



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Women in Politics

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Introduction

This is a timely moment to consider the issue of women's representation in Northern Ireland. The UN Commission on the Status of Women is presently (10-21 March 2014) considering the post-2015 Millennium Development Goals agenda. Progress in women's representation and empowerment is on the agenda for attention, along with further strategies to achieve gender equality in leadership. In a local context, the issue is coming to the fore in the course of Assembly business. It was discussed during the Assembly Executive Review Committee review of D'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition (2013), was the subject of a research paper by Michael Potter of the Assembly Research and Information Service (2013), and a plenary debate on women's political representation in the Assembly on 10 March 2014 set the context for further progress.¹ This attention is important, and relevant, as we enter a period of intense electoral activity, beginning with the European Parliament and new local council elections on 22 May 2014, followed by the 7 May 2015 UK general election and the devolved assembly and parliamentary elections on 5 May 2016. It is appropriate then to take stock of where we are in Northern Ireland in terms of democratic electoral politics and gender equality, and consider how the record can be improved.

That an improvement can take place, there is no doubt. Women's representation in the Assembly has not broken the 20% mark since powers were devolved to the new power-sharing institutions in 1998 (Table 1). In contrast, the other devolved legislatures have maintained a relatively stable representation of at least one-third female seat-holding. However, as Table 1 shows, women's hold on political office in the devolved institutions is not necessarily stable or enduring, and constant attention needs to be paid to increasing women's descriptive representation.

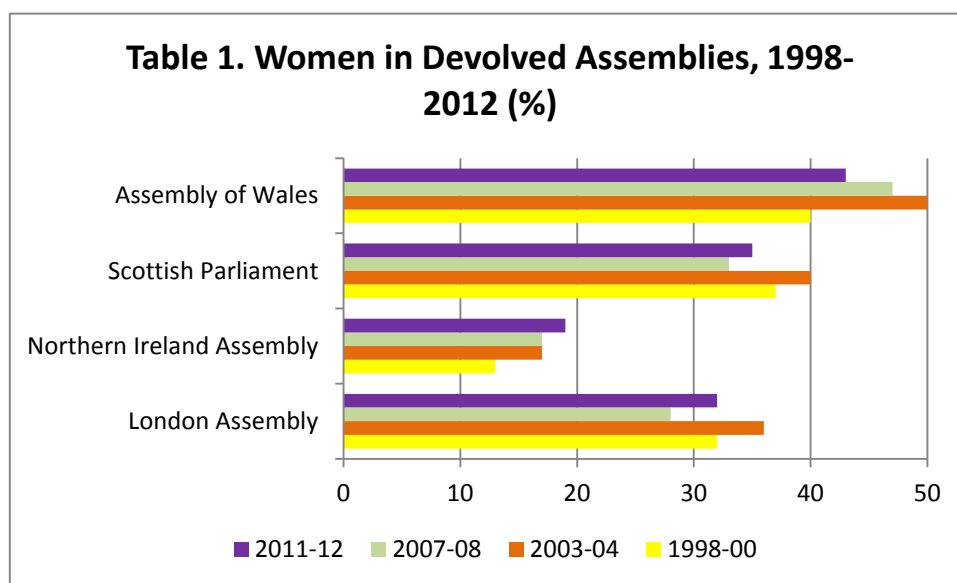
At local level, women constitute one-quarter of councillors, their presence spread unevenly across the 26 local councils (Table 2). Progress has been made since 1989, when women's share of local council seats was at a token level of 9 per cent. Yet, Northern Ireland still lags behind the 32 per cent average representation for women in local councils in the EU 27-member states. In

¹ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Reports-13-14/10-March-2014/>.

