

Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus Legacy Report 2017 - 2022

Report: NIA 188/17-22

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Introduction

- The Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus was set up in 2016 following a recommendation by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in its Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly report.
- This report covers the Caucus' work during the 2017–2022 Assembly
 mandate. It should be noted that this was a short and curtailed
 mandate due to the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive in 2017
 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.
- The Caucus is a united, cross-party forum made up of all current women MLAs and Lesley Hogg, the Clerk / Chief Executive of the Assembly. The aim of the Caucus is to address the under-representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland.
- 4. The Objectives of the Caucus are to:
 - Champion and support the recommendations for action listed in the Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly 2015 report in partnership with the political parties, the Assembly and the Executive;
 - Champion the practical implementation of UN Security Council
 Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in partnership with the
 All Party Group on Women Peace and Security;
 - Work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Women's Sector to support individual women wanting to become further involved in politics;
 - Work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, the
 Northern Ireland Women's and Education Sectors, and with the media, to

promote the idea of gender-equality in political representation as essential and achievable with the correct targeted action.

 Facilitate gender-specific training, coaching and study exchanges for women MLAs

Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus Steering Group

- 5. The Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus Steering Group sets the direction for the Caucus, agrees priority work streams and a Forward Work Programme and provides the operational decision-making function.
- The Steering Group has the ability to take evidence, conduct research and make recommendations on issues relating to gender and the role of women in the Assembly.
- 7. Membership allocations to the Steering Group are done using d'Hondt and based on the current mandate. At the start of the 2017-2022 mandate, the membership allocations were as follows:
 - DUP were allocated four seats:
 - Sinn Fein were allocated three seats;
 - SDLP were allocated two seats;
 - UUP were allocated one seat; and
 - Alliance were allocated one seat.
- 8. The Caucus may, if it chooses to do so, invite additional female MLAs from smaller parties to join the Steering Group.
- 9. The membership of the Steering Group for the 2017-2022 mandate is as follows:
 - Kellie Armstrong MLA (Alliance)
 - Rosemary Barton MLA (UUP)
 - Paula Bradley MLA (DUP)

- Joanne Bunting MLA (DUP)
- Pam Cameron MLA (DUP)
- Jemma Dolan MLA (Sinn Féin)
- Megan Fearon MLA (Sinn Féin) ¹
- Claire Hanna MLA (SDLP) 2
- Dolores Kelly MLA (SDLP)
- Carla Lockhart MLA (DUP) ³
- Emma Sheerin MLA (Sinn Féin)
- Clare Bailey MLA (Green Party) *
- Claire Sugden (Independent) *
- Lesley Hogg (Clerk to the Assembly/Chief Executive) *
- 1 With effect from 12 February 2020 Sinéad Ennis replaced Megan Fearon
- 2 With effect from 12 February 2020 Sinéad Bradley replaced Claire Hanna
- 3 With effect from 12 February 2020 Michelle McIlveen replaced Carla Lockhart

- 10. The Caucus elects a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson through a nomination process and these positions are rotated on an annual basis.
- 11. For the period 23 January 2018 25 February 2019, the Chairperson of the Caucus was Paula Bradley MLA (DUP) and the Deputy Chairperson was Megan Fearon MLA (Sinn Féin).
- 12. For the period 25 February 2019 12 February 2020, the Chairperson of the Caucus was Megan Fearon MLA (Sinn Féin) and the Deputy Chairperson was Kellie Armstrong MLA (Alliance).
- 13. For the period **12 February 2020 27 March 2022**, the Chairperson of the Caucus was Clare Bailey MLA (Green Party) and the Deputy Chairperson was Rosemary Barton (UUP).

^{*}by agreement and invitation of the steering group

Review of 2017 - 2022 Mandate

Briefings

- 14. A crucial element of the work of the Caucus is receiving briefings and presentations from officials and stakeholders on issues relating to gender and the role of women in the Assembly. During the 2017-2022 mandate, the Caucus received a number of briefings.
- 15. 9 April 2018 Briefing by the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service on Women's Parliamentary Groups in Europe.

This briefing surveyed models for women's parliamentary groups, including:

- the role and functions of such groups; and
- examples of Women's Parliamentary Groups in Europe.

16.5 November 2018 – Briefing by the Equality Commission on Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life in Northern Ireland.

This briefing provided an overview of inequalities and differences in participation in public life in Northern Ireland, including:

- highlighting the underrepresentation of women; and
- government public appointments.

17.15 April 2019 – Briefing by the Rt Hon Sir John Gillen on Preliminary Report into the Law and Procedures in Serious Sexual Offences in Northern Ireland.

