

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

**Participation in Public Life**

# Increasing diversity in political representation



December 2021

It is internationally recognised that societies' needs are better served where there is diverse political representation. Further, it has been shown that gender balance in parliamentary bodies raises the profile of social policy generally and women's rights issues particularly.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) in 2019 highlighted **key inequalities in diversity in elected positions in Northern Ireland**.

These were an under-representation of women and people from minority ethnic groups. It also highlighted that there are significant and specific data gaps across all areas of public life. The Commission recommended actions to address these issues, and you can read our full policy paper recommendations here [www.equalityni.org/Participation/Policy](http://www.equalityni.org/Participation/Policy).

This short publication updates the evidence base of our 2019 recommendations, taking account of social and public policy developments since then.

## Recommendations for elected representatives / political parties and local councils to increase diversity in political representation in Northern Ireland:

- Advance the participation of women, and individuals from minority ethnic groups, in political life.
- Tackle cross-cutting barriers to active participation.
- Address identified gaps in equality data across a number of areas of public policy.



## **Recommended actions to address the under-representation of women and minority ethnic groups:**

- Introduce temporary special measures, for example the Women in Local Councils initiative.
- Consider positive action in relation to women's political participation via the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002.
- Ensure appropriate, flexible, accessible and affordable childcare provision, including through the implementation of an effective full Childcare Strategy and action plan.
- Address the sexist criticism and abuse of women on social media.
- Challenge stereotypes and prejudice across society.

## Advancing equality in participation in political representation

Whilst female representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly increased at the 2017 election, it still has the lowest female representation (33%) when compared with other devolved legislatures in the United Kingdom (45% in Scotland and 43% in Wales).

Currently, there is no political representation in terms of ethnic minorities within the Northern Ireland Assembly, and only one minority ethnic representative within local councils.

Particular consideration is also required in relation to those with multiple identities such as women with a minority ethnic background or women with disabilities. Specific, tailored responses to address the barriers they face to participation may be required.

# POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

**Advance the participation of women, and individuals from minority ethnic groups, in political life.**

The under-representation of women and minority ethnic groups means that, in addition to there being lower or no representation in elected chambers, the bodies that are made up from elected members, such as the Assembly scrutiny committees, or bodies that have elected member representation, such as the Policing Board, will also have under-representation.



**Women in politics in Northern Ireland represent:**

- **33% MLAs;**
- **27% Mayors;**
- **26% Councillors.\***

\*Michael Potter, NIA, Research and Information Briefing Paper, [Who runs Northern Ireland?: A Summary of Statistics Relating to Gender and Power in 2020](#)

The Commission welcomes the aim and objective of the Women’s Caucus to address the under-representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland.

Maximising the participation of women, and those from minority ethnic groups requires government and political parties to take prompt action to further promote the participation in political life of women, and those from minority ethnic groups.

### **Recommended actions include:**

- Actively tackling the barriers they may face (see later discussion).
- Develop and broaden candidate pools.
- Adoption of temporary special measures.
- Positive action measures.



## WOMEN

In relation to women specifically, we recommend steps, including the adoption of temporary special measures (policies aimed at increasing access and overcoming barriers).

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 amends the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 to exempt the selection of election candidates from the provision of the Order. This enables political parties to use positive discrimination for the promotion of women candidates over men. However, while this provision has been extended to 2030, it has never yet been used in Northern Ireland.

We welcomed the positive action measures taken by local government at elected member, officer and service delivery level through the Women in Local Councils initiative, which included the creation of gender champions, the development of family friendly operating and working practices and training and mentoring.





## MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

In 2019, 10% of the House of Commons were from minority ethnic communities, 2% in the Scottish Parliament, 3% in the Welsh Parliament, however since 2017 there has been no political representation in the NI Assembly from minority ethnic communities.



**Currently, there is no political representation in terms of ethnic minorities within the Northern Ireland Assembly.**

In evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Experience of Minority Ethnic and Migrant people in NI (September 2021), the North West Migrants Forum stated that

*‘every level of leadership in Northern Ireland is all white, apart from Derry City and Strabane District Council, which now has its first-ever black person in council. ...the lack of minority ethnic leaders has contributed immensely to the lack of focus or prioritisation of racial equality or support for minority ethnic people.’*

## **BARRIERS**

### **Tackle cross-cutting barriers to active participation**

The Commission is mindful that many identified inequalities are at least partially derived from a combination of barriers encountered by individuals from across the equality categories.

The effective inclusion of individuals from across a range of equality categories will require specific and tailored steps to be taken.

#### **Recommended actions include:**

- more effectively engage with, and foster the active participation of, people from across the full range of equality categories;
- address structural barriers which can deter individuals from a range of equality categories from participating in public life;
- meet the physical access and communication needs of prospective participants;
- build capacity, overcome perceived barriers and foster a sense of belonging;
- challenge stereotypes and prejudice.

## DATA

### **Address identified gaps in equality data across a number of areas of public policy**

There are substantial and specific data gaps across all areas of public life in relation to the participation of those from across the nine equality categories.

We welcomed the NI Assembly's collection of disability data on an annual basis, and continue to recommend broader monitoring of the equality characteristics of MLAs and wider elected representatives.

Data to address the impact of COVID-19 now and in the future is vital now more than ever in shaping public policies. Equality considerations must be at the heart of public policy and comprehensive data across equality grounds must be collected, analysed and used to inform the Executive and policymakers design and/or review our laws, policies or service provision.

## ***Further information***

To view our 2019 policy recommendations visit  
[www.equalityni.org/Participation/Policy](http://www.equalityni.org/Participation/Policy)