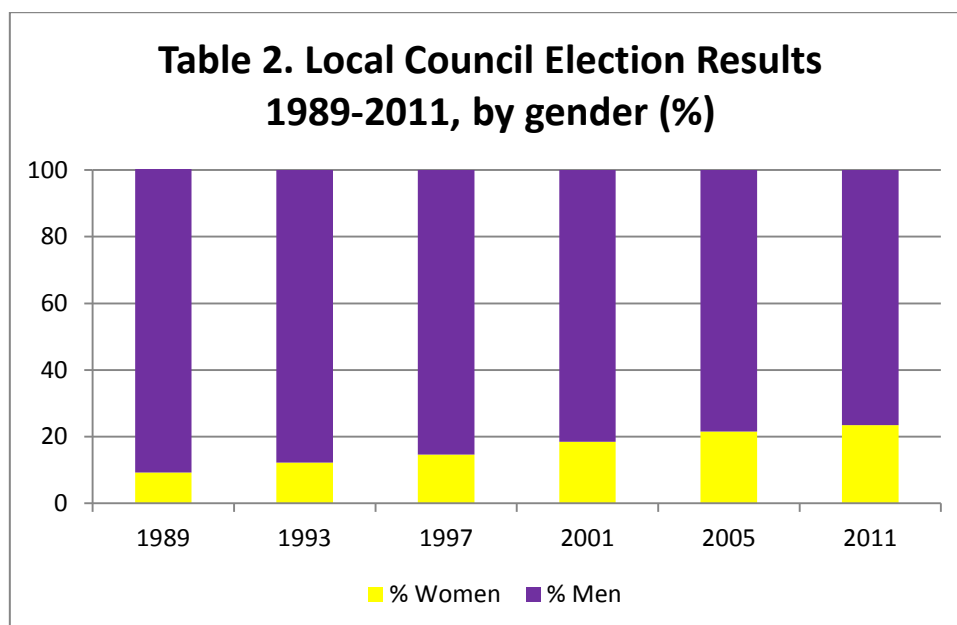
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international comparisons, the NI Assembly would rank 77th in the world, along with Kenya and Estonia, if it were a national parliament.

Much attention has been devoted to trying to explain this low representation of women in what is a relatively new legislative body. The conflict of three decades is cited as having a dampening effect on women's political ambitions, and personal testimonies of women elected to the 1998 Assembly bears out this view (Hinds 2012). It still exerts a path-dependent effect, with the early pattern of women's exclusion becoming more difficult to address as Assembly politics bedded down. The conservative culture in which politics takes place has also been identified as contributing to the continued gender inequality in representative politics (Galligan and Knight 2011). This culture reinforces gender stereotypes that affects women's and girls' employment and civic engagement opportunities, including their participation in politics.



Sources: Assembly/Parliament websites



Sources: CAWP, Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, DFPNI 2012, Hillyard et al (2006)

Then there are a range of individual-focused constraints shaped by the macro conditions described above that in turn influence the supply of women coming into political life. Constituting 4 of the '5 C's' – cash, culture, care, confidence – these aspects of women's lives impinge on individual opportunity to engage in public and political affairs. Culture also has a determining effect on voters' attitudes to women as political representatives. On the demand side, the 'pull' factors are conditioned by the electoral

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system, political party openness to having women in representative roles, and party candidate selection practices– the 5th ‘C’ (Matthews 2012). In brief, then, combinations of societal, political and individual conditions in Northern Ireland shape a unique and indeed, challenging, environment for a gender-equal democracy.

The extensive attention to this issue in over 100 countries in the last decade has its root in a number of normative principles and practical considerations. As Norris and Krook (2012: 5) note ‘The goal of strengthening gender balance in legislatures is of particular importance for democracy and social justice’. These conceptual concerns, along with the equally-motivating idea of ‘gender justice’ provide the philosophical basis on which how well democracy works is interrogated in the abstract and in reality. In addition, a gender-inclusive assembly is taken as a positive indicator of the status of women in a society. It is also a measure of the quality of democratic processes, and supports the legitimacy of the institution in the public mind.

Increasingly, it is recognised that women and men bring different insights to bear on all public policy concerns, and their diverse life-experiences, interests and expertise contribute to addressing complex societal issues. Having a gender-balanced parliament, then, enables that elected body to be more fully representative of the views of the society it serves. In turn, this diversity informs societal debate.

A more gender-diverse legislature generates a more inclusive political agenda: the gendered impact of economic, health, family and educational policies are among the sectors that become more open to debate leading to gender-attuned policy outcomes. Again, this inclusiveness generates a democratic dividend in that the elected institution is seen as being responsive to women’s and men’s policy needs and interests.

For these reasons, promoting greater balance between women and men in political and public decision-making has been debated in nations worldwide, supported by international organisations, advocated by women in civil society, and provided for by democratic governments and parliaments. A genuine political engagement with the issue takes place when the discussion moves from civil society into the political institutions – parties, government and parliament- informed by a wish on all sides to bring about a gender-balanced representative body in the interest of the public good.

