



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland
Assembly - Barriers and Challenges:
Women's Resource and Development
Agency

16 September 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly - Barriers and Challenges:
Women's Resource and Development Agency

16 September 2014

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 Trevor Lunn
Mr Seán Rogers
Ms Caitríona Ruane

Witnesses:

Ms Annie Campbell	Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
Ms Anne McVicker	Women's Resource and Development Agency
Ms Lynn Carvill	Women's TEC

The Chairperson: We now have a briefing from Anne McVicker, who is a director of the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), which supports women's groups and organisations with training and campaigning on key issues that affect women here. Ms McVicker is accompanied by Lynn Carvill, the chief executive of Women's TEC, and Ms Annie Campbell, the director of Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland.

I remind members that Hansard will record this session. I welcome Ms McVicker, Ms Carvill and Ms Campbell and ask them to make their presentation. After the presentation, members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

Ladies, I apologise at the outset; unfortunately, I have to leave to attend another event upstairs, but the Deputy Chair will take over. Thank you very much. Feel free to go ahead and begin when you are ready.

Ms Anne McVicker (Women's Resource and Development Agency): Thank you very much for the invitation. We are here to represent the views of WRDA's membership, which stands at over 800, and the Women's Consortium, which is made up of the Training for Women Network, the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, the Foyle Women's Information Network, Women's TEC and the Women's Support Network, and is also reflective of the Ad Hoc Women's Policy Group.

It has often been cited that the traditional barriers to getting more women into politics have been the lack of affordable and accessible childcare; the fact that women are seen as carers and so take a step

back in their careers to look after children; a lack of confidence, because they maybe have been out of the workforce for a while; and the fact that there is continuing employment discrimination.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr Sheehan] in the Chair) A really key issue is that the culture of politics is seen as problematic to many women. It is often male, often seen as aggressive and adversarial. Given the experience over the past years, it is felt that much of politics is about playing games. Many women simply do not like that and, consequently, they are more likely to get involved in community action and development rather than formal political life or related decision-making agencies.

We feel that there needs to be more female role models in political life. Having more women in politics would make politics more inclusive and transparent. The important contribution offered in Ireland by having two women presidents has been cited as a very positive example, as have some of the mechanisms in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly that have brought more women into politics.

We feel that there needs to be a commitment to increase the number of women in political and public life and that that should be stated in the Programme for Government and complemented in a range of measurable actions. Actions by Governments and political parties in Northern Ireland should tackle the under-representation of women and build women's leadership and visibility to enrich democracy, policy debate and decision-making.

When considering strategies to increase the representation of women in politics, we need to ensure that it applies to all women, including those from culturally diverse backgrounds and disadvantaged communities. Within five years, measures should be put in place to provide for a significant increase in the number of women in political parties in the Assembly. We also think that the Civic Forum, as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement, should be restored with gender balanced representation.

I now invite Lynn and Annie to contribute.

Ms Lynn Carvill (Women's TEC): Thank you very much. There are a couple of points that I would like to raise with the Committee. Some are maybe outside the remit of the Committee and the Assembly, but they are very important in recognising the barriers that women face.

Prior to holding my current position, I worked as a lobbyist for the WRDA for five years. I worked with women politicians up here and worked to support them. It was very clear to me at that time that candidate selection is a huge barrier to getting women into politics. It really matters who is on the ballot paper. In the 2011 Assembly election, we had five constituencies in Northern Ireland that had only one woman on the ballot paper, and one constituency, Newry and Armagh, had none. So, when the electorate is faced with that, it really does not have a diverse choice about who to vote for.

Another issue that I would like to raise is about a very successful and well-attended conference that the WRDA ran in 2011, entitled "How to Elect More Women in Northern Ireland". One of the Committee members, Paula, spoke at that conference. It was an in-depth look at what the barriers are to women and how we can get women to run. One of the things that really struck me was that every MLA at that conference said that they were asked by someone in their political parties to run. Men are asked between one and two times before they decide to say yes. Women are asked between five and 10 times before they decide to say yes. There are very simple things that political parties can do in asking women to stand for election. There is an effort that needs to come from that end.

I will leave it to my colleague Annie to talk about positive action, but I suggest that there are some things that the Assembly could do to enhance the situation. One is to have a gender action plan across the Assembly. What has also proven to work in the past is resource training for existing and potential female MLAs. That happened in the 1990s, when DemocraShe delivered training, and I believe that MLAs said that it was very successful in getting women into the Assembly.

We also need to do more work to attract young women. Last year, the WRDA, along with Politics Plus, organised the pop-up political academy for young women, and I know that another Committee member spoke at that. It was very successful, and we got young women from schools in to try to enthuse them about politics, but there needs to be a jump to link that with the political parties.

