



Assembly and Executive Review Committee

INQUIRY INTO WOMEN IN POLITICS

August 2014

Question 1

What are the key challenges / barriers facing women in relation to entering politics in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Northern Ireland Assembly, and what evidence can you provide on this?

There are multiple causes of women's under-representation in decision making – economic, social, cultural and political¹. It is clear from a range of research reports and inquiries² that there are a number of key barriers facing women in relation to entering into politics. Some of these barriers can impact not only on women's ability to enter politics but equally to remain in politics. The key barriers, in our view, are summarised below.

Lack of childcare / work life balance

Fulfilling caring responsibilities can limit women's ability to commit time to pursuing a political career. Women are more likely to perform the main childcare responsibilities and a lack of childcare can have a major impact on women's working lives.

For example, research commissioned by the Commission, *Childcare, Maximising the Economic Participation of Women*³ (2013) has highlighted that the division of paid work and care in the household is '*often gendered, with mothers assuming greater responsibility for care work and fathers for earning*'. The research has also made it clear that the availability of affordable and appropriate childcare is a fundamental part of the process of mothers entering, remaining in, progressing in or returning to work and hence of employment equality⁴.

¹ *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House, APPG Women in Parliament*, July 2014 – [APPG ImprovingParliament 072014](#)

² See for example: *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House, APPG Women in Parliament*, July, 2014 – [APPG ImprovingParliament 072014](#);
Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Assembly research paper NIAR 570/13, September 2013 - http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RalSe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf
Speakers Conference on Parliamentary Representation, report, 2010 – <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/239/239i.pdf>

³ *Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women*, McQuaid R, Graham H, Shapira M, ECNI, February 2013, commissioned by ECNI.

⁴ Ditto

In Northern Ireland, the availability of affordable childcare is limited and there is a significant dependence on informal care⁵. Women in rural areas, Black Minority Ethnic (BME) women, women caring for disabled children, women living in disadvantaged communities, among others, face additional difficulties in accessing suitable childcare⁶; many of whom are also amongst the most under-represented in political and public life.

Further, the long and irregular hours culture of political life, whether in the Assembly or in constituencies, can exacerbate this problem. A recent Westminster Inquiry *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House*, by the All Party Parliamentary Group Women in Parliament ('*APPG Inquiry*') (2014)⁷ found that these factors, as well as potentially having two workplaces, often some distance from each other, combined with a lack of clarification on support available for MPs with primary caring responsibilities, were major factors in the poor retention of women MPs. Childcare was found to be the biggest source of difficulty in political life for 67% of elected women TDs in Ireland in a 2000 study⁸.

In addition, a recent *Women and Peacebuilding Project*⁹ (2014) in Northern Ireland has indicated that some women expressed the view that, while equality legislation has been enacted, attitudes have not changed; for example, whilst men have a support system, usually their families, that allow them to become politically active, this can be more difficult for women.

Lack of financial resources

Women can also have less access to financial resources than men and can be deterred from entering politics due to the financial commitments required. Compared to men, women experience lower employment rates, are more likely to be economically inactive, and have higher rates of part time work.¹⁰ They are also less well networked with the business and financial interests that fund politics¹¹. A lack of financial resources can be

⁵ [Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women](#), McQuaid R, Graham H, Shapira M, ECNI, February 2013, commissioned by ECNI.

⁶ See [Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women](#), *Women living in Disadvantaged Areas: Barriers to Participation*, McLaughlin H, March 2009 – [http://www.wrda.net/Documents/Barriers to Participation - Final March 2009 version 2.pdf](http://www.wrda.net/Documents/Barriers_to_Participation_-_Final_March_2009_version_2.pdf); *The Experiences of Ethnic Minority Women in Northern Ireland*, Isal S, NICEM, March 2013 – <http://nicem.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/EoEMWiNI-11.pdf>

⁷ *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House*, APPG Women in Parliament, July 2014 – [APPG ImprovingParliament 072014](#)

⁸ *The Development of Mechanisms to Monitor Progress in Achieving Gender Equality in Ireland*, Galligan Y et al 2000 – https://openlibrary.org/books/OL16002495M/The_development_of_mechanisms_to_monitor_progress_in_achieving_gender_equality_in_Ireland

⁹ *Women and Peacebuilding Project*, CFNI, WRDA, NWCI, 2014 – <http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Women-and-Peace-Building>

¹⁰ See OFMDFM *Gender equality strategy statistics 2013*, www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk

¹¹ It will be noted, for example, that the APPG Inquiry indicated that 'historically, unlike men, women have not built up the traditional party political networks, for example, through business or trade union contacts', page 21,

a difficulty not alone with the cost of elections, but also with the financial burden of day to day campaigning.

Lack of confidence

Lack of confidence or low self esteem has been shown to be major barriers to women putting themselves forward in political processes.¹² When women do become involved, it is often as support rather than in leadership¹³.

Further, women living in disadvantaged communities can be particularly vulnerable to low self esteem. For example, as highlighted in research commissioned by the Equality Commission, *Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women*¹⁴, women living in poverty have a greater risk of educational underachievement, and a lack of qualifications can create a lack of confidence to enter the workplace.