Initiatives supporting women’s political representation

The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement negotiations that brought three decades of ethno-national conflict to an end could be said to have overshadowed the lively discussions on the nature of democratic politics that took place in Scotland and Wales prior to devolution. Nonetheless, the Agreement did make a gesture in the direction of gender equality in political life. It affirmed a range of fundamental rights, including *the right of women to full and equal political participation*. This right has yet to be fully realised.

Northern Ireland is not alone among political systems in this regard, and over the last decade and more there have been many initiatives addressing the issue of women’s political under-representation. International bodies, for example, have drawn up charters, recommendations and guidelines on bringing more women into political life. The Council of Europe 2003 Recommendation on the balanced participation of women and men in public and political life, for example, calls on national governments to ‘*commit themselves to promote balanced representation of women and men by recognising publicly that the equal sharing of decision-making power between women and men of different background and ages strengthens and enriches democracy*’. All member states of the Council of Europe, including the UK and Ireland, accepted this non-binding recommendation a full decade ago.²

Exhortation, however, is not sufficient to effect a change in the male political super-majority. Recently Norris and Krook (2012) prescribed a six-element action plan to effect gender equality in politics. These six elements, found in different configurations in all policy recommendations, consist of the following:

- **Constitutional Rights** – Political rights and civil liberties for women in a constitution, including the right to vote, to stand for election, and to hold public office provide a framework for more specific equality provisions.
- **Electoral System** – Laws governing elections and political parties regulate the nomination and election process. Proportional representation with large district magnitudes maximises opportunities for women. Other considerations to be taken into account are the provision of election and campaign funding, the use of incumbency term limits, multiple mandate restrictions, and the rules on access to the ballot.
- **Legal Quotas** – In the past decade, legal quotas have been used to fast-track women’s representation. Legal quotas vary in their requirements – the level of women’s and men’s representation they require, candidate placement rules, the monitoring body, if any, and the penalties for non-compliance, again, if any. Over 40 countries provide for legal quotas.³
- **Party rules and recruitment procedures** – Parties are gatekeepers to elected office, and can do much to redress gender imbalances in candidate selection. Effective strategies include adopting internal gender quotas for candidate selection, and internal leadership positions. Informal targets can also work, with committed implementation and effective monitoring.

² Recommendation Rec (2003)03 is available at http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/equality/03themes/women-decisionmaking/index_en.asp (last accessed 10 March 2014)

³ www.quotaproject.org (last accessed 10 March 2014)

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- **Capacity Development** – Parties, the media and non-governmental organisations can contribute to a diverse range of initiatives to strengthen the skills and resources of women in the pipeline for elected office and enhance the knowledge and skills of women once they enter the legislature. Examples of activities include knowledge networks, mentoring programmes, skills training and funding for women candidates.
- **Parliamentary Reform** – Legislative bodies are organised around standardised procedural rules that can act to exclude women. Introducing maternity leave for elected representatives is a gender-sensitive policy that would help create a more inclusive legislative environment. Reforming the sitting hours, the facilities and working conditions, principles for leadership recruitment, and provision of childcare facilities are other areas to consider.

Practical Initiatives

This section will focus on giving examples of initiatives undertaken in other countries as illustrations of international practices that have been found to support women's representation.

Quotas and party recruitment processes: While legal quotas have become a common strategy for increasing women's representation, its relevance to the Northern Ireland Assembly is limited, given that Assembly elections are an excepted matter. Nonetheless, the **Sex Discrimination (Election of Candidates) Act 2002** is a legal instrument enabling parties to adopt measures that will boost women's share of candidate positions. Most parties in Northern Ireland now have women's officers and a strategy to nurture and select more women candidates. In over 50 countries around the world, major political parties have introduced internal minimum gender balance thresholds for candidates. **Austria, South Africa, Germany, Sweden, Mozambique and the Netherlands** are among this group. All are in the top 30 countries in the world for gender balance in political representation.

The **Campaign for Gender Balance** recently joined forces with Women Liberal Democrats to create **Liberal Democrat Women** to provide mentoring, training and support for Lib Dem women seeking election.⁴

Women Can Do It aims to make more women participate in society and politics. It arranges candidate training opportunities in more than 25 countries worldwide, arranged by the **Norwegian Labour Party** with funding by Norwegian People's Aid. The topics covered democracy and women's participation, communication, debating, handling the media, negotiations, networking, advocacy, and campaigning.