In equality law and legislation, there is no paid parental leave for anyone in the Assembly. If that could be brought in, it would be good. I would really advocate that. I would also advocate job-sharing for MLAs. If you want to diversify the representation of the Assembly, that is one way that you could move forward. I cannot say how that would be worked out legally, but I think that it would really work.

Finally, before I pass over to my colleague, I want to note something. When I left my job as a lobbyist, the pressure and expectation that half of the community in Northern Ireland place on the women who are here became very clear to me. Female MLAs deal with everything that the men deal with, but there is an extra pressure in what women expect of them. I think that that has to be noted. Thank you.

Ms Annie Campbell (Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland): Good morning. I echo my colleagues' thanks for inviting us here. For those of you who do not know, the Women's Aid Federation is a member of the WRDA and works closely with it in the all the communities of disadvantaged women and others. As you know, our work spreads across all communities, including Stormont.

I am delighted to be here. As cited in your briefing paper, which is very comprehensive, it is very clear that there is unfinished business with the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement regarding the commitment to give women the right to full and equal political participation. That just has not happened. Frankly, I think that it is a collective disgrace that we have this wonderful new Assembly, which we hope will keep going, yet it is ranked as 70th in world in women's participation. There are proven methods to do something about that and, if it is not done, one can only assume that there is an institutionalised bias against having women up here. I say that because that is what women who I meet across my work say. They ask why women are not there and why their issues are not here in greater force. I say that with respect to all the male MLAs who support our work. It is excellent that the Committee is looking at this issue. We are delighted to see that happening.

I want to briefly refer the Committee to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. It has a six-step action plan — it is a very comprehensive report from across western Europe. A lot of what is in those six points have been echoed in what my colleagues said and in other research that has been developed through Queen's and so on. I am sure that much of that has been put before the Committee, but, if not, we can certainly send it to you.

Those points start with constitutional rights, and thank God we have those. We hope that they are secured. The second point is the electoral system. I see that that is outside the brief of the Committee, but I would like to point out that that is a proven method of getting women in. It was not embedded in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, but the reality is that it is harder to get women in without it as they are not in the traditional old boys' networks. So, things like regional lists get women into Parliaments and Assemblies.

The third main plank of the report was about legal quotas: either to reserve seats for women or to have gender quotas. I know that that can be a very contested matter in this community, but if we look at the outworkings of Patten, what happened with our police service, how they are working with the community — they certainly work credibly well with Women's Aid across Northern Ireland — and how welcomed they are in most communities, we see that it is a success. Instead of waiting for 100 years when the tide will turn or the room will get warm for everyone, we took action. The reality is that politics and the way that it is structured means that it is a cold house for women. That is a catchphrase for it on all sorts of levels: attitudinal levels; structural levels; and matters around the recruitment and selection of candidates. You need a step change. To those who would say that that means discriminating against men, I would say that you would need to ask some men to realise that they have to step aside. If you want 50% women here, it means that there will be fewer men. That is the reality. If the situation was reversed and there were 22 men up here, I am quite confident that the view across the whole women's sector would be to have quotas. I would call for quotas — we would. We want balance. That is what we need to have a good, sound Government.

There is also the matter of reviewing party rules, which Lynn has touched on, and recruitment procedures. Obviously, this Committee cannot legislate that into parties, but it could strongly recommend it. There could be a kind of shame-and-blame culture, if you like, so that it is no longer acceptable not to have women on lists and going forward for winnable seats.

The fifth point is around capacity development. Again, my colleagues touched on mentoring programmes, skills, training and funding for women candidates. All of these are incredibly important. I add a rider to that to the effect that I would not like anyone to go away thinking that women in general do not have an appetite for politics. They do. It is evidenced every day across all the communities, where there is such strong community development work, often led by women. In my own area of work, which is around support for victims of sexual and domestic violence, women, when they are long enough in that role, get very political and very angry about what is and what is not being done in their

community. That is political to me, and they are the issues that we want to see up here in greater numbers and in more depth.

The last thing, which, again, has been touched on by my colleagues, is parliamentary reform. That can be about facilities, working conditions and hours of sittings, which is very important. That applies to political parties as well as not always asking women to come out at teatime when the kids are looking for their dinner or whatever. It can also be about childcare facilities. Some of these things have happened in Scotland and in Wales, but they are kind of absent here.