Lack of role models, gender stereotypes and culture

The lack of female role models within politics at a local and national level can also act as a deterrent. Further, gender stereotyping can result in politics being seen as a 'traditional role' for men. In addition, the culture of politics and political institutions can act as barriers to women's participation¹⁵.

For example, a recent *Women and Peacebuilding Project*¹⁶ asked women across Northern Ireland about issues of participation and representation in general. This report highlighted barriers due to the fact that the culture of politics was often aggressive and adversarial. In addition, some women expressed fears in relation to voicing their political views especially if they challenged the political status quo in their communities. Participants also indicated that there was a lack of female role models in political life.

Media scrutiny

The *APPG Inquiry* (2014) in Great Britain has also revealed that the intense level of scrutiny which elected representatives and their families experience is a key negative factor that discourages women from entering political life¹⁷.

Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House, APPG Women in Parliament, July 2014 – [APPG ImprovingParliament_072014](#)

¹² Ditto

¹³ *Women in European politics – time for action*, European Commission, page 46 – <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=2052&langId=en>

¹⁴ *Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women*, McQuaid R, Graham H, Shapira M, ECNI, February 2013, commissioned by ECNI.

¹⁵ The APPG Inquiry noted the 'perceived masculine culture of Parliament'. Respondents to the APPG Inquiry noted that the behavior, which may extend beyond the chamber, would not be tolerated in any workplace or school. *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House, APPG Women in Parliament, July 2014 – [APPG ImprovingParliament_072014](#)*

¹⁶ *Women and Peacebuilding Project*, CFNI, WRDA, NWCI, 2014 – <http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Women-and-Peace-Building>

¹⁷ *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House, APPG Women in Parliament, July 2014 – [APPG ImprovingParliament_072014](#)*

Candidate selection

Candidate selection has been identified as a significant obstacle to women's participation¹⁸. There is evidence that female candidates seeking selection can experience discriminatory conduct by selection panels. For example, the results of a recent survey of MPs, as outlined in the *APPG Inquiry* (2014), revealed that over two-thirds (67%) of female elected members surveyed had encountered discrimination during the selection process; this compared to approximately one-third of male elected members surveyed (33%)¹⁹.

In addition, complaints received by the Commission also make it clear that women frequently face discrimination due to their gender; both when seeking to enter, and remain within the workplace. Many of the complaints that we receive relate to employment related discrimination due to pregnancy/maternity, work life balance issues or sexual harassment.²⁰

Prejudicial attitudes towards women by candidate selection panels can also act as a barrier. It is of note that the report of the Speaker's Conference into Parliamentary Representation in the UK Parliament in 2010, for example, highlighted that, in most cases, it remains more difficult for a candidate who does not fit the "white, male, middle-class" norm to be selected, particularly if the seat is considered by their party to be winnable²¹.

Lack of interest in politics

There is also evidence to suggest that, whilst overall public interest in politics is declining, this is particularly evident amongst women²². Further, research (2012) has indicated that the conflict of three decades has had a dampening effect on women's political ambitions and personal testimonies of women elected to the 1998 Assembly bear out this view²³.

¹⁸ Galligan in Coakley and Gallagher 2005; examined in page 28, *Women in European politics – time for action*, European Commission (2009), page 46 – <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=2052&langId=en>

¹⁹ *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House*, APPG Women in Parliament, July 2014, page 31 – [APPG ImprovingParliament_072014](http://www.appg.org.uk/ImprovingParliament_072014)

²⁰ For example, ECNI statistics in 2013/14 reveal that almost a third (29.0%) of all enquiries/applications for assistance received by the Equality Commission in the area of employment relate to sex discrimination in the workplace; with most enquiries (82%) being made by women.

²¹ *Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, report, 2010* – <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/239/239i.pdf>

²² For example, in 2009, 42% of men were interested in politics compared to 25% of women, Northern Ireland Life and Times 1998, 2005, 2007, 2009. Question: How interested would you say you personally are in politics?

²³ *Women's Political Participation*, Hinds B, as set out in *Everyday Life after the Conflict, the impact of devolution and cross-border co-operation* McGrattan, Cillian, Meehan eds, MUP, 2012, as quoted in *Women in Politics*, Galligan Y, KESS, 2014 – [KESS Galligan_200314](http://www.kess.ie/Galligan_200314)

Barriers due to multiple identities

Women, including disabled women, BME women, rural women, Lesbian Bisexual and Transsexual women, older women, young women and girls, and women living in disadvantaged communities, can also experience particular additional barriers to entering into political life due to their multiple identities. In addition, the recent *Women and Peacebuilding Project*²⁴ highlighted that participation in political and public life was significantly more difficult for women who 'live at the margins of the community' and that any strategies to achieve gender participation should be culturally aware.

In our *Shadow report to CEDAW*²⁵ we drew attention to the needs of women with multiple identities. In addition, in its Concluding Observations²⁶ the *CEDAW Committee* called on Government to 'take specific targeted measures to improve the representation of women, in particular black and ethnic minority women and women with disabilities'. It will be noted that the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network²⁷ and the Northern Ireland Council on Ethnic Minorities²⁸ have highlighted the added barriers that rural women and BME women respectively face in terms of access to childcare, employment and the means of political participation.

