# Irish Feminist Network Policy Brief on Women's Political Representation in Ireland



## 1. The Under-representation of Women in Irish Politics

The under-representation of women in Irish politics is by now a well-established and documented fact. There are currently 14.5% women TDs in the Dáil, and 30% of political representatives in the Senate are women. Globally, Ireland ranks 79h in terms of women's representation in parliament, behind Zimbabwe, Gabon, and the Republic of Korea, and just ahead of Slovenia, Chile and Turkey.

While the comparatively higher rate of women in the Senate reaches what is commonly termed a 'critical mass' in women's representation, and this is to be welcomed, the stagnant rate of women's election to the Dáil is worrying. Ireland significantly falls short of the world average for representation in the lower house (19.4%), as well as the EU average (22.2%).[1]

The situation is similar with regard to local and European elections. In 2009, only 16% of elected councillors were women (down one percentage point from previous elections in 2004), and women made up only 25% of MEPs (down 13% on the previous election).[2]

In recognition of the problematic, and even worsening, nature of women's representation in Irish politics, several initiatives have been launched to address women's under-representation in Irish political life, both in civil society and the formal political sphere. For instance, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Law Reform and Women's Rights appointed a sub-committee on women's participation in politics, which published a report in 2009 with recommendations to boost the numbers of women in Irish politics.[3]

One of its recommendations, the introduction of quotas, is now being pursued by government, which plans to legislate for a 30% female candidacy rate for parties. Non-compliance with this quota will result in cuts in state funding to parties by up to 50%. The quota will only apply to national elections, and not to local elections, and will increase to 40% after seven years.[4]

While the IFN views such measures as productive and necessary, there are several factors, which need to be considered in the analysis of women's under-representation in Irish politics. In what follows, these factors will be elucidated, and recommended actions will be outlined.

## 2. Why is Women's Political Representation an Important Issue for the IFN?

In accordance with its Strategic Plan, 2011 – 2013, the IFN views women's political representation as one of its key strategic priorities. Addressing the obstacles women encounter in terms of achieving substantial numbers in political structures is a core

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[1] Inter-Parliamentary Union, http://www.ipu.org
[2] Houses of the Oireachtas, *Women's Participation in Politics*
[3] Ibid.
[4] Irish Times, "Gender quota to rise over time – Hogan"

component of the IFN's work toward fulfilling its vision of a world which prizes gender equality, and which allows women and men to live free from gendered injustices and oppression. Countering women's under-representation in Irish politics also feeds into the IFN's mission, which consists of the promotion of gender equality and feminism in Ireland more generally.[5]

### 3. Why is Women's Political Representation an Important Issue for Everybody in Ireland?

The skewed numbers of women in Irish politics are important and impact upon everybody by virtue of the effect they have on the political landscape in Ireland, and the wider implications this entails in terms of policy and resource allocation. The effects of women's under-representation include:

**Party Disadvantage:** Ignoring women means parties are losing out. Talented candidates are not being fostered and utilised by parties to the best of their ability. People may also simply not vote for a party based upon perceptions of hostility to women and other traditionally excluded social groups. For example, research into the UK's Labour party in the late 1970s showed women's perception of Labour as a male-dominated party, to be a significant factor in voting behaviour.[6] For parties, then, electoral reward may be undermined by women's relative exclusion from politics.[7]

**Restriction in Voters' Choice:** While parties lose out on talented candidates, voters also lose out in terms of choice in candidates. In the 2011 general election, some constituencies did not have any women candidates at all, and the total percentage of women candidates (15%) decreased from 17% in 2007. This limiting of candidacy mainly to men significantly diminishes voters' choice.[8]

**Policy Development:** Although it is difficult to predict what transformations, exactly, a more gender-balanced Irish political system would bring, research on 'critical mass' shows that policy priorities change with increases in women representatives.[9] Policy change must, though, be placed into context with regard to women's access to other policy-influencing arenas of power (e.g. civil service), while the ability of individual feminist or feminist-friendly women politicians to effect wide-ranging changes must also be acknowledged.[10]

**Resource Allocation:** If policy is altered due to women's critical mass, or due to women's increased power in other policy-influencing spheres, or due to particular feminist individuals, or indeed, a combination of all of these factors, then resource allocation for policy implementation will also change. In light of the fact that women are largely excluded particularly from financial committees and commissions, and Ireland finds itself in a position where austerity measures are increasingly placing citizens under financial strain, involving women in decision-making processes concerning finance, expenditure reform, economic regulation, and similar topics, is paramount.[11] Increasing women's political representation is a means to achieving such involvement.