I totally appreciate that there are many men up here who are champions of our work and also of gender equality, and they often feel that you are accusing them personally of wanting to discriminate against women. In some cases, there will be embedded old notions, and they need to be unearthed, but, in a lot of cases, it is simply that they do not recognise the kind of attitudinal and normal behaviour. If you get a room and it is mostly men, there is a certain atmosphere. It is the same if you get a room and it is mostly women. You are acting within that without even realising that you are actually making it a bit complicated for the two or three women who are in the room. The same thing would apply if people were coming from another ethnic background. They are the things that need challenged. You cannot challenge them yourself; you actually have to listen to people who are nailing it and saying, "This is why that is uncomfortable" or, "That joke would make women feel uncomfortable" and all the rest of it.

Finally, as I said, there are many people who are helping us to champion domestic and sexual violence issues, but, often, it can start slipping unless we in Women's Aid and in civic society, if you like, keep pushing it and pushing it. We have seen in Scotland and Wales, with the tremendous numbers of women that they have in their Parliament and Assembly, that those issues do not slip but get embedded. I mean that they get embedded with really large budgets, because, at the end of the day, if money does not go where the policy priorities are, the work does not really get done. Again, there is lots of research to say that, if women get into parliaments, the bread and butter issues, which are the issues that really affect the communities, get higher up the agenda. That has to be a big win for everyone.

Some of those matters cannot be waved away with a magic wand by you. We appreciate that, but it is more than just a question of whether one woman somewhere can become an MLA. This is a whole business about how we run society and how we make it truly democratic.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thanks very much, Anne, Lynn and Annie for your very robust presentation. I will throw it open to questions in a minute. I believe that most people here would like to see greater representation from women in the Assembly. There may be disagreement on how we bring that about, but this Committee is studying other institutions, including Wales, which you mentioned, and Scotland. We are also looking at Finland and Iceland, which have much higher representations of women in their assemblies or parliaments. So, at least we are looking at the issue, and, hopefully, something positive will come out at the other end. Lynn, you mentioned the issue of job-sharing. Can you expand on that a bit? Are you talking about someone who is elected as an MLA sharing that role? If a man was elected, could you bring a woman in to share that role?

Ms Carvill: This has come to my attention. It has always been around as an idea, but it has come to my attention more recently. Someone was hoping to run for the Labour Party in GB and did not run because they have a disability, and they knew they would have to job-share, but that did not really exist. I think that there are probably various ways you could run it, but I suppose for the electorate and democracy and all of that, it would need to be that two people run for one seat. So, you would have to have two people running for one position, obviously, from the same party. That is the way that it would work. I know that, in the past, people have said that that cannot work, but my question is always be, "Why could that not work?". It would allow for people who either have other responsibilities outside here or who maybe cannot work full time.

Mr Beggs: Some votes are party votes and other votes are on issues of conscience. If it was an issue of conscience, which of the two people on a job-share would be able to exercise their right on a vote of conscience? There are practical steps and things that could cause a difficulty. I am just trying to see how you would practically deal with such a scenario.

Ms Carvill: That question is very far down the line because most votes are party votes. It is possibly like job-sharing in any scenario in that you would have to have people who are able to work together,

because that is the way the situation works. That problem is quite far down the line. Or you could go half and do fractions. You could possibly do it that way.

Mr Beggs: It seems very, very complicated.

Ms Carvill: I do not think that it would immediately negate the idea.

Mr Givan: I apologise for being late, and I have to go again because there is justice legislation going through; I need to be in the Chamber for that. I know the work of your organisation well, and you have come to the Justice Committee on a number of occasions. Our party is making great strides in advancing female candidates and has been successful at having them elected, but the issue of women's rights obviously cannot be advanced only by female politicians, and Lord Morrow is taking through a Bill that your organisation has been very supportive of. How do you deal with trying to advance the issues that are important to you and your organisation when often, and on this issue, some female politicians are very opposed to what your organisation believes in?

Ms A Campbell: That is always the case. Issues do not always divide according to gender by any means. As I said, we really appreciate the support that we get from the male MLAs, who take forward a lot of our issues. If you look at it in the round, in Scotland and Wales, where you have a greater mass of women MLAs, you find that some of those issues are higher up the agenda, such as, for example, domestic and sexual violence. There still may be differences within that as to how to take it forward, but the actual issues get more prominence. There can then be the same political disagreements among women and across the parties as there would be with anything. We are very fortunate that, in the domestic and sexual violence field, there is a lot of cross-party support. However, when you get, for example, to the issue of Lord Morrow's Bill, which is about how prostitution is perceived in society and so on, there can be differences based on moral ethics, how you view human rights, and so on, and that will still be a matter for political debate. If you had a greater mass of women in here, you would have more support for the position that Lord Morrow is taking, which we support.

Mr Lunn: We get a lot of figures around the level of representation, which is clearly appalling up here, and the level of interest in politics from women around the world. I notice that Southern Ireland still has particularly poor levels, if it can be believed.