²⁴ *Women and Peacebuilding Project*, CFNI, WRDA, NWCI, 2014 –

<http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Women-and-Peace-Building>

²⁵ *CEDAW Shadow Report*, ECNI, June 2013 –

http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/CEDAW_2013.pdf

²⁶ *Concluding Observations on UK*, CEDAW Committee, 26 July 2013.

²⁷ In their response to the Westminster Inquiry on the implementation of UN SCR

1325 <http://www.nirwn.org.uk/manager/images/uploads/NIRWNResponseto1325Inquiry.pdf>

²⁸ http://www2.ohchr.org/English/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/NICEM_ForTheSession_UK_CEDAW55.pdf

Question 2

Can you provide evidence on initiatives which demonstrates positive outcomes to encourage more women to pursue a career in politics which could be applied to the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Initiatives in Northern Ireland

First, we would draw the Committee's attention to the *Women in Local Councils: Making a Difference*²⁹ initiative; a comprehensive model of action on participation in politics and public life in Northern Ireland. *Women in Local Councils* is a pro-active initiative, coordinated by the Local Government Staff Commission and involving the Equality Commission as a key partner, which was set up to address the under-representation of women in councils at elected member level, as senior officers and in service delivery.

Research had shown that women in councils identified a very male dominated culture, long working hours and evening working, poor flexible working arrangements and the use of demeaning language and behaviour as negative factors in addressing gender balance.³⁰

When the initiative began in 2006, there were no women chief executives, only 16% of second tier posts were held by women and 14 of the 26 councils had no women in senior posts. In addition, only 22% of the elected members were women.

The Women's Development Steering Group recognised that achieving a cultural shift would require ownership of the initiative by the councils and a political dimension to ensure that elected representatives and parties were at the core of the initiative.

The initiative developed a **declaration of principles** committing to equality and promotion of a culture in which women feel able to participate. A **network of gender champions** was established and **gender action plans** were developed and adopted by councils. Development programmes covering **organisational culture, work / life balance, local democracy, capacity building** and **personal development** were made a priority. A dedicated website was established along with a calendar of events.

²⁹ See case study in *Making Equality Work*, ECNI, 2013

http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/Making_Equality_Work-Good_Practice.pdf

³⁰ See *Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality – developing and applying women, peace and security practice in Northern Ireland / Ireland, Strategic Guide and Toolkit*, Hinds, Donnelly, June 2014, <http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Women-and-Peace-Building>

When the composition of the local government workforce was analysed in 2009 following three years of the initiative, there were three women chief executives, 26% of second tier posts were held by women and 19 of the 26 councils had women in senior posts. The 11 councils now working in shadow mode have four women chief executives and 25% of councillors elected to them are women.

Not only is it possible to learn from and build on the positive work undertaken in this initiative, but it is also important to note the **clear link** between action to increase female representation at local government level with action to increase female representation amongst Members. In particular, many women gain their first experience of political life as a local government representative, before progressing to a career as a Member in the Assembly.

We note that the recent *Women Peace and Security Strategic Guide and Toolkit* (2014) has recommended that the model of gender action planning developed by this *Women in Local Councils* initiative should be considered by political parties and central and local government as a mechanism to address the under representation of women in politics, nationally, regionally and locally.³¹

It is of note that this *Guide* also recommended that support to increase women's engagement, participation and representation can take many forms; including strengthening existing networks, mentoring young women, empowering women through appropriate skills to build confidence, guidance for women's groups and more sustainable funding.

Other diversity initiatives

We also draw the Committee's attention to initiatives that have been taken forward in other jurisdictions. For example, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has set out a comprehensive framework for creating gender sensitive Parliaments, including through the participation of women³². They provide case studies illustrating a number of models such as:

- gender action plan (Sweden);
- specialised women's committees or caucuses that can be entrusted with monitoring the progress of gender mainstreaming across parliament (Argentina, Bolivia, Rwanda);

³¹ See *Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality – developing and applying women, peace and security practice in Northern Ireland / Ireland, Strategic Guide and Toolkit*, Hinds, Donnelly, June 2014, <http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Women-and-Peace-Building>

³² *Gender Sensitive Parliaments: A Global View of Good Practice*, Inter Parliamentary Union, 2011 – <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/gsp11-e.pdf>

- legislation for gender mainstreaming (Belgium);
- gender impact and gender budgeting mechanisms (Spain, South Africa);
- research programmes (Mexico);
- adapting the way assemblies work (Australia).

The case studies demonstrate the need for comprehensive and coherent policies and practices.

The National Assembly for Wales supports its progress in the participation of women with a significant programme on women in public life. It includes information and awareness lectures, women's development schemes and mentoring programmes. The programme mirrors those undertaken in relation to other under-represented groups such as Operation Black Vote³³ which works with Government on a specific programme for BME women councillors.

