



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus Pathways to Political Participation: A Roundtable Discussion

Report of an event engaging women political representatives across Northern  
Ireland.

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# 1. Aims, Objectives and Membership

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.

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.

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 the 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 Women's, Youth and Education Sectors as well as the media to promote the idea of gender-equality in political representation as essential and achievable with the correct targeted action; and
- Facilitate gender-specific training, coaching and study exchanges for female MLAs in partnership with the Assembly's Member Support Services.

The Steering Group sets the direction for the Women's Caucus, agrees priority work streams and a Forward Work Programme, and provides the operational decision-making function.

The membership of the Steering Group is as follows:

- Claire Sugden MLA (Chairperson)
- Paula Bradshaw MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Diana Armstrong MLA
- Cheryl Brownlee MLA
- Linda Dillon MLA
- Connie Egan MLA
- Deborah Erskine MLA
- Diane Forsythe MLA
- Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
- Cathy Mason MLA
- Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
- Carál Ní Chuilín MLA
- Emma Sheerin MLA

## **2. Background and Event Purpose**

At its meeting of 13 November 2024, the Steering Group agreed that the Women's Caucus would organise an engagement event on the theme of pathways and challenges to women's participation in politics. Members also agreed to produce a report of this engagement event and to seek to schedule a debate to mark International Women's Day on 4 March 2025, informed by this report.

The theme for International Women's Day 2025 is Accelerate Action, and the event was designed to identify how the Women's Caucus might accelerate its action in support of advancing women's political participation.

For the Women's Caucus, engaging with elected representatives and sharing lived experiences is key to understanding how to address under-representation of women in politics; to identify what needs to be done to attract more women into politics and to support women in political advancement.

The event was titled, 'Pathways to Participation: A Roundtable Discussion' and took place on 11 February 2025 from 5-7:30pm in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings, Stormont Estate.

Invitations were issued on behalf of the Caucus to all women local councillors, MLAs and MPs who represent Northern Ireland constituencies.

### **3. Event Overview**

#### **Agenda**

Participants enjoyed a networking opportunity on arrival which was followed by a welcome from the Chairperson of the Steering Group, Claire Sugden MLA; after which roundtable discussions took place which focused on the following questions:

- What was your pathway to politics and what were your challenges?
- How can we support other women to stand for election?
- How can we support each other to progress in politics?

Dinner was provided during the discussions and the event was closed by the Deputy Chairperson of the Steering Group, Paula Bradshaw MLA.

## **Attendance**

The event benefitted from cross-party representation as well as attendance from elected representatives across a Northern Ireland. In total, 22 councillors, 14 MLAs and the Clerk/Chief Executive attended. Assembly staff supported the event.

Attendees were fulsome in their praise for the event, the organisation and the purpose.

## **4. Issues Raised**

The event operated under the Chatham House Rule which allowed for more openness in discussion, given that personal details, experiences and sensitives would be shared. Participants were reassured that when sharing information, they would not be explicitly or implicitly identified in this report.

### **4.1 Pathways and Challenges**

Attendees shared their pathways to becoming an elected representative. It was evident that a considerable number of attendees had a community background which progressed to standing for election. A shared passion for making a difference to their local communities was presented with some describing their experience as 'empowering'. It was clear that there was a shared sense of feeling privileged to be elected and being able to help their respective constituencies.

However, not all intended to become politicians and it was evident that encouragement from party colleagues was a deciding factor in standing for election.

Representatives shared positive experiences of their pathways. These included:

- Hybrid participation in proceedings has helped women and others to participate which in turn encourages others to not only stand for election, but remain in public life;
- Support and encouragement from their own political party; and
- Support for other women and notably that cross-party solidarity amongst women is increasing.

Representatives discussed challenges they faced and there was a sense of solidarity in sharing their experiences. The following were cited:

- A resounding agreement that abuse and negative comments received via social media and other online platforms continues to be a challenge;
- Personal safety is a very real concern;
- Remuneration of councillors does not reflect the hours required to do the job and sharing this with other employment is extremely challenging;
- Work/life balance, with a focus on challenges presented trying to 'juggle' caring responsibilities. There was an agreement that politics needs to be seen to be achievable for those with caring responsibilities;
- The lack of adequate maternity leave for elected representatives;
- Council and parliamentary structures, such as the infrastructure, culture, operations and methods of work can be a real and perceived barrier to full participation; and
- A lack of training available to elected representatives can lead to a feeling of isolation and 'imposter syndrome' with many citing that confidence is gained through experience and support.

## 4.2 Support to stand and progress

Representatives discussed how they may support other women to stand for election and progress in politics. Suggestions included:

- The importance of sharing positivity by publicly recognising how rewarding working on behalf of others can be, and talking about these positives as a way of attracting more women into politics;
- Whilst opinions divided on the issue of quotas, the debate was respectful and there was a mutual understanding of positions;
- Networking, mentoring and training opportunities for women elected representatives at all levels of government;
- Institutional and cultural changes need to be considered across all levels of government with the need to promote gender sensitivity in structures, operations, methods and work;

## 5. Next Steps

The roundtable event provided the Caucus with extremely valuable face-to-face engagement with women elected representatives from across Northern Ireland; and we extend our gratitude to all those that attended and made the event a success.

A key consensus was that events such as these, allowed women to share their experiences and create and nurture connections to allow women to progress in politics. The Caucus recognises how rewarding working on behalf of others can be, and talking about these positives as a way of attracting more women into politics is key. We are committed to continuing to promote and support similar engagement events, using the Women's Caucus as a vehicle through which to drive much needed change.

We recognise that the challenges faced by women remain the same, including juggling work and home, the need for maternity leave and childcare, the problem of gender-based abuse, and isolation, resilience and self-confidence. The political landscape must not put women at a disadvantage. Our political



systems must be reflective of the people they represent and we are committed to working, as far as possible, to address the structural barriers to women's full participation in public life.

To deliver real change, we must think beyond the Caucus and all work together to combine support, resources, and political-will to play our part in enabling women to take that leap into political life. We want to encourage and support training, development and capacity building so that all women can have the same access to opportunities.

In the coming months, the Caucus will consider and publish its Forward Work Programme. We will share our targeted action plan to allow others to help us realise our vision of a society where women are equally represented in politics.