To take it right back to basics, I do not know what other parties do, but if somebody wants to be a candidate in our party, they have to be a party member and they submit their name to the headquarters. That is then vetted and sent back to the local association and it selects the candidates for council, MLA or even for MP. I have no figures here for the level of female membership of political parties. I do not mean representation but actual voting membership.

I had a quick look at our membership lists. It is not so much that they are heavily dominated by men but the fact that men's wives do not appear to join. The men join the party but the wife or partner does not. If there was a greater female membership in political parties — there is not a huge number in any of the parties — surely that would feed through and would evolve into more female candidates. A higher female membership, if you want to vote that way, would bring forward more female representatives.

About 20 years ago, we tried to introduce quotas for females on selection lists. It was voted down at the specific request of our female membership; they would not have it. They said, "No way. It is merit or nothing". I think that we have gone beyond that now. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Ms A Campbell: A few.

Ms Carvill: You mentioned people coming forward. Some people do come forward. However, having spoken to such a variety of people who are politicians, I have learned that most people are asked. Most people in any of the parties are asked to run; it is just the way that the situation works. Some come forward.

I thought that this was something very specific to the women in political parties, but it is specific to men as well. Women may position themselves better but may not be asked to stand as much, even if a party is growing the number of women involved. Research is being done on this, particularly by Claire McGing at Maynooth. She has figures on party membership across Northern Ireland that show that it

does not necessarily follow that women will come through. I think that they need to be asked a few times.

Mr Lunn: Other women could ask them. I am not being facetious here, but I think that, if you had what is referred to as critical mass, it would feed through eventually. I do not think that it is something that we can cure overnight.

Ms McVicker: You have to realise that there is an uneven playing field here. That may work, but other things would have to be put in place as well. First is the position of women in society as carers and who look after families. Maybe so many men are involved in politics because they have partners who are looking after them and looking after the home. With women who have not been involved, even in community action, you find that there is a lack of confidence.

To go back to what Lynn and Annie said: resources need to be put in place to invest in women to build up their confidence so they feel that they could actually take that extra step, but it is certainly a very uneven playing field.

Mr Lunn: I am entirely with you about facilities and resources being put in place in places like this to make it easier for parents to involve themselves. It may improve their confidence in putting themselves forward if there were childcare facilities and all the rest of it, proper timings and so on. It is not just the women who would like to see decent timings up here, believe me.

At the basic level, who goes forward for selection? You say that most people are asked, and I would say that that is true. If you display a bit of talent, the party comes to you, or you do not display a bit of talent but the party still comes to you and asks you whether you would like to stand. I do not see why that should not apply to men any more so than women.

Ms A Campbell: If you put yourself in that position, those of you who are men, in a room where most of your party officers are probably going to be men, where things have been done in a certain way for a long time, where no one has approached you and there are a few eager and potentially good candidates who are men who already have their hands up in the air saying publicly that they want to do it, you are not going to be the one who is chosen even though you could be the one who could make the better MLA. It has to be more managed than that.

Parties have to take responsibility. If you do not have a gender audit of who your membership is and how many women and men you have, you need to look at that and you need to look at what your processes are. It is the same with the way that things have changed now with selection for jobs. It is not just that somebody knocks on your door and says, "I want to do that job"; there are criteria, you go through an interview, and all of that has to be done by people who are independent and are not trying to get the favoured person in. Parties should be doing that as well as the rest of society. There should not be this kind of casual approach.

Mr Lunn: We are agreeing with you on that point. It is the parties that have the basic responsibility to do something about it.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cathaoirleach. You are very welcome. I just want to put on record my admiration for the work that each of you, personally and through your organisations, has done over the last while. I think the first time I met you, Anne, was probably about 30 years ago — would that be right? Secondly, there is not a thing you have said that I do not agree with. It is not an easy place to be. I am not going to pretend it is. I noticed a couple of people's eyes light up when you talked about job-sharing. It will be lovely.

You raised a couple of queries. Your presentation was very focused, with a clear knowledge of how we operate here. I am a member of the Assembly Commission, and I have asked for the gender action plan in relation to the Assembly Commission. We have also proposed this investigation, inquiry or whatever we are calling it, and I believe that it is one of the most important things that this Committee will do. I think it is very important.

It is not enough to say that we just want people to put themselves forward. I know that no one in this room is saying that. I think that parties have to be proactive in setting quotas at every single level of the party, otherwise nothing will ever change. Nobody gives up power, no matter how progressive a party is. I believe that we need very strong quotas internally. I know that, when I sat on the Ard

Chomhairle, when panels came to me with all men I was one of the voices saying, "That needs to go back. Where are the women?".