We are aware that **quotas** in many forms – parliamentary quotas implemented at party level, selection mechanisms, electoral processes – have been used worldwide to improve the representation of women. A recent Assembly research paper³⁴ highlights that, while the impact is complex, in some cases the introduction of quotas 'has made a significant difference, with historical leaps in women's representation'. It further indicates that of the countries with 30% or more women, the most used system is a legislated candidate quota, where a party list is rejected if the quota is not fulfilled.³⁵

The recent Westminster *APPG Inquiry*, while noting that quotas are not always a popular option or universally accepted, recognised that, even if the current rate of progress in the UK maintained, it will take several electoral cycles to achieve gender

³³ The work of Operation Black Vote (OBV) covers four main areas:

- Political education – to raise awareness and understanding of democratic and civic society through citizenship projects.
- Political participation – to improve engagement with civic society through local and national voter registration and other civic participation campaigns.
- Political representation – to increase political representation of BME communities through encouraging engagement, undertaking ground breaking mentoring schemes, lobbying political parties and civic institutions on the benefits of representative bodies.
- Promotion of equality and human rights – increasing the awareness of a progressive equality and human rights agenda.

³⁴ [The use of quotas to increase the political representation of women](#), Assembly research briefing paper May 2014, M Potter. See also [Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly](#), Assembly research paper NIAR 570/13, September 2013

³⁵ 15 examples are referred to and include countries such as Rwanda, Senegal, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Belgium, Spain, Timor Leste, Mexico, Angola and Argentina. The research paper also indicates that there have been cases where increases have not been as much as the quota or where women's representation has stopped at the quota and increased no further. In addition, it notes that the vast majority of these countries with 30% or more women have List-Proportional Representation systems which make the introduction of quotas relatively straight forward. Three have 'First Past the Post System' as in the UK.

parity. This Inquiry noted that ‘more than 50% of the top twenty countries registering sharpest growth in women’s representation have used legal quotas’. The *APPG Inquiry* recommended that if progress is not made on women’s representation in the next election, parties should conduct a review of gender quotas. It also recommended a Parliamentary debate to discuss prescriptive quotas in the House of Commons.

Finally, it is of note that at the next general election in the Republic of Ireland measures will be put in place, further to the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012, to impose financial penalties for parties which do not select 30% at least of men and women as candidates.³⁶

³⁶ This rises to 40% of either sex in any election after 7 years from the first election. A 50% reduction in State funding is applied if these targets are not met. See *Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly*, Assembly research paper NIAR 570/13, September 2013
http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf

Question 3a

What policies should political parties have in place to increase the number of women candidates in Northern Ireland elections?

As selectors of candidates, political parties have a key role to play in addressing the under-representation of women in politics.

Whilst we both recognise and welcome the steps taken by a range of political parties in Northern Ireland to encourage and support women candidates, for example, the appointment of women's officers and a strategy to nurture and select more women candidates, the Commission is clear that more can be done.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 permits the taking of positive action in relation to women's political participation. Political parties are exempted from the normal provisions of sex discrimination law in relation to "*arrangements they adopt for the purpose of reducing inequality in the number of women and men elected*". This gives wide scope for lawful positive action. We welcome the fact that this exemption which was initially set to expire in 2015, was extended to continue in force until 2030.³⁷

We are aware that the Labour Party in Great Britain has, for example, made use of these provisions and taken positive action in the form of 'women only shortlists' in order to ensure greater female representation within its party. In addition, we note that a range of different types of systems have been proposed, and in some instances have been used, to redress an imbalance in the representation of women in elective offices in the UK apart from all-women shortlists.³⁸

Measures can include, for example; 'twinning' where two local constituency parties select their candidates jointly, with a requirement that one man and one woman are selected; 'zipping', which can potentially be used in list type elections, such as the European Parliament or the regional element of the Scottish Parliament or National Assembly for Wales, where the parties selecting the candidates on a list are required to alternate male and female candidates; and 'balanced shortlists' where a certain proportion of women are required to be present on a shortlist.

Following the July 2013 examination of the UK Government, the *CEDAW Committee* in its Concluding Observations on the UK³⁹, called for more prescriptive temporary special measures to improve the representation of women in political life, as well as in the public and private sectors.

Whilst the *CEDAW Committee* recognised the extension of the provisions in the *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002* and the provision to allow parties to

³⁷ It was extended throughout the United Kingdom under the Equality Act 2010 which came into force in Great Britain in October 2010.

³⁸ As set out in House of Commons, [All women Short List Standard Note](#), 18 Dec 2012.

³⁹ [Concluding Observations on UK](#), CEDAW Committee, 26 July 2013.

adopt women-only shortlists, it regretted that additional measures had not been put in place⁴⁰.

A *UN Resolution on Women and political participation* (March 2012) sets out the expectations on State parties to ensure women's enhanced participation in political life⁴¹. The *UN Resolution* urges State parties to strongly encourage political parties to; remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women; to develop their capacity to analyse issues from a gender perspective; and to adopt policies that promote the ability of women to participate at all levels of decision making within those political parties⁴².

Securing change will require high level **commitment and leadership** from political parties, as well as a visible demonstration of their commitment to drive and secure change in this area.