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[5] Irish Feminist Network, *Strategic Plan 2011 – 2013*

[6] This fact contributed to Labour's eventual adoption of quotas in 1993 – see  Squires, "Quotas for Women: Fair Representation?", p. 71

[7] Houses of the Oireachtas, *Women's Participation in Politics*, p. 9

[8] Irish Times, "Mná na hÉireann lose ground"

[9] Galligan, "Women in Politics", p. 294

[10] See Childs & Krook, "The Substantive Representation of Women" and Annesley, "Gender, Politics and Policy Change"

[11] The National Women's Council points out that The Commission on Taxation, designed to review the Irish tax system and to set up a framework for the next decade on tax policy in Ireland, consisted of 13 men and five women (see http://www.nwci.ie/whatwedo/political-equality-and-decision-making/), while the joint committee on economic regulatory affairs only has one woman member.

**Political Style:** There is also some evidence to indicate that increased numbers in women parliamentarians can impact upon political style. For example, in the new Scottish parliament, which has experienced an increase in the numbers of women representatives, women's increased presence has resulted in changes to the old, confrontational style, which in turn has enabled men to engage in similar consensual political practice.[12]

**Democratic Deficit:** Most importantly, the reality of not having women equally represented in Irish political life creates a democratic deficit in our society. It means that half the population have only minimal political power and remain largely excluded from the decision-making processes affecting their lives.

## 4. Understanding the Causes

The under-representation of women in Irish politics is a complex phenomenon, however, there are usually five, often mutually reinforcing, explanatory factors cited. These are termed the five Cs: childcare, culture, cash, confidence, and candidate selection.

**Childcare:** women are disadvantaged in terms of childcare when compared to their male counterparts, as they are still primarily and overwhelmingly responsible for caring labour in the household. Caring for children, that is, child-minding and rearing, and the domestic tasks commonly associated with this, are largely the responsibility of women.[13] This significantlyimpacts upon the time mothers can devote to their political interests and may make a political career untenable.

**Culture:** the culture of politics is often described by female politicians as non-accommodating of women's life experiences and priorities. For instance, party meetings are frequently held in pubs at night time, when conflicting priorities, such as childcare, render attendance impossible. Also, the dominant view of politicians as male continues to play a role both in the eyes of the public, and in aspiring women politicians.[14]

**Cash:** lack of finance has also been cited by women representatives as a significant factor, particularly in terms of campaign funding. Women generally earn less than men, and appear to have less access to economic networks and supports.[15]

**Confidence:** women are often less confident with regard to their place in politics, and their political ability. This is hardly surprising, as politics is largely male-dominated, and women might perceive it as an alien or difficult-to-penetrate sphere. Women politicians have pointed out that mentoring by more senior politicians would be a useful means of redressing this, while female role models can dispel the standard view of politics as male.[16]

**Candidate selection:** discrimination in candidate selection has been shown to be the central factor in women's under-representation in Irish politics.[17] Although women form substantial numbers as party members, they are rarely similarly represented on parties' national executives (except for where positive measures are used). Women are generally not party leaders, and few women make it into local government. As politicians usually progress from local to national politics, women's pathway to national level politics is restricted.

## 5. Measures to Address the Under-representation of Women in Politics

There are different measures for redressing the under-representation of women in politics, and the Oireachtas report on Women's Participation in Politics specifically identifies awareness raising; mentoring, training and networking; voluntary positive action measures

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[12] See Galligan, "Women in Politics", p. 295

[13] See NWCI, "Who Cares?"

[14] Houses of the Oireachtas, *Women's Participation in Politics*, pp. 15-16

[15] Ibid., pp. 13-14

[16] Ibid., pp. 14-15. See also NWCI, 'Survey of Female Local and European Election Candidates – June 2009'

[17] Galligan, "Women in Politics", p. 289

(voluntary party quotas); and mandatory outcome and opportunity measures (quotas for elected individuals and quotas for candidates).[18] While awareness raising, mentoring, training and networking are important, and women politicians cite these as significant measures for enabling women to participate in political life, positive measures, or 'reverse discrimination' as it is sometimes referred to, are more controversial and therefore require greater elucidation.