Actually, I think it needs to go further than individual parties. There is legislation in the South — we will study what happens to it — that actually provides for financial penalties for parties. That is when parties start listening. They do not like losing money. I think we need to look at that. Although at the moment it is just a percentage of candidates, I would like to see winnable seats, because that is the way we are going to get changes.

We need the debate and the discussion, because there is probably much more common ground between all the parties. It is good for politics to have women in politics. At the moment this place is not good for politics or for women in politics. You are absolutely right. It is aggressive, adversarial, very male and older. We need to try to change that, and we have to be proactive in doing that.

I certainly look forward to working with you. We do not have all of the answers. What I will say is that it is great women being in the community, but often the decisions are being made here, so I throw a challenge back to the community and say that we need women like you in politics. That is a big step. I know, because I was in your situation in the community sector and it was the biggest step that I made in my life, but we need strong women from the community sector across all different backgrounds to come forward, particularly women in disadvantaged areas. That is a challenge that I am going to throw out to the community sector.

Mr Lunn: On the back of that, I noticed that in your presentation there was a comment that maybe women do not naturally find a place within one particular political party. Is there evidence for that?

Ms McVicker: I do not think we should assume that all women think the same. In the past there was certainly a role for the Women's Coalition in saying that more women needed to be involved in politics, but to think that all women should be part of one political party —

Mr Lunn: No, the party of their choice. The comment was about:

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

I think that, realistically, any potential candidate who aspires to be, let us say, an MLA up here will have to connect themselves to a party.

Ms McVicker: Yes.

Mr Lunn: Male or female, it does not really matter. Your notes here seem to say that women have difficulty with that.

Ms A Campbell: There was evidence of that in some of the workshops and so on: that women do not actually want to get into what is left of the old divisive politics. Therefore, some of them are reluctant to enter one of the traditional parties, if you like, up here at the moment. They want to forge new ground on the bread-and-butter issues. However, I am not saying that that is the case for all of them; some of them are obviously clear supporters of clear parties. It is part of that shifting of the agenda, I suppose, towards what we share, what we can go forward on and what our real problems are — financial and all the rest of it. We are not trying to say that all women —

Ms McVicker: I do not think that women like to be boxed off and put in the one party. Women's views are representative of all the parties that exist.

Mr Lunn: Yes, but when you gravitate towards a political party, it does not mean that you — I will choose my words carefully — agree with every single item in its manifesto. You choose the one that most suits you. That is the same for men as for women. So, I do not buy this thinking that women have a problem effectively selecting a party. You mentioned the Women's Coalition. That was a good effort, but what happened to it?

Ms McVicker: It had its day. It achieved its objective, I believe. It is maybe not as relevant now as it was then.

Mr Lunn: Fair enough.

Ms A Campbell: It was formed for a specific purpose, which we feel we achieved. Given what Caitríona mentioned, I put that challenge back to you: how many parties are actively recruiting in disadvantaged areas? Have you asked those women to join your party? I do not know a lot of women who get asked.

Mr Lunn: I can only speak for my party, but the people who join our party are not necessarily asked. They join on the back of particular issues or events. It will not be a surprise to you to hear that, after the flags protest of December 2012, we recruited another, I think, 150 members in a few weeks, which was unprecedented for us. I am not making anything of that issue; it is just a fact. A lot of those 150 — a proportion of them, I am sure — were women. People are inspired to become involved in politics for different reasons, but sometimes they are asked — of course they are.

Ms P Bradley: Can I just come in on that point?

The Deputy Chairperson: Gregory is next, but if he is happy to give way, yes.

Mr G Campbell: Yes.

Ms P Bradley: Are you sure that you do not mind?

You have nearly answered it all; it is something I was going to ask you later on. In my experience when I have been out speaking to women's groups, a lot of them bring up this point: "What political party would I join?". I have tried to explain to them that everything that my party says, does and believes in is not necessarily everything that I believe in, but I believe in the ethos and the general principles of my party, and that is what attracted me to my party. The odd thing comes up where I will go, "Actually, no, I do not agree with that", and I will not even want to go to vote on it, but I have to, and that is part of being a member of a party.

Do you think that there is something that the parties could be doing more of? All our parties very much deal with the issues on the ground, but sometimes that does not get reflected out there. When people see the news at night or watch the Stormont TV programmes or whatever, they hear about the big constitutional issues a lot of the time. A lot of the issues are to do with parity, flags or whatever it might be. However, the media are not portraying all the other issues that we discuss at Committee level, in the Chamber and in various other meetings in this Building, which are actually the issues that affect those men and women who live in all areas of our communities. I think that the parties maybe are at fault here for not putting that out a bit more and for not putting the message out a bit more that those are the issues that we are discussing and that are important to us.