Drawing on the recommendations set out in the *APPG Inquiry* (2014)⁴³ and the *Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)* in Great Britain (2010)⁴⁴, it is clear that there are a range of actions that political parties can take to ensure greater diversity within their party; including in terms of increasing female representation within political parties.

These include, for example:

- challenging any negative gender stereotypes within the party; building a culture within the party that values and respects the role and contribution of women in political and public life; and communicating that commitment to the wider public, particularly to women and representative organisations;
- ensuring that selection panels do not discriminate against candidates on grounds of their sex, and/or pregnancy/maternity;
- ensuring that diversity awareness training, advice and support is available to party members; particularly those involved in candidate selections. It will be noted that the Commission has supported the inclusion in the Members' Code of Practice of clear principles on both equality and good relations and that the standards set out in the Code, including those relating to equality and good relations, should be embedded through appropriate training and induction⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ The UK Government will report again to the CEDAW Committee in November 2017

⁴¹ UN Resolution A/RES/66/130: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/130&Lang=E

⁴² UN Res 6(c) – http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/130&Lang=E

⁴³ *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House, APPG Women in Parliament*, July, 2014 – [APPG ImprovingParliament 072014](#)

⁴⁴ *Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, report, 2010* – <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/239/239i.pdf>

⁴⁵ ECNI evidence to Northern Ireland Assembly Committee on Standards and Privileges, 4 June 2014 – [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Official-Reports/StandardsandPriv/2013-2014/140604_Reviewofthecodeofconduct\(EqualityCommission\).pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Official-Reports/StandardsandPriv/2013-2014/140604_Reviewofthecodeofconduct(EqualityCommission).pdf)

- undertaking effective and targeted engagement with women and representative organisations in order to raise awareness of, and interest in, political processes and institutions;
- building capacity and providing support, including financial support and/or training and mentoring programmes, to female candidates;
- adopting gender quotas in the selection of candidates;
- taking actions to address specific barriers faced by women with multiple identities, such as disabled women or BME women;
- promoting female role models within the party and taking steps to ensure the contribution of female Members is both recognised and visible;
- reviewing and monitoring actions taken to increase the participation of women, including those with multiple identities, at all levels in political parties;
- improving the collection and transparency of data on the diversity of candidates.

Further, there is a clear link between action to increase female representation at local government level with action at Assembly level. We have made it clear that we support further action measures by government and political parties to address under-representation of women and other interests in elected office in councils⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ *Response to DOE Policy Proposals on reform of local government* , ECNI, 2010 – <http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Consultation%20Responses/2011/DENILocalGovernmentReformECNIresponse11March2011.pdf?ext=.pdf>

Question 6

Do you consider there are specific initiatives / actions that the Northern Ireland Assembly as an institution should take to enhance the role of women in politics, including a gender sensitive environment – and if so please include your recommendations.

Opportunities exist for the Assembly to drive change including *via* the development of a new cross departmental Gender Equality Strategy being brought forward by OFMDFM as well through the reform of local government where steps can be taken to encourage the participation of women in all aspects of life and decision making in Northern Ireland at a local level.

Increasing women's representation in the Assembly will require **leadership** and a **high level of visible commitment** as well as consistent and coherent action across Government, underpinned by a robust monitoring and evaluation framework.

We support the view of the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) that made it clear that 'Parliaments are well placed to provide a strong role model for government agencies and other organizations in mainstreaming gender through their own institutional processes and practices.'⁴⁷ The IPU also recognized that the presence of women in parliament is not enough in itself to ensure progress towards gender equality and that a key issue was a parliament's gender sensitivity and awareness, as reflected in its policies and infrastructure.

We bring to the Committee's attention a range of good practice initiatives that have been either already adopted by Parliaments in other jurisdictions, or recommended as best practice.⁴⁸

- the creation of gender equality committees⁴⁹ and women's parliamentary caucuses⁵⁰, and/or mainstreaming gender equality across all committees. It is also of note that the *APPG Inquiry (2014)* has recently recommended⁵¹ the

⁴⁷ *Gender Sensitive Parliaments: A Global View of Good Practice*, Inter Parliamentary Union, 2011 – <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/gsp11-e.pdf>

⁴⁸ These recommendations are primarily drawn from *Gender Sensitive Parliaments: A Global View of Good Practice*, Interparliamentary Union, 2011 – <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/gsp11-e.pdf>; and *Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House*, APPG Women in Parliament, July 2014, [APPG ImprovingParliament_072014](http://www.appg.org.uk/ImprovingParliament_072014)

⁴⁹ For example, debate the content of legislation and ensure that gender considerations are taken into account, and which have a range of powers including scrutinising draft legislation. IPU indicated that their advantage lies in their ability to work closely with national women's machinery, equality ombudsmen and NGOs, and in their permanent character and resources.

⁵⁰ These are cross party co-ordination groups which women parliamentarians participate on a voluntary basis. Such groups have successfully raised the need to legislate on issues relevant to women and gender equality

⁵¹ APPG page 19

establishment of a *Women and Equalities Select Committee* to raise issues that are a priority for women and review how women are impacted by Government policy. It considered that the creation of such a Committee would symbolise Britain's commitment to representative democracy and would better hold the government to account on equality.