This briefing provided the main findings and recommendations of the review of the arrangements to deliver justice in serious sexual offences cases and outlined key issues, including:

- the prevalence of under reporting of sexual offences and the high dropout rate of cases;
- development of legislation to manage social media risks associated with this type of case;

- the excessive delay for such cases in the criminal justice system;
 provisions for children and vulnerable adults;
- measures to combat rape myths; and
- relationship and sex education (RSE) in schools.

18.13 May 2019 – Briefing by the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group on Gender Budgeting.

This briefing provided an overview of the ongoing work on Gender Budgeting, covering a range of issues, including:

- the differential impact taxation and Government spending policies have on women compared to men;
- best practice from other parts of the UK and Ireland;
- the Budgetary Impact Analysis Conference held in Belfast in 2018 and the
 - upcoming report to be published based on the findings of the conference; and
- the negative effects of a gender-neutral approach to apprenticeships.



Members of the Caucus with representatives from the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group following the briefing on 13 May 2019

19.1 July 2019 – Briefing by the Northern Ireland Equality Commission, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform on the Performance of the UK under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

This briefing provided an overview of the key issues covered in the CEDAW Committee's concluding observations relating to Northern Ireland, including:

- strengthening institutional mechanisms for gender equality;
- provision of affordable and accessible childcare;
- measures to eradicate violence against women;
- social security reforms and effects of Universal Credit;
- the needs of rural women.



Members of the Caucus with representatives from the Northern Ireland Equality Commission, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform following the briefing on 1 July 2019

20.1 July 2019 – Briefing by the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service on Gender Sensitive Parliaments.

This briefing provided an overview of work in other legislatures, including:

- a 'gender audit' undertaken by the Westminster Parliament;
- the Scottish Young Women Lead programme supported by the Scottish Parliament:
- the Welsh LeadHerShip programme; and
- Parliamentary working groups for Gender Equality issues.

21.17 September 2019 – Briefing by the Gender and Sexual Orientation Policy Unit, Department for Communities, on the Performance of the UK under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

This briefing provided an overview of the ongoing work being undertaken to implement the recommendations in the CEDAW Committee's concluding observations report relating to Northern Ireland, including:

- the work and remit of the Unit;
- preparatory work to collate and analyse data;
- identification of key issues and options; and
- engagement with other departments to identify policy leads for specific recommendations.

22.1 October 2019 – Briefing by the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service on Gender Sensitive Parliaments.

This follow up briefing, from work carried out in July 2019, provided further information on work carried out in other legislatures, including:

- mapping the examples of best practice in other legislatures against the recommendations contained in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee report on 'Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly'; and
- the key priorities set out in the Caucus work programme.

23.14 October 2019 – Briefing by the Northern Ireland Equality Commission on Equality in Participation in Public Life.

This follow up briefing, from work carried out in November 2018, provided an overview of the policy recommendations contained in the report and presented the priority areas for intervention, including:

- the need to improve data collection and disaggregation;
- the need to increase diversity in government public appointments for women and people with disabilities; and
- the need to increase diversity in political representation for women and individuals from minority ethnic groups.



Members of the Caucus with a representative from the Northern Ireland Equality

Commission following the briefing on 14 October 2019

24.11 November 2019 – Briefing by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions Women's Committee on the current work programme of the

Committee.

This briefing provided an overview of the Committee's ongoing work, including:

- the campaign 'Better Work Better Lives';
- policy paper 'Childcare in Northern Ireland: Cost, Care and Gender Equality';
- the need to consider menopause, domestic, sexual violence and sexual harassment as workplace issues; and
- the International Labour Organisation Violence and Harassment Convention 2019.

25.20 January 2021 – Briefing by Caroline Perry, Assembly Clerk, on the Northern Ireland Assembly Corporate Plan 2019 – 2023.

This briefing provided an overview of the gender-specific objectives in the Assembly Corporate Plan 2019-2023 and the work that the Assembly has done to date, including:

- Speaker-led International Women's Day events;
- engagement by the Assembly Outreach team with the Women's Policy Group; and
- initiatives by Politics Plus on Women in Leadership and The Next Chapter Project.

26.14 April 2021 – Briefing by the Ulster University Gender Budgeting Research Project on Gender Budgeting.

This briefing provided an overview of the findings and recommendations of their Gender Budgeting research project, including:

- that Northern Ireland is behind other legislatures in UK and ROI and other OECD countries in the absence of gender budgeting tools and processes;
- the absence of a high-level political commitment such as a commitment within the Programme for Government;
- the need for political will to drive forward gender budgeting; and
- the issue of capacity within the civil and public service.