Civil society organisations that work to mobilise women's interest in politics, and provide them with training have been a useful resource for political parties seeking to increase their proportion of women candidates. In 2010 the number of women elected to local assemblies in **Lebanon** more than doubled from 201 to 530. One factor in this success was the **Shariky** programme ('participation' in Arabic), that supports women candidates through training and mentoring, builds links between existing women politicians and women seeking elected office. The programme gave women participants the confidence, network and skills to run successful campaigns.

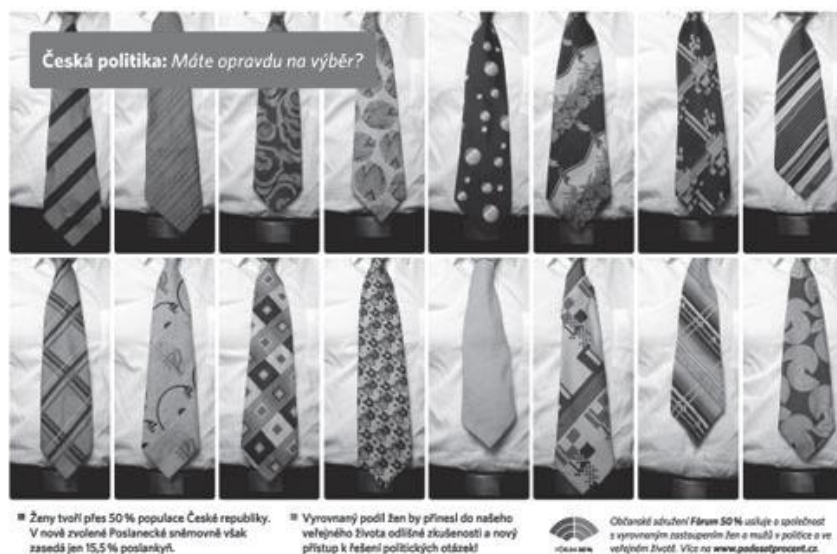
Women for Election, a non-profit, non-partisan organisation set up in 2012 in Ireland, offers a tailored training and support programme for women seeking to enter public life. Its aim is to inspire, equip and inform women to run for public office. The programme covers all aspects of campaigning, effective planning and administration of political campaigns, fundraising and budgeting, message development, presentation skills and managing the media. To date, over 530 women from across the island have participated in WfE programmes, and over 100 are running in the local and European elections, many for the first time.⁵

Raising awareness in society of the democratic problem that comes from women's political exclusion is a common strategy engaged in by parliaments and civil society organisations. Many eye-catching campaigns, often during elections, encourage voters to consider supporting women candidates. These campaigns also challenge stereotyped attitudes that contribute to women's exclusion from public and political life. One lively public billboard campaign was carried out by Forum 50% in advance of the 2006 **Czech Republic** general elections. The posters pictured long rows of trousers or ties with the question: 'Do you really have a choice?' (Illustration 1, Source Norris & Krook 2012: 44)

⁴ Liberal Democrat Women at www.genderbalance.org.uk (last accessed 10 March 2014)

⁵ Women for Election at <http://www.womenforelection.ie/> (last accessed 10 March 2014)

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In Turkey, in 2007 the Association to Support Women Candidates created posters of well-known businesswomen and artists wearing a tie or moustache asking ‘Is it necessary to be a man to enter parliament?’ (Illustration 2, Source Norris & Krook 2012: 45)



The campaigns for gender parity often have an online presence, and the **European Women’s Lobby 50/50** campaign for gender parity has a continuing high-profile online and in organised events across Europe. It provides excellent resource materials online.⁶

Parliamentary Reform: Current thinking on parliamentary reform not only considers specific reform initiatives, but places these in the context of parliaments being gender-sensitive institutions. A gender-sensitive parliament is a legislature that ‘responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods and in its work’ (IPU 2009:3). It includes the analysis of legislation from a gender perspective (gender mainstreaming) and attention to an assembly’s operational and institutional culture (IPU 2009: 81-83). The **Swedish Parliament** was assessed for gender-sensitivity in 2005. The results highlighted that women had difficulty in reaching senior parliamentary positions, viewed themselves and their work as invisible, were regularly subject to ridicule and belittling, and often did not have access to full information about parliamentary work. The outcome of the review was the identification of 15 action points to improve the gender-sensitive work and culture of the Swedish