- ensuring that legislation passed does not discriminate against men and women but instead, actively promotes gender equality;
- improving education, engagement and outreach measures so as to educate the public about the role of parliament and to encourage a wider pool of potential candidates from all backgrounds.

Such measures could include working with schools to ensure that the teaching in politics in citizenship classes is done effectively, and supporting youth and community citizenship engagement programmes.⁵² It will be noted that in Northern Ireland Youth Action's research (2007), *Still Waiting*⁵³, found a significant degree of disconnection between girls and young women and politics and participation. The Youth Action research recommended more comprehensive civic education and measures, such as school councils, which were found to have a positive impact.

- changing the culture of the institution by, for example, creating a zero tolerance response to unprofessional language and behaviour, including sexist, bullying and derogatory behaviour, and ensuring effective harassment policies and procedures are in place;
- taking steps to help Members balance work and family life; such as improved flexible working practices; a review of support available for Members with primary caring responsibilities and mothers returning after maternity leave, including the provision of childcare centres within parliament; agreeing a cross party policy so as to improve maternity and paternity leave for all Members;
- providing central support for Members and their staff in relation to human resources issues, such as harassment in the workplace;
- ensuring codes of conduct include reference to gender equality;
- improved diversity and equality training for members;
- increasing the predictability of Parliamentary calendar so that Members can better plan their time and prepare more effectively.

⁵² Ass recommended in *APPG Inquiry 2014*, [APPG ImprovingParliament_072014](#)

⁵³ http://www.youthaction.org/databasedocs/doc_19851037.pdf

- challenging gender stereotypes in education, the media and in other spheres, including those relating to the role of women and men in the home and the perception of parliamentarians as ‘white, middle class men’⁵⁴;
- taking steps to encourage the visibility of female Members in the media in order to challenge stereotypes;
- debating and considering the use of quotas; including the use of all women shortlists;
- providing financial and other support designed to develop the skills, experience of women and other underrepresented groups; including capacity building measures, training, and national mentoring schemes that support people who wish to offer themselves for elected office.
- removing barriers experienced by those with multiple identities;
- encouraging political parties to collect and publish data on the diversity of candidates. It will be noted that the Equality Act 2010 contains provisions, not yet in force, aimed at requiring political parties to collect and publish anonymised diversity data on candidates.

We also draw the Committee’s attention to the range of positive action measures recommended in the *UN Resolution on Women and Political Participation (2012)*⁵⁵; which provides a useful reference point for all key stakeholders who seek to take positive action in this area.

In particular, the *UN Resolution* urges States to:

- review the differential impact of their electoral systems on the political participation of women;
- take all appropriate measures to eliminate prejudice that are based on the idea of inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women;
- promote awareness of the importance and recognition of women’s participation in the political process at all levels – community to international;
- develop mechanisms and training to encourage women’s participation, as well as tools and skills for empowerment, in consultation with women;
- improve women’s access to information and communications, technologies, including e-government tools, in order to enable political participation;
- create an environment of zero tolerance as regards violence, assault of harassment of women elected officials and candidates for elected office;

⁵⁴ As referred to in the APPG Inquiry.

⁵⁵ [UN Resolution Women and Political Participation](#), UN A/RES/66/130

- encourage greater involvement of women who are marginalised, including indigenous women, disabled women, women from rural areas and women of any ethnic, cultural or religious minority;
- encourage the promotion of specific programmes for young people and children in particular young women and girls on the importance of the political process and women's participation in politics;
- ensure measures that reconcile family and professional life;
- promote the granting of appropriate maternity and paternity leave;
- tackle measures to address barriers such as violence, poverty, lack of access to quality education and health care and gender stereotypes.

Importantly the UN Resolution stresses the need for action not just in political life **but in all areas of public life**; including governmental bodies and committees, in public sector bodies and in the judiciary. It encourages the setting of specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women in all governmental and public administration positions.

Section 5: Additional Information

Please provide any additional information which you believe will be of assistance to the Committee during the Review.

We consider that there are **cogent reasons** underpinning our recommendation that further action is needed to encourage the participation of women's in political life. In summary, such action:

- helps to tackle key inequalities experienced by women;
- ensures compliance with EU/international standards;
- is consistent with the general principles of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;
- recognises and values the positive contribution of women;
- is consistent with proactive work being undertaken in other jurisdictions;
- is consistent with the aims and objectives of the Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016.

Tackling key inequalities

Whilst some improvements have been made in terms of female representation within the NI Assembly, overall this has remained a **persistent** and hard to tackle inequality affecting women⁵⁶. We consider that there is a **clear need** for positive action 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 female⁵⁷.