27.17 November 2021 – Briefing by the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service on an Exhibition Highlighting 100 years of Female Representation in the Various Parliamentary and Political Institutions of Stormont.

This briefing provided an overview of the project, including:

- background to the project;
- exhibition design; and
- next steps.

28.26 January 2022 – Briefing by the Raise Your Voice Project on the work of the project.

This briefing provided an overview of the Raise Your Voice Project, a project to challenge sexual harassment and sexual violence in communities in Northern Ireland. The briefing included:

- overview of training facilitated by the project;
- its engagement with local councils; and
- its campaign to improve RSE in schools.

29.3 March 2022 – Briefing by the Women's Resource and Development Agency, the Women's Support Network and the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network on current issues facing the sector.

This briefing provided an overview of the issues impacting the women's sector at present. Some of the issues raised included:

- poverty;
- cost of living crisis;
- funding for community organisations;
- tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence;
- feminist recovery plan; and
- absence of a childcare strategy.

Events

30. Political Women - Creating a Platform for the Future - 5 February 2018 - Parliament Buildings

Marking the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave the vote to (most) women for the first time, Members of the Caucus participated in this event by hosting tables and facilitating discussion. The Chairperson provided introductory remarks, with the Deputy Chairperson closing the event.

31. Speaker's Event to Mark International Women's Day 2019 – 'Balance for Better' – 8 March 2019 – Parliament Buildings

The Caucus supported the Speaker's Event to mark International Women's Day 2019 – the theme of which was 'Balance for Better'. The event included a special debate in the Assembly Chamber which brought together 70 young women representing 28 schools and youth organisations from across Northern Ireland. The young women presented statements on the issues that are important to them, with topics ranging from women's health and education to the need to increase and better support female participation in politics, the workplace and society as a whole.

32. Launch of the British Council Report: Women, Power, Politics: What's Changed in 100 Years? – 11 March 2019 – Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings

The Caucus sponsored an event by the British Council to launch its report entitled 'Women-Power-Politics: What's Changed in 100 Years?'. The report provided research to map and understand the key developments in women's role in politics in the UK and around the world over the last 100 years, contrasting the UK's progress with international examples. The Deputy Chairperson provided introductory and concluding remarks at the event, with Members of the Caucus taking part in a panel discussion.

33. Speed Dating – 10 June 2019 – Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings As part of its Work Programme, the Caucus hosted a 'Speed Dating' event with Women's sector organisations. The aim of this event was to ensure that the Caucus was responsive to the needs of the sector, to inform the work streams of the Caucus and to provide an opportunity to network with

relevant stakeholders and organisations. The following organisations attended this event:

- Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network
- Age NI
- Alliance for Choice
- Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Women's Support Network
- Equality Coalition
- Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

34. Speaker's Event to Mark International Women's Day 2020 – 'Each for Equal' – 6 March 2020 – Parliament Buildings

The Caucus supported the Speaker's Event to mark International Women's Day 2020 – the theme of which was 'Each for Equal'. The aim of the event was to encourage more young women to get involved in politics by making their views known on the issues which affect them. The young women involved were given the opportunity to participate in a session in the Assembly Chamber chaired by the Assembly Speaker, Alex Maskey MLA. The discussions were led by the young female contributors and responded to by Members of the Caucus.



Speaker's event to mark International Women's Day 2020

35. International Women's Day 2021 – 'Choose to Challenge' – 8 March 2021 – Online

The Caucus supported the Speaker in marking International Women's Day 2021 – the theme of which was 'Choose to Challenge'. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this took place through a series of short videos, involving women from different sectors and backgrounds. The theme highlights the importance of challenging barriers, biases and misconceptions in the interest of creating a more inclusive and equal world. The videos were published on the Assembly social media channels – Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

36. International Day of Rural Women – 14 October 2021 – Parliament Buildings and Online

Members of the Caucus participated in a panel discussion during an event

held by the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network to celebrate International Day of Rural Women.

37. International Women's Day 2022 – 4 March 2022 – Parliament Buildings

The Caucus supported the Speaker's event to mark International Women's Day 2022. The event, a Women's Parliament in the Assembly Chamber, saw participants call for an action plan to address the disproportionate economic and social impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on women. Speakers used personal stories and lived experiences to highlight the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on women, as well as the importance of creating an action plan to address the imbalance.

Engagement with Other Legislatures

38. International Congress of Parliamentary Women's Caucuses – 9-10 September 2018 – Dublin Castle

The International Congress of Parliamentary Women's Caucuses, attended by the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, brought together parliamentarians from across the world to discuss issues facing women and how they can be addressed.