All you hear about on the TV is the big, big issues, but the small issues are the important ones, because they are the ones that we build on. They are our bedrock. They are what we come from. All our political parties were formed on those issues. I think that there is a job of work for us to do, as political parties, to get those women in. When they speak to me, they will say, "But your party is more interested in this" or "Another party is doing that." I tell them that that is not what we are about and that that is not what we discuss. We discuss education, health and all the other issues that affect them. I think that there is a bit of work to be done by political parties and probably a need for a better education system, but I will come to that afterwards when it is my turn to come in.

Ms McVicker: I agree with you, Paula. I think that there is probably more of an onus on female politicians to engage with communities and to do what you have done with our organisation. You came and spoke to us about there being no peace without women and UN resolution 1325. It is about being engaging in a very down-to-earth way. The feedback that we got from the conference at the end of June was that it is not just about the big issues that you hear about on the TV like the constitutional issues; it is the bread-and-butter issues. Our membership wants to hear that those issues are important.

Mr G Campbell: There are a couple of things that I would like to get your views on. You spoke about the adversarial nature of politics, and a couple of MLAs also raised that issue. It is very clear that that would be off-putting, and it has been there for quite some time. If you look at that and accept that — I think that most people do — you would imagine that the converse would be true and that, when there were occasions in the comparatively recent past when it appeared to the wider public that adversarial

politics was going to be replaced by a more all-embracing political life, more women would have come forward, just as there were not more when it was adversarial. Whether it was 1998 or 2007, would you not have expected, at that stage, when it appeared that adversarial politics was going to recede, that more women would have come forward? That did not seem to happen.

Ms Carvill: I am not sure. It would not be my view that, at both those times, adversarial politics actually receded. I think that it is still very much alive and well.

Mr G Campbell: Yes, but was the view not that it was going to happen? That is what I mean. In 1998 and 2007, there was a wider community view that the old sort of Punch and Judy politics was receding, because agreements had been reached. Would you not have expected more women to have got involved, if the reason for them not being involved was the adversarial politics that they had seen on their televisions or read about in their newspapers? Whatever happened afterwards, at that point, would they not have felt that those days were over and, therefore, that they wanted to get involved? That did not seem to happen.

Ms Carvill: People and women see on their televisions that it is still adversarial. There have been a number of occasions over the last few years in our Assembly Chamber when personal attacks, often on women by men, were seen as OK. That is not necessarily seen as OK in, let us say, Westminster. It goes back to what Paula said about the media. It has a stage here as well. It wants to report on what is sensational, not bread and butter. What we generally see on our televisions is that that adversarial nature still exists today. That is what the public see. That comes across in all of the community development work that we do with women, and it is one of the huge turn-offs. I do not believe that that corner has been turned.

Mr G Campbell: I am not going to press the point, Chairman. The only point that I would make is that what you are talking about is what has happened subsequent to those dates. I was talking about at the time. It is just like the way, in South Africa or elsewhere, millions of people queued up to vote because, at that time — it does not matter what happened afterwards — they felt "This is a new dawn, therefore we are queuing up. Millions of us are going to queue, because it is a different era." The only point that I am making is that, in 1998 or 2007 — not what happened afterwards: not six months later when there was a row, two years later or 10 years later — I would have expected more women to get involved. They may have been turned off afterwards because of the adversarial approach, but you are giving your explanation.

Ms A Campbell: If I could just come in briefly on that point: when the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, there was a huge wave of hope, and a lot of women wanted to be involved. From my perspective, two things happened. In the Good Friday Agreement, the electoral system that was agreed for this Assembly was the old one, which was not going to bring more women in. Although those arguments had been made to those who were making the deal, they were not heard. We did not get the regional lists and, as a point of fact, that was one of the reasons that led to the demise of the Women's Coalition, although it got a couple of Members in originally. That was a big thing.

The second thing was that, come 2002 when we had the legislation from Westminster for the selection of candidates and so on, although it could be applied here, it was not applied. Nothing structural was done to bring those women in who wanted to come in. It was not the fault of the women because they did not want in. They wanted in, but doors were not opened for them. I think that the potential is still there; there are women out there who would want in to this Assembly who will not get in under the current set-ups.

Mr G Campbell: Prior to the 1998 agreement, there was a list system for the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue.

Ms A Campbell: Yes, there was. That was how the smaller loyalist parties got in, as well as the Women's Coalition and Labour.

Mr G Campbell: We did not see a big increase of females, despite using the list system on that occasion.

Ms A Campbell: Actually, it led to the fact that the Coalition was at the table. We would not have been there had it not been for that regional list system.

Mr G Campbell: But numerically, out of the numbers in the forum, it did not show a big increase.