In addition, as noted in the Call for Evidence paper, apart from the Italian regional legislatures, the NI Assembly has significantly lower female representations than comparable Western European legislatures⁵⁸. It is also clear that the representation of female Members within individual political parties varies considerably⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly took place in May 2011, when 20 of the 108 members elected were female (18.5%), which represents an increase on the 18 seats held by females (16.7%) in the previous Assembly elections, in March 2007. At June 2013, of 108 Northern Ireland Assembly seats, 21 were held by females (19.4%). OFMDFM Gender Equality Statistics Update 2013 – <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/gender-equality-strategy-statistics-update-july-2013.pdf>

⁵⁷ This compares to Scottish Parliament (35% female), Welsh Assembly (40% female) and UK Parliament (House of Commons) (22% female)

⁵⁸ *Call for Evidence, AERC Inquiry into Women in Politics in Northern Ireland* – <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Assembly-and-Executive-Review/reviews/Women-in-Politics/AERC-call-for-evidence-final.pdf>

⁵⁹ Alliance (25%), DUP (13%), SF (35%), SDLP (14%), UU (15%), Others (17%).

The Commission's Equality Awareness Survey (2011)⁶⁰ also revealed increasing **high levels of public support** for more female MLAs, with 63% of respondents indicating that they would like to see an increase in the number of MLAs, an increase from 56% in 2008. It is also of note that this survey revealed that more than half (51%) of people surveyed also wanted to see more MLAs of a different ethnic origin.

Compliance with EU/international human rights standards

Taking action to address female under representation in political life is also **consistent** with **international human rights standards** and best practice recommendations.

The *Good Friday Agreement* committed Government to work for the right of women to *full and equal political participation and the advancement of women in public life*⁶¹. In addition, the equal participation of women and men in public life is a cornerstone of the *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW)⁶². Under Article 7, for example, the UK Government is required to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life.

In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action⁶³ renewed pressure for the implementation of CEDAW, identifying equality between men and women in power and decision making and the need for mechanisms to promote the advancement of women as '*two areas of significant concern where action was critical*⁶⁴'.

This was further expanded and underpinned by a series of UN Security Council Resolutions⁶⁵ which recognise that '*peace is inextricably linked to equality between women and men.....maintaining and promoting peace and security requires equal participation in decision making*⁶⁶'.

⁶⁰ *Do You Mean Me, Equality Awareness Survey 2011* ECNI, June 2012 – <http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/DYMMequalityawarenesssurveyreport2012.pdf>

⁶¹ *The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement (the Good Friday Agreement, April 1998* – <http://peacemaker.un.org/node/1697>

⁶² CEDAW Article 7: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>

⁶³ The Beijing Platform for Action was developed by the 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 – BEIJING PFA – <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>

⁶⁴ Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers, page 24, IDEA, 2005 – <http://www.idea.int/publications/register.cfm?title=Women%20in%20Parliament%3A%20Beyond%20Numbers%2E%20A%20Revised%20Edition%2E&forwardUrl=%2Fpublications%2Fwip2%2Floader%2Ecfm%3Fmodule%3Dsecurity%2FgetFile%26pageid%3D14128>

⁶⁵ UNSCR 1325 - <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1325> - recognises the critical roles that women and girls play as active agents in conflict prevention and resolution, peace negotiations, peace building and post conflict reconstruction. UNSCR 1325 calls on States to: increase the number of women in decision making and their participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding and adopt a gender perspective on peace making peace keeping and peacebuilding, as well as protect women and girls from gender based violence. UNSCR 2122 - <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2122> - sets out in more detail how women should be involved in decision making.

⁶⁶ UN Secretary General Kofi Annan introducing UN SCR 1325 in 2000 – Press release SG/SM/7598, 24 October 2000 – <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/20001024.sgsm7598.doc.html>

In particular, in 2012, the General Assembly of the UN, in a specific Resolution on ‘*Women and political participation*’, urged all States to take action ‘to ensure women’s equal participation’⁶⁷ and set out the steps that State parties are urged to take in order to achieve this.

In our recent evidence to the Westminster APPG on Women Peace and Security Inquiry into the implementation of *UN Security Council Resolution 1325* in Northern Ireland in December 2013, and in our shadow CEDAW report⁶⁸, we stressed that it was vital for Government to identify and implement positive action measures to ensure meaningful participation by women in peace building and political processes here⁶⁹.

It is important to stress that the CEDAW Committee in its *Concluding Observations on the UK* in 2013 remained concerned at the low representation of women in the post-conflict process in Northern Ireland and the failure to fully implement Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and called on the UK Government to:

- continue to take concrete targeted measures to improve the representation of women in Parliament and the judiciary, particularly black and ethnic minority women and women with disabilities; and
- ensure the participation of women in the post-conflict process in Northern Ireland, in line with Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000).

In addition, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities*⁷⁰ (Article 6) which set out the rights of women with disabilities, requires the UK Government to take all appropriate measures to ensure the full development, advancement and empowerment of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of the human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in UNCRPD. Under the UNCRPD, (Article 29), the UK Government must undertake to ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others.

