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Making women's voices heard

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Big picture

It will not surprise many people that women are under-represented at all levels of decision-making worldwide and that achieving gender balance in political life remains an elusive target. Ireland, in particular, has a long road to travel, ranking 100th in the world for women's representation in national parliaments, behind countries such as China and Iraq (as of November 2022).[1]

In Irish national politics, women are significantly outnumbered by men. Since 1918, 131 women have been elected to Dáil Éireann, in comparison to 1,211 men. This breaks down as 90 per cent men and

[1] See https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=11&year=2022

10 per cent women elected to our national parliament in 104 years. Despite this abysmally low average, the representation of women at national level has been increasing. The 2020 general election saw 162 women contest for seats across 39 constituencies. In total, there were 519 candidates running for 159 seats, so women constituted 31.2 per cent. These figures compare favourably with the previous general election in 2016, when women made up 163 of the 551 candidates, just under 30 per cent.

The 30 per cent threshold in terms of women candidates is significant. In 2012, legislation was passed which obliges political parties to select at least 30 per cent women candidates and 30 per cent men candidates to contest general elections. If the quota is not met, political parties will lose 50 per cent of the state funding they receive on an annual basis to run their operations. The gender quota threshold for candidates rises to 40 per cent from 2023 onwards.

In the twelve general elections prior to the introduction of the gender quota legislation (1973 to 2011), the proportion of women's representation in the Dáil never rose above 15 per cent. The general election of 2016 was the first at which the legal gender quota applied, and the change was significant (Buckley, 2019):

- Of the 551 candidates, 163 (30 per cent) were women – the highest number and proportion to ever contest an Irish general election.
- The number of women candidates represented a 90 per cent increase compared to the previous general election in 2011.
- All political parties met, or exceeded, the 30 per cent quota.
- There was a 40 per cent increase in the number of women elected.

While noteworthy improvements were seen in 2016, the situation stagnated somewhat at the 2020 general election. All the main political parties met the 30 per cent threshold, but in minimalist fashion. Gallagher (2020) pointedly notes: 'The main parties continue to comply with the letter of the legislation, but it is open to question whether they are complying with its spirit.' Buckley & Galligan (2020) argue that 2020 could be regarded as a 'consolidation' election for the gender quota legislation: 'With just 22.5 per cent of the seats in Dáil Éireann occupied by women, the legislative gender quota should be viewed as the start rather than the culmination of efforts to support women's candidacy and election.'

Irish local government

But what of local government and our council chambers? Earlier this year, the Centre for Local and Regional Governance (CLRG) at University College Cork (UCC) was asked by the Women's Caucus in Cork City Council to produce a report documenting the lived experience of women running for local elected office in Cork city. A research team of four was formed – Dr Aodh Quinlivan (UCC), Dr Fiona Buckley (UCC), Olajumoke Oluwaferanmi Igun (UCC) and John Ger O'Riordan (former Senior Executive Officer, Cork City Council). Letters were issued to all the female candidates who stood for election to Cork City Council in 2014 and 2019. Letters were also sent to each of the male candidates who put themselves forward for election in 2019. Following the responses, focus groups and interviews were organised. These took place in late May and early June 2022.

After the May 2019 local elections, women's membership of the thirty-one local authorities stood at 24 per cent. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council almost became the first ever local authority in the state to have a fifty–fifty split of men and women in its council chamber. Women won nineteen seats out of forty and they were later joined by Mary Fayne, who was co-opted in October 2019.

Table 1: Women elected to Irish city and county councils, 1991–2019

Year	*% of women*
1991	12
1999	15
2004	19
2009	17
2014	21
2019	24

Despite small progress being made, it remains the case that only one out of four councillors in Ireland is a woman. The aforementioned gender quota legislation of 2012 only applies at national level and it has not been extended to the local government arena (Quinlivan & Buckley, 2014). Data from the last six cycles of local elections in Ireland suggest that there is no electoral bias against women – the problem is that not enough women are appearing on the election ballot papers. It is worth noting that the main political parties put in place informal gender quotas for the last two local elections, in 2014 and 2019. There is some cautious optimism that the national gender

quota legislation is promoting greater levels of women's participation at the local level too. Between 2009 and 2019, there was a 78 per cent increase in the number of women contesting local elections and a 54 per cent increase in the number of women elected. However, rates of women's candidacy vary across political parties; in 2019, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael selected less than 30 per cent women candidates (see Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of women candidates disaggregated by political party – 2019 local elections

Party	*Women candidates (%)*
People Before Profit	59.2 (n=29)
Social Democrats	55.2 (n=32)
Solidarity	47.4 (n=9)
Green Party	43.9 (n=36)
Workers' Party	42.9 (n=3)
Labour	40.5 (n=45)
Sinn Féin	33.9 (n=78)
Renua	32.1 (n=9)
Aontú	30.2 (n=16)
Fine Gael	29.0 (n=118)
Fianna Fáil	21.2 (n=88)
Independent/Non-party	19.0 (n=97)
Total	28.3 (n=560)

There is a logic to the political parties using local elections to recruit, train, promote and run women with a view to having them 'election-ready' for the next general election. Given the personalism and localism inherent in Irish politics, local government experience is particularly critical to one's chances of selection for general election. Developing a local political base and gaining the necessary experience at local government level are very important in terms of being viewed as a credible candidate for national parliamentary elections. Research by Buckley et al. (2015) indicates that this is especially true for women, who are statistically more likely than men to win a national seat if they have already served at local level.

