and men. It is not always about taking from one and giving to another; it is about addressing the different perspectives, experiences, habits and behaviours of women and men.

I mentioned the Mexican Parliament as an example. When the Mexican Parliament scrutinises its budget, the Finance Committee in the Mexican Parliament has the capacity, supported by its secretariat obviously, to take the government budget and look to see how the budget spend breaks down in its allocation of resources to women and to men in the community. For example, in the education section, does it address early male school leavers and focus money in that regard? Does it look at women's participation in science subjects in schools and target measures to support that? That is the kind of thing that a gender mainstreaming approach in Committee business can bring to the Committee's broader consideration.

I am not saying that it happens overnight. It requires a secretariat that is very aware of these issues and can provide the expertise to inform Committee members as to the gendered nature of it. It also brings a role for women and men representatives to be able to say that they can see, from their constituency work or from their observations more generally, that women and men citizens come with different views, perspectives and needs, as well as similar perspectives and needs, on issues. It is just about being a little more gender aware in the way that the work of the Committee is thought about and considered.

The Chairperson: Do members have any other questions?

Mr McCartney: I want to ask about the 25% interest in 2009. Is there an update figure on that? In terms of a comparison, would that be generally women's interest in politics across many jurisdictions?

Professor Galligan: These figures are taken from the Northern Ireland life and times survey. There has not been an update, unless there is a recent one. I hope that there may be, but the figure for 2009 was the last one that I was able to find in that regard. Is it similar to other jurisdictions? The answer is no; it is lower than other jurisdictions, by quite a bit.

Ms Ruane: I am sorry for taking up more time; I just have a small query. Sinn Féin recently brought in four new women to replace three men and one woman. I am trying to remember when we brought them in. Do these figures take that into account?

Professor Galligan: Those figures were correct as of March.

Ms Ruane: March this year?

Professor Galligan: Yes. That is from the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS).

Ms Ruane: But it says 2012. Do you remember when it was, Raymond?

Mr McCartney: It was before March, anyway.

Professor Galligan: I will check that again, but I was trying to hold the comparisons equally across the board. In fact, these figures, now I recollect, are the results of the elections. These are the election results at a particular point in time. Some elections were in 2011 and some elections for these Assemblies were in 2012; that is why there is a difference.

Ms Ruane: That is fine. It might be useful to note that some of our MPs were also MLAs, so we put new people in. I am saying that because I think that you will see a bit of a shift in that graph, which is a good thing and we need to celebrate that.

We have a young woman of 22 who is an MLA, and, when she comes to a meeting with me, I can see young women perking up immediately. We also need to look at age. I am probably one of the oldest women here. We need that mix of age profile as well, so that younger people can see it. The same goes for men, but we have a lot of young men in Stormont. I just wanted to make that comment about age profile.

Professor Galligan: I will just make a small response to that, because you brought out a very relevant point, which is the role model effect of women in politics and that of young women. Studies have been done — they are mostly to do with the Westminster elections — that show that, when a woman MP is elected or even when a woman is running and is a prospective winner, women's interest in politics increases. When a woman is elected, women's interest in politics in that constituency increases whether they support that woman's party or not. It seems to have an overall effect. It also has a particularly strong effect on teenage girls and, interestingly, on teenage boys, who become more interested in politics when they see women being in politics. It is a more pronounced effect for teenage girls, though, and all of that is about capturing representation and increasing the engagement of citizens with political life.

The Chairperson: OK. Professor Galligan, thank you very much for taking the time to present to us today.

Professor Galligan: Thank you very much indeed. I wish the Committee the very best of luck in its endeavours.