⁶⁷ [UN Resolution Women and Political Participation](#), UN A/RES/66/130

⁶⁸ CEDAW Shadow Report, ECNI, June 2013 –

http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/CEDAW_2013.pdf

⁶⁹ We recommended that the Committee ask Government to set out the steps to be taken, including temporary special measures, to realise the commitments in the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement on increasing the representation of women in Northern Ireland in political and public life. We note that, while Government has not implemented United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, the UK’s 7th Periodic Report records that ‘[n]evertheless, some aspects of UNSCR 1325, such as women’s participation in peace building and political processes, are relevant to all states.’ – CEDAW Shadow Report, ECNI, June 2013 –

http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/CEDAW_2013.pdf

⁷⁰ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities –

<http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

Further, in 2009, the European Commission's report *Women in European politics – time for action*⁷¹ showed that progress on women's equal participation had stagnated resulting in a democratic deficit. The Charter, *A Strengthened Commitment to Equality between Women and Men*⁷² reaffirmed EU commitment to 'pursue the fairer representation of women and men in positions of power in public life and the economy' and this commitment is demonstrated by a set of targeted initiatives in the *EC Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015*⁷³.

Consistent with Section 75

Whilst we recognise that the NI Assembly itself is not subject to the public sector duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we believe that the NI Assembly, by introducing measures that promote equality between men and women in political life, is acting in a manner that is **consistent with the general principles of Section 75**; legislation which requires public authorities to pay due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between men and women.

Positive contribution of women

There is a growing body of evidence that women make a positive difference to the quality of decision making⁷⁴. Research carried out by the Hansard Society⁷⁵ found that, despite the difficulties women face in institutional politics, they can and do bring issues to the table which may not otherwise be debated or which might otherwise be considered to be of less significance. This can have the effect of making the legislature more relevant to the whole population.

Evidence from business, too, shows that women make a positive difference to the quality of decision making⁷⁶. Not to ensure full and equal participation of men and women is to lose skills and experience from the decision making processes and means that different experiences and perspectives of half the country are not being heard.

An Assembly research paper⁷⁷ sets out the considerable imbalance in power towards men in politics, public life and employment as well as in decision making in general across the public sector in Northern Ireland.

⁷¹ Women in European politics: time for action, 2009, page 18 –

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=2052&langId=en>

⁷² A Strengthened Commitment to Equality between Women and Men: A Women's Charter, 2010, COM (2010) 78

– <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52010DC0078:EN:NOT>

⁷³ Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015, 2010, COM (2010) 491 – [http://eur-](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52010DC0491&from=EN)

[lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52010DC0491&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52010DC0491&from=EN)

⁷⁴ Counting Women in Campaign response to House of Lords Joint Select Committee -

<http://www.parliament.uk/Templates/BriefingPapers/Pages/BPPdfDownload.aspx?bp-id=ln-2014-008>

⁷⁵ Hansard society research - <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/free-parliamentary-affairs-articles-for-international-womens-day/>

⁷⁶ Deloitte survey report – <http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-BosniaHerzegovina/Local%20Assets/Documents/2013/Women%20in%20Business.pdf>

⁷⁷ Who Runs Northern Ireland? A Summary of Statistics Relating to Gender and Power, Paper 79/14 NIAR 405-14 - http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/7914.pdf

Consistent with action being taken in other jurisdictions

Action by the NI Assembly, political parties and key stakeholders in Northern Ireland is consistent with action being taken in other jurisdictions. For example, in both the UK and Ireland the under representation of women has become a concern of government.

In 2010 the Speaker's Conference in UK reported with over 70 recommendations including one on continued highlighting and reporting of progress. The UK Government agreed⁷⁸ that fairer representation is fundamental to a democratic society and accepted the case presented for diversity on the basis of justice, effectiveness and enhanced legitimacy. The *All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in Parliament* report in July 2014⁷⁹ has also set out a series of recommendations on the supply, selection and retention of women in Parliament, stating, '*a democratic parliament should better reflect the society it represents and for which it legislates*'⁸⁰.

The Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights in the Republic of Ireland has also established a subcommittee on women's participation in politics. The Joint Committee recorded recommendations in 2009⁸¹, including proposals to introduce financial penalties where parties do not select at least 30% of men or women as candidates to Dáil Eireann.

Consistent with aims and objectives of Gender Equality Strategy

As referred to in the call for evidence paper, action to address women's under-representation in political life is also consistent with aims and objectives of Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016⁸².

In particular, a strategic objective of the Gender Equality Strategy⁸³ is '*to ensure the active and equal participation of women and men at all levels of civil society, the economy, peace building and government*'. Gender indicators⁸⁴ have also been developed to measure success in achieving equality in the representation of women in political life.

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⁷⁸ Government response to Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, March 2010 - <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/speakers-conference/7824.pdf>

⁷⁹ Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House, APPG Women in Parliament, July 2014 – [APPG ImprovingParliament_072014](#)

⁸⁰ Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House, APPG Women in Parliament, July 2014, page 15 – [APPG ImprovingParliament_072014](#)

⁸¹ This resulted in continued action measures – <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PR11000263>

⁸² Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016, OFMDFM, revised 2010 – <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/gender-equality-strategy-2006-2016-2nd-edition-large-print.pdf>

⁸³ Gender Equality Strategy strategic objectives 2.8 / 2.9 in Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016, OFMDFM, revised 2010 – <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/gender-equality-strategy-2006-2016-2nd-edition-large-print.pdf>

⁸⁴ Gender Indicators