More than 40 countries were represented at the event, including Argentina, Malawi, New Zealand, Pakistan and the United States of America.

Speakers at the event included:

- Catherine Martin TD Chairperson, Irish Women's Parliamentary
 Caucus
- Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP UK Parliament
- Kareen Jabre Inter-Parliamentary Union
- Hon Dr Jessie Kabwila MP Malawi Parliament

The Congress adopted the following international declaration, which was subsequently adopted by the Women's Caucus at its meeting on 10 December 2018.

Today in Dublin, Ireland, the International Congress of Parliamentary Women's Caucuses held its inaugural meeting. As members of women's parliamentary caucuses and cross-party groups in parliaments around the world, we came together to learn from each other, to strengthen global ties and to share information key to tackling issues which affect women across the globe.

Women represent more than half of the world's population and we are committed to work in order to build a fair society for all.

We are committed to working across party and ideological lines in pursuit of gender equality goals, to increase the capacity and influence of women parliamentarians, and to lobby for adequate budgetary allocations for gender policies and for gender-equal reforms in political and parliamentary rules and procedures.

We are committed to equalising women's political representation and furthering women's policy interests at a global, national and local level. We are committed to bridging the gap between women's civil society groups and the formal political system.

And most importantly, we are committed to advancing empowerment, equality, safety, security, dignity and respect for all women in every country in every aspect of life.

Today, in Dublin, the Congress committed to the following:

- 1) working towards the establishment of a Women's Caucus in every parliament by 2020;
- 2) the creation of a network of women's caucuses which can meet on a regular basis to further the aims of the Congress;
- 3) that all parliaments encourage the continuity of their caucuses by investing in institutional memory and adequate resourcing which would support their work;
- 4) that each caucus would develop a clear plan of action aimed at influencing policies and actions which encourage greater participation by women in politics and other areas of relevance to each society;
- 5) that each caucus would strengthen links with civil society groups working in areas that affect women;

6) that each caucus and parliamentarian will continue to strive in their representative roles to improve the lives of women throughout the world.

39. UK Women's Budget Group Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy – 25 November 2019 – Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings

The Caucus hosted a meeting with the UK Women's Budget Group Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy to progress its work on gender budgeting. The meeting included a discussion session focusing on:

- What a gender-equal economy in Northern Ireland would look like;
- How this can be achieved;
- Taxation and social security; and
- What can be learnt from other devolved nations.

40. Oireachtas Women's Caucus Panel Event – 15 April 2021 – via Zoom

The Chairperson of the Caucus participated in a panel event organised by the Oireachtas Women's Caucus. At the event, the Chairperson addressed the underrepresentation of women in politics and provided an overview of the work of the Caucus.

41. Bipartisan Women's Caucus Member Meeting – 29 September 2021 – via Zoom

Members of the Caucus participated in the inaugural Bipartisan Women's Caucus Member meeting. This group is made of members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the US House of Representatives and the Oireachtas. The group discussed numerous issues that impacted women and young girls across the world and agreed to take forward three areas to discuss within their own caucuses:

- education and the empowerment of women and girls;
- supporting women in public life by making parliaments more familyfriendly; and
- UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

Other Initiatives

42. Women's Caucus Motion 'Promoting a Gender-sensitive Assembly'

For the first time, the Women's Caucus brought a motion to the floor of the Assembly which called on MLAs to endorse and adopt an action plan to create a gender-sensitive Assembly. The motion took place on Monday 8 March 2022, to coincide with International Women's Day.

The action plan was based on recommendations stemming from the Assembly and Executive Review Committee report 'Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly'.

The motion was overwhelmingly supported and passed by the Assembly – the wording of the motion can be found below and the Hansard report from the debate can be found here – <u>8 March 2022</u>

'That this Assembly, on International Women's Day, notes recommendation 12 of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly', which proposed that the Assembly should consider adopting measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly; and endorses the recommendations in the gender-sensitive Assembly action plan as put forward by the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus.'

43. Engagement with Political Parties

As a follow up to the motion promoting a gender-sensitive Assembly, the Caucus wrote to party leaders in June 2021 to inform them of the Gender-Sensitive Action Plan and the identification of gender-sensitive political parties as an essential element towards its realisation.

The Caucus also offered its support to parties and were keen to develop dialogue to scope the potential for further work on the action plan.

44. Women's Leadership Training Programme

In 2019, the Caucus invited all female MLAs to participate in a Women's Leadership Training Programme. 14 Members registered their interest to take part in this programme which was delivered through two modules; Effective Leadership and Media Training.

45. Communications

During the 2017-2022 mandate, the Caucus established a social media presence – on Twitter and the Assembly website – and used this to promote engagement with stakeholders and highlight gender-specific issues.