Ms A Campbell: That is then down to the parties, who were not putting women forward.

Ms Ruane: Some of them.

Ms A Campbell: It is a shared —

Mr G Campbell: On the issue of young people, you say in your paper, and I can see why, that:

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

That goes back to the adversarial issue. It continues:

"Young women don't know how to get into politics, Young women feel disengaged from politics".

Again, I want your view. I spend quite a bit of time doing visits to schools — sixth form or upper sixth form — and even in higher education with 18- to 22-year-olds doing media studies, and different groups like that. I find that, in that age group of between 17 and 21, the more active people in the room are female. They are much more active than the young men. Is that your experience, and, if it is, then what is it that is vibrant and active about a 17- or 21-year-old group that seems to dissipate? Is it family responsibilities or what is it beyond the 21-years-old group? It appears to me that the hundreds of young females that I have seen are very active, vibrant and up-and-at-them for change, yet that does not translate into political action.

Ms Carvill: That is what happens in life generally; it is not just political life. We have a lot of young women and young men, but young women are politically active when they are at that age when they are leaving education and moving into higher or further education. What happens then is that life happens. Life happens to them when they move into work and life happens to them if they want to move into politics, and there are certain structural barriers that face females.

We had this discussion before we came in. For example, the largest amount of complaints made to the Equality Commission are still of maternity discrimination, even with all the legislation that exists. That is one part of it, but there are structural issues and barriers facing young women as they move into their 20s and beyond. A woman in politics who spoke to me a number of years ago talked about how she was a councillor hanging on by her fingernails as she was rearing her kids at that time. This was at a time when the conflict was on here as well, but that is what you do; you hang on by your fingernails, and then the kids grow up and you can re-immersing yourself in that life. I think that what you are talking about crosses all life in terms of how women move forward.

Ms A Campbell: As a rider to that, in Northern Ireland we are now faced with the move to the super-councils and so on. That is timely, and we needed to do it. However, that will increase the gender gap, and no positive action has been taken to ensure that those councils will be gender balanced. Undoubtedly, they will be training grounds for the Assembly, and that is the normal way that it should be. It is as if people are just sleepwalking into maintaining the gender gap through who is here in the Assembly and what their gender is.

Mr Rogers: That is the point that I was going to come on to. In many of our community groups and whatever, the women play the most active part. There seems to be a block in getting women into local government, never mind anything else. What more can we do to build capacity, not alone in our political parties but within communities, to allow women to make that step from community activities to local government activities?

Ms A Campbell: There is a range of capacity development issues. They do not all operate at the same time, but they are things like mentoring sessions particularly for women who are thinking of doing it. Basically, it is encouragement and support. There can be a lot of information that is held in a small group, say, a party. Again, you may not even realise that it is only you or six other people who know all this — people who have had the time to be in your company a lot — that you are sharing that information with. It is about making sure that the women who you are asking to come forward will feel that they will be supported in the role. There are funding issues. There are issues about when you choose to call those meetings so that they do not clash with the main points of childcare and those matters. As Lynn said, staying with it is an issue. The fact that you do not say immediately when

someone asks you does not mean that you will not be a good MLA. It could mean that you are a thoughtful person who is considering the matter and considering how you can balance it all. Do not give up on the first one or two asks. I am sure that there are others there.

Ms McVicker: In 2006, there was an initiative taken called Women in Local Councils: Making a Difference. It was not just getting women to come in as local councillors, but it looked at the overall gender balance in councils, including the number of women in middle management positions and as chief executives. You cannot push the issue of getting women into local government; you have to look at the structure that they are coming into. You have to warm the place up, and you have to deal with a number of issues to do with gender rather than just having the objective of getting more women as local councillors. That initiative was supported by all political parties, and it was actually quite successful.

Mr Rogers: Was something like that not done quite recently in the South of Ireland to get more women involved?

Ms Ruane: New legislation was brought in.

Ms Carvill: There was a group called Women for Election that delivered training, and a lot of the new women who have moved in down there went through that process. There is training, and it is almost like a support network. It was highly successful.

Ms A Campbell: Looking at the balance in the Assembly at the moment, unless a critical mass of the male MLAs sign up to really push this forward, it is not going to happen. It cannot. There are not enough women to leave it to just the women here. You need to get men in all of the parties who are going to make this a priority issue.

Mr Beggs: At the tail end there you mentioned a highly successful training initiative — I think it was down South. Training is very important, but it should happen at all levels. We should encourage women to become active in their local community association or whatever informal community bodies there are. That makes them more likely to have the confidence to step forward as a councillor and be successful. Again, it is about having a network behind you. Very few people come out of the blue and suddenly become an MLA or MP. Usually there is either a community background or a council background. My question is about training at each of those levels, through community involvement and the upskilling of women councillors. What currently exists in Northern Ireland? Mention was made of DemocraShe, but what currently exists and what would you like to see exist? Can you tell me something more about the successful model that you mentioned in the Republic of Ireland?