## 6. The Case for Electoral Gender Quotas

The under-representation of women in Irish politics has not gone unnoticed by the international community. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has urged the Irish government to introduce measures to redress the gender imbalance in political representation. The Council of Europe has also called upon governments to adopt such measures, and Ireland thus holds international legal obligations, which it must fulfil.[19]

While the public predominantly want to see an increase in women in politics,[20] it should be noted that the majority of women candidates surveyed by the National Women's Council (for a 2009 study on local and European elections) echoed this desire for increased women's representation, and largely thought this should be achieved through a quota system.[21]

There is a consensus, then, that Ireland must, as a matter of urgency, increase the numbers of women in Irish politics. This can only be done through drastic measures, for as the National Women's Council has shown, at the current rate of transformation, it will take women several hundred years to achieve parity with men.[22]

Some parties in Ireland (the Green Party, Sinn Fein and Labour) have already introduced voluntary party quotas. This is certainly a step in the right direction, and invokes the Swedish model, which has seen significant increases in women parliamentarians over the last several decades. On the other hand, voluntary measures like this are generally acknowledged to take longer before they are maximally effective, and are heavily dependent upon political will within the party.[23]

Mandatory outcome measures, that is, quotas of seats to be filled by women, have been effectively used in other countries, e.g. in India. There are doubts, though, over whether the reserving of seats for women could withstand legal scrutiny in a European court. For this reason, women's organisations, the Oireachtas Sub-committee on Women's Participation in Politics, and now the government, have advanced the introduction of electoral gender quotas. These quotas legislate for a percentage of women candidates, rather than seats, and government plans to set this percentage at 30% (later to increase at 40%). The punitive nature of such a mandatory opportunity measure, which, in Ireland, can see parties losing up to half of their state funding in case of non-compliance, acts as an incentive for more gender-balanced candidacy selection.

Research on the experiences of other countries has shown that electoral gender quotas are very effective very quickly.[24] With the introduction of the French parity law, for example, women's representation increased from 25.7% to 47.5% at municipal level.[25] For this reason, and given the urgency involved in redressing women's under-representation in

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[18] Houses of the Oireachtas, *Women's Participation in Politics*, pp. 19-23

[19] Ibid., p. 10

[20] Ibid., p. 9

[21] NWCI, 'Survey of Female Local and European Election Candidates – June 2009'

[22] NWCI, 'Political Equality and Decision-Making'

[23] Houses of the Oireachtas, *Women's Participation in Politics*, p. 20

[24] Ibid., p. 21

[25] Bird, "Who are the Women? Where are the Women? And What Difference Can They Make?", p. 6

Ireland, electoral gender quotas provide the most promising measure to increase women's participation in Ireland, although certainly not the only one.

**7. Quotas and Beyond**
As has been pointed out above, women face several inter-linked obstacles in becoming involved in politics. In recognition of the complex nature of women's under-representation in Irish political life, the IFN believes that the following actions need to be undertaken to enable long-lasting and effective change to the status quo:
a) The government should proceed with its plans to introduce electoral gender quotas. However, as such quotas only account for women candidates and not actual seats, the percentage should be increased to a 50% quota to allow for the possibility that women candidates may not initially be elected in high numbers (owing to the strong correlation of politics with maleness, etc.), and to provide increased choice for voters.
b) Government should not restrict quotas to the national level, particularly as the next elections will take place at local level in 2014.
c) Existing campaigns to raise awareness on the under-representation of women in Ireland should be extended and intensified, and where necessary, new campaigns, involving civil society organisations, politicians, and other interested parties, should be initiated.[26]
d) The recommendations of the Sub-committee on Women's Participation in Politics should be implemented in full.
f) The issue of childcare should additionally be addressed in a more general way, to make childcare a more equally shared responsibility. Government should therefore introduce paternity leave, mandatory for a certain period, in line with international best practice. For women aspiring to become politicians, accessible and affordable childcare needs to be made available, and government should roll out a system of universal high-quality childcare.

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8. Irish Times, "Mná na hÉireann lose ground", http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/0217/1224290025329.html, accessed 26/09/2011

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[26] As per its *Strategic Plan, 2011 – 2013,* the IFN intends fully to become active in such campaigning – see p. 7

9. Irish Feminist Network, *Strategic Plan 2011 – 2013*, http://www.irishfeministnetwork.org/publications.html, accessed 26/09/2011

10. NWCI, 'Political Equality and Decision-Making', http://www.nwci.ie/whatwedo/political-equality-and-decision-making/, accessed 27/09/2011

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13. Squires, J., "Quotas for Women: Fair Representation?", <u>Parliamentary Affairs</u>, Vol. 49, No. 1, p. 71-88