The Caucus also agreed a Communications Strategy in June 2021 with the aim to encourage more female MLAs to get involved in the work of the Women's Caucus.



Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus Twitter

46. Northern Ireland Senior Women Football Team

In April 2021, the Northern Ireland Senior Women Football Team qualified for the Euro 2022 finals – the first time in their history that they qualified for a major tournament.

The Women's Caucus wrote to the team to congratulate them on their achievement, highlighting that the team was an inspiration for other women

to get involved in sports and that the players were visible role models for women, girls and other marginalised genders.

Suggested Issues for the Successor Committee

The Caucus considered a number of issues which have yet to be formally concluded. These are discussed briefly below.

47. Research Project into Gender Mainstreaming in Politics in Northern Ireland

In 2021, the Caucus considered a proposal to undertake a contemporaneous study of gender mainstreaming in politics in Northern Ireland. The study would build upon the findings and recommendations of the 2015 Assembly and Executive Review Committee report 'Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly'.

Whilst the Caucus agreed to initiate planning for the project in May 2021, progress on identifying potential academics and research partners was slow. Subsequently, at its meeting on 17 November 2021, the Caucus agreed that the project would not proceed at this point in time.

The Caucus believes there is merit in reviewing the project proposal in the new mandate.

48. Gender Budgeting Motion

In 2021, the Caucus agreed to table the following motion for debate on the floor of the Assembly:

High-Level Political Commitment to Adopt Gender Budgeting

'That this Assembly notes with concern the lack of high-level political commitment to adopt gender budgeting in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Executive to amend the indicators associated with Outcome Three, to have a more equal society where everyone is valued and treated with respect, in the Draft Programme for Government, to incorporate a commitment to gender budgeting; and further calls for the inclusion of

actions within the associated Outcome Delivery Plans to assess best practice in neighbouring jurisdictions, with a view to identifying suitable tools and processes for gender policy analysis and resource allocation which can be integrated within existing Section 75 processes, to enhance capacity and competency within the civil and public service in respect of gender analysis, and to extend the collection and availability of gender-disaggregated data.'

Unfortunately, due to pressure on Plenary time towards the end of the mandate (primarily due to the volume of legislation progressing through the Assembly) the motion did not make it onto an Order Paper.

The Caucus believes there is merit in reviewing this issue, with a view to tabling the same, or updated, motion in the new mandate.

49. Engagement with Other Legislatures

During the 2017-2022 mandate, the Caucus held a number of discussions with other legislatures, including the Oireachtas and the US House of Representatives – as well as participating in the International Congress of Parliamentary Women's Caucuses..

The Caucus believes there is merit in further strengthening relationships with other legislatures, especially those in Scotland, Wales and Republic of Ireland, to adopt best practices in the creation of a gender sensitive Northern Ireland Assembly.

50. Continuation of Progress Made to Date

At its last meeting of the mandate, the Caucus met with key stakeholders from the women's sector and discussed the issues that are impacting women in Northern Ireland on a daily basis.

The Caucus recommends that an incoming Caucus should pick up on the good work that has already been carried out on women-centric issues and should ensure that moving to a new mandate does not undo the progress already made.

51. Communications

During the 2017-2022 mandate, the Caucus took its first steps in the world of social media with the creation of a Twitter account

Taking account of the recommendation that the Assembly should engage with young women and school girls, the Caucus believes there is merit in increasing its social media footprint, as well as reviewing the current Caucus Communications Plan.

Appendix 1 – Mandate facts and figures Caucus Meetings

Session	Number of meetings held	Dates of Meetings
2017-2018	4	23 January 2018 5 March 2018 9 April 2018 14 May 2018
2018-2019	8	6 August 2018 (Strategic Planning) 5 November 2018 10 December 2018 22 January 2019 25 February 2019 15 April 2019 13 May 2109 1 July 2019
2019-2020	4	17 September 2019 14 October 2019 11 November 2019 12 February 2020

Session	Number of meetings held	Dates of Meetings
2020-2021	6	18 September 2020 (via Zoom)
		18 November 2020 (via Zoom)
		20 January 2021 (via Zoom)
		14 April 2021 (via Zoom)
		19 May 2021 (via Zoom)
		30 June 2021 (via Zoom)
2021-2022	3	17 November 2021 (via Microsoft Teams)
		26 January 2022 (via Microsoft Teams)
		3 March 2022 (via Microsoft Teams)

Witnesses

Session	Number of Organisations who gave evidence to the committee
2017-2018	1
2018-2019	5
2019-2020	4
2020-2021	2
2021-2022	5

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