Ms Carvill: The Women for Election programme started a number of years ago — I am trying to remember when; maybe four years ago — and was funded through a charitable trust. Essentially, it travelled around the South of Ireland, running workshops and inspiring potential politicians. Political parties put their women forward. Also in the mix, in a parallel process, was that quotas were coming in. Therefore, there was an onus on political parties to ensure that 30% of candidates were women. That was another push, and then this was another process in terms of training them. It happened at weekends, and current female councillors and TDs participated. They started mentoring aspiring politicians within that process. It became quite holistic, and it was very successful. I know that the women who run that programme — it is now more of a social economy private enterprise — have been in the Assembly on a number of occasions when these things have been discussed. You certainly might want to talk to them about how it worked, because it has been very successful.

I am sure that it has been mentioned, but just in case it has not, I cannot emphasise enough the importance of networks and support — Women for Election and those kinds of supports, and DemocraShe and those things that happened. It is about women knowing that they are supported, even across parties, by women who are in the same position as themselves. The men's networks exist already. Women's networks do not, at the moment. That is very important.

Mr Beggs: Can you tell us more about what is currently in place, if anything? Where do you see the gaps?

Ms Carvill: I do not know that there are any live projects. I do not think so. There are bits and bobs that happen periodically. The Women into Public Life project happened in the north-west and with Scotland. However, I am not aware of anything since then that is particular to training women in

politics. The most recent project would have been the work happening with Politics Plus. Resources have continually been an issue, ever since the 1990s.

Ms A Campbell: The skills and so on are there. It is just a case of commissioning the work.

Mr Beggs: Sometimes there are skills but there still needs to be that confidence built in to an individual. I know some people who I would consider to be excellent potential councillors, but you need to encourage and encourage. Sometimes, that little bit of extra training can give them the confidence to step up. We as a Committee should try to do some further research through the Assembly Library to try to find out what is in place at present, so that we have a clear picture. It is a very important area.

Ms A Campbell: What I meant was that the skills are there, in organisations such as DemocraShe. You could absolutely put together good programmes. We have them there. It is just a case of calling for them to help do exactly what you are saying; to build the skills in potential candidates.

Ms P Bradley: In the 1990s, when I first was a member of the DUP, we did a DemocraShe course, which was run by Bronagh Hinds. That was where I met Pam Cameron for the first time. It was for DUP female members, and it was one of the most worthwhile courses to do with politics that I have ever done. It really made us think that yes, we can do this and be part of this, albeit it took me six or seven years before I put my name on a ballot paper. However, it was extremely worthwhile.

I know that there is a big job of work to do in the community to get people who are not in political parties involved. That is something that we as political parties have to take on. However, there is a big job to do with females who are already involved. Gregory and I were talking about this earlier. In our party, we have a large female membership, yet we are not getting even them to come through. It is something that we need to look at. Political parties need to look at the likes of DemocraShe for their female membership, so that they can learn the system. I found it so interesting and it really encouraged me to think that this was something that I could possibly do.

Megan brought forward a debate in the Chamber not too long ago. A motion was passed that we would bring in some sort of education or something. We need to follow up on that to find out where it has gone. A motion was passed that we would look at women's participation and training for women across the board. We need to pull that out again and look at where we are. Definitely, that type of training is so beneficial. I remember that, even years later, you could still phone Bronagh and say "Can you help me with this?". Networks were formed. I think that women are getting better with networks. We see each other quite frequently at different events. Every time you see each other and speak to each other, it is a wee bit more encouraging. We are a wee bit further forward. We have not taken big strides — I know that — but it is moving forward. For women like me and other female politicians, your organisation and others like it are our network. You are the people we can rely on to get a message out to the rest of the community. We should not lose heart. We are moving in the right direction. Sometimes we beat ourselves up a wee bit about how bad it all is. It is not; it will improve. I believe that.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thanks very much, ladies. This has been one of the longest evidence sessions that I can remember. That shows the level of interest. There is a lot of work to be done, but, as Paula said, she is optimistic about the future, as are most of us. There has to be change. Hopefully there will be. Thanks very much for coming along.

Ms McVicker: Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to come here and represent our views. We urge the Committee, at the conclusion of the review, to take bold, decisive action to bring that critical mass of women into the Assembly. As women, we hope that that will happen.

The Deputy Chairperson: You know that we can only make recommendations. We do not really have the power to make changes. *[Laughter.]* Thanks very much.