

EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly

23 October 2014

Chief Executive, Dr. Evelyn Collins, CBE speaking notes

NB: Check against delivery

What kind of initiatives, including positive actions, should the NI Assembly consider?

The Equality Commission welcomes the Inquiry on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly undertaken by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

The Commission is a strong advocate for more equal representation of women in political life in Northern Ireland and trusts that the Inquiry generally will lead to concrete and practical actions being undertaken to encourage and support more women into political life, in particular as Members of the Legislative Assembly and in light of the fact that the Northern Ireland Assembly has the lowest female representation when compared with other devolved and national legislatures in United Kingdom, with only 20.3% (22 out of 108) of its current Members being female.

We welcome the improvements that have been made in terms of female representation within the NI Assembly, but overall female underrepresentation has remained a persistent and hard to tackle issue.

We consider that there is a clear need for lawful voluntary positive action measures that promote equality of opportunity for women.

Simply put, positive action is generally taken to include proportionate measures which seek to address under-representation or past disadvantage of a particular group.

Political parties can engage in a wide range of lawful positive action in respect of candidate selection – this is provided for in the Sex Discrimination (Elections Candidates) Act 2002 – in relation to

‘arrangements they adopt for the purpose of reducing inequality in the number of women and men elected’. The Committee might wish to encourage parties to make use of these provisions.

The Assembly as an institution can also take positive action in view of the low representation of women - including outreach measures, structural measures and/or measures to address the working environment

Specific examples of positive action for discussion:

Outreach

- Undertake/improve education, engagement and outreach measures specifically targetting girls’ schools and clubs and women’s organisations – to raise awareness of the role of the Assembly and to encourage girls and women to consider politics as a career choice.
- Support action – including through funding - designed to develop the skills and experience of women, including capacity building measures and training that support women who are considering a career in political life.

Structures

- In line with structures that exist in other Parliaments, the Assembly could consider the merits of establishing a dedicated Committee to consider issues of particular relevance and priority for women and review how women are impacted by Government policy generally.
- Create a network of champions to promote women’s contribution to political life – drawing from senior party representatives.
- Encourage leadership and a high level of visible commitment; for example, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister highlighting the importance of more equal representation of women in politics and in the Assembly – this is not just a women’s issue, an Assembly more representative of the community is important in terms of legitimacy

- Encourage political parties to ensure as far as possible that women are represented on all Committees (currently 2 with no women)
- *Ensure that all legislation passed by the Assembly does not discriminate on grounds of sex but actively promotes gender equality*
- *Encourage the visibility of female MLAs in the media by political parties.*

Working environment

- Review (or change) institutional culture to ensure that the culture of the Assembly is both welcoming to, and supportive of, female MLAs; for example by ensuring zero tolerance of sexist, bullying and derogatory behaviour and ensuring effective policies and procedures are in place to deal with this if it occurs.
- Take steps to help Members balance work and family life by, for example, reviewing the support available for Members with primary caring responsibilities and mothers returning after maternity leave, and addressing any barriers that exist to their effective participation.

Really important - There is a high level of public support for more female MLAs, with two thirds (63%) of those surveyed indicating they would like to see an increase in the number of female MLAs according to our last Equality Awareness Survey (2011)