⁶ European Women’s Lobby 50/50 campaign 2012-14 at <http://www.womenlobby.org/get-involved/ewl-campaigns-actions/50-50-campaign-for-democracy/50-50-campaign-20> (last accessed 10 march 2014)

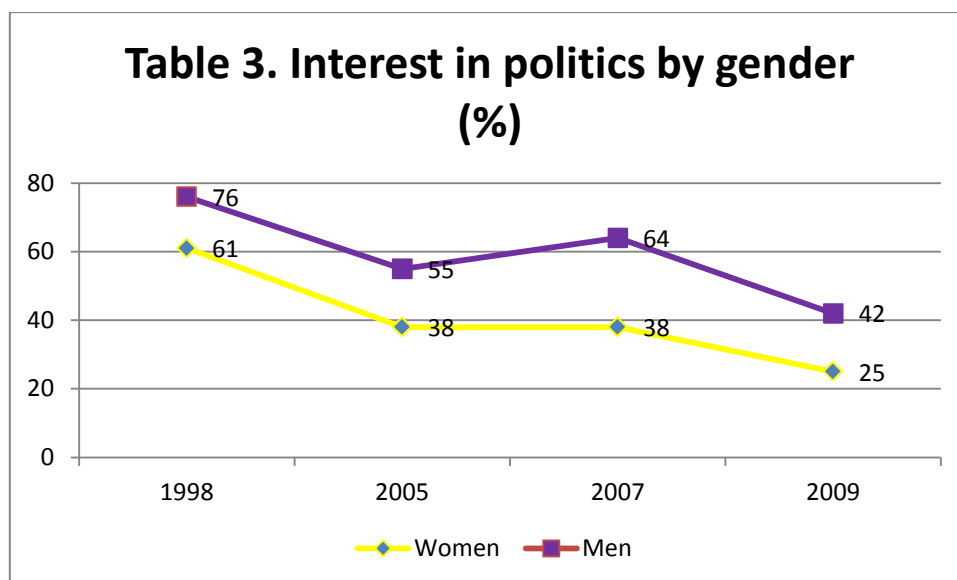
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parliament, including a parliamentary gender equality plan with the office of the Secretary General (ie Clerk) responsible for implementation (IPU, 2009: 84-85)

Capacity Development – for parliamentarians: When women and men are elected for the first time, studies show that they require support to be effective parliamentarians. This training usually focuses on the core responsibilities of legislatures, and it should also consider specific gendered contexts (Markham 2012). The study tour is a useful mechanism for legislators to experience first hand the law-making processes of another country. On the initiative of the Speaker of **the National Assembly for Wales**, Dame Rosemary Butler, women AMs have come together to form a cross-party Assembly Women in Democracy Caucus as part of her wider *Women in Public Life* campaign started in 2012. Among the events in the 2014 work programme for the Caucus is a visit to the Icelandic Parliament to learn why Iceland is ranked a world leader in gender equality.⁷

Conclusion

The issue of women's equal representation with men in democratically elected bodies has been a defining one of the 21st century. It is the unfinished business of the suffragist movement, through which women gained the right to vote on these islands almost a century ago. It calls for political commitment to reverse the current under-representation of women in political life in Northern Ireland. Table 3 indicates that something must be done to preserve the legitimacy of the political institutions. Fifteen years after the 1998 Agreement, public interest in politics is worryingly low. Of even more concern is the evident gendered pattern: only one quarter of all women show an interest in politics.



Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times 1998, 2005, 2007, 2009. Question: How interested would you say you personally are in politics?

Restoring women's interest in the legislative process is a democratic challenge. Aiming for a parity legislature is a practical and symbolic way of showing women that the Assembly, and politics, is relevant to their lives. It will also assist in making Northern Ireland's democratic institutions 'fit for purpose'. The international legislative frameworks exist and examples of good practice abound. What is required is the will by party leaders and others in high political office to effect this reform.

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⁷ For more information on the Wales *Women in Public Life* project see <http://www.womenmakingadifference.org.uk/wipl> (last accessed 10 March 2014)

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