There are other factors to consider. Future opportunities for women's electoral success at the local level will be shaped – for better or worse – by local government reform plans. For example, the Local Government Reform Act 2014 reduced the number of local councils in Ireland by 73 per cent, from 114 to 31, with the complete abolition

of town councils. The corresponding reduction in council seats was dramatic, with a fall from 1,627 to 949. A decrease in the number of council seats means, of course, fewer opportunities for men and women to gain local government experience. In terms of advancement to the national parliament, this may hurt women more than men because, as mentioned above, local government experience has been found to be a more critical factor for the election of women to parliament (in comparison to men). There were more women at town council level than at city or county council level, so the abolition of this entire tier of government removed the most accessible entry point for women into the political sphere.

Cork City Council

Turning to Cork, women councillors have made a significant contribution to the City Council, despite being heavily under-represented. From 1900 to 2022, there have only been six female lord mayors in the city. The first was Jane Dowdall in 1959 and she was followed thirty years later by Chrissie Aherne. In more recent times, Deirdre Clune (2005), Catherine Clancy (2013), Mary Shields (2014) and, currently, Deirdre Forde (2022) have served as Cork's first citizen. Currently, there are six women in the council, from a total of thirty-one elected members (19 per cent). Cork city is below the national average of 24 per cent for the representation of women in local government, and ranks seventeenth out of the thirty-one local authorities. Over the last five election cycles, the number of women candidates seeking a seat in City Hall has increased from 12 per cent of candidates in 1999 to 29 per cent of candidates in 2019. However, the number of women enjoying electoral success remains stagnant; the current number of women in the council (six) is the same as it was in 2004.

For the women who participated in our study, experiences on the campaign trail differed enormously. Some suffered significant abuse and threats on the doorsteps, often linked to gender and family circumstances. There is no doubt that male candidates at the 2019 local elections in Cork city also suffered abuse, including personal threats and attacks on the home. However, it appears that the *nature* of the abuse is different for women and tends to be more personalised, based on how they look or relating to their husbands/partners or children.

An unfortunate growing trend is abuse via non face-to-face means of communication, i.e. online, mainly through Twitter and Facebook. Participants noted:

> The worst part of the election campaign was the online bullying and character assassination, which I believe was purely because I am a woman. It was horrific for my family. The acceptance of that behaviour serves no one in politics.

> I felt I was quite specifically targeted and there was a gender aspect to it. I had to come off social media for a while. It got very personal, very specific and very image-related.

> I got sent some awful messages through social media. There were big misogynistic rants in the middle of them.

Again, this was not exclusive to women, but two things became apparent across the focus groups and interviews: (1) women speak more about the online abuse they receive and (2) they receive more of it than men. Recent research by Dr Ian Richardson, as published in *Council Review* (see O'Flynn, 2022), revealed that female local councillors received eight times as many abusive tweets per followers compared to their male counterparts. Interestingly, the research found no significant difference between the number of abusive tweets female TDs received compared to their male counterparts. The net result, as explained in the same issue of *Council Review* by Orla O'Connor, Director of the National Women's Council, is that online abuse acts as a barrier for many women who wish to enter public service but who do not run for office or put themselves forward out of fear of abuse.

The examples of misogynistic comments directed at the women participants in our study, often through anonymous social media accounts, demonstrate a resistance to women in public life and betray a misguided belief among some members of the public that a public representative/candidate for election should be a man.

Recommendations

We produced a set of seven recommendations, some of which relate to national policy as opposed to Cork City Council specifically.

1. ***Gender quota legislation (40 per cent at the next general election) should be extended to local government for the 2024 local elections.***

It is hard to reconcile that a legislative gender quota is deemed necessary and worthwhile at national government level but not for local government. As evidenced in Table 1, in the absence of a legal gender quota at local level, some political parties are selecting less than 30 per cent women candidates, the minimum proportion universally deemed necessary to facilitate the election of increasing numbers of women. Furthermore, the application of gender quotas should also be meaningful. As identified by one male participant: 'The political parties have to make sure that they are not just adding in female candidates tokenistically. It happens a lot and we cannot get away from it. If we're genuine about change in the council chamber, we cannot just be tokenistic about it.'

2. ***Maternity leave should be introduced for local councillors and consideration should also be given to extend paternity leave entitlements. More should be done regarding childcare issues for councillors.***[2]

Two of Cork City Council's women councillors gave birth in 2022 but were denied a basic right of maternity leave. The need for maternity leave has been apparent for quite some time and was highlighted by all of our participants, men and women:

> Back around 2003, I went to a National Women's Council conference in Dublin. It was my first time hearing about the 5 Cs (Culture, Candidate selection, Cash, Childcare and Confidence) and the barriers facing women in politics. Nothing has changed in the nineteen years since. I feel like a hypocrite now going into schools encouraging young girls to go into politics. There are huge barriers and one of the biggest is maternity leave. It's 2022! If we were talking about any other profession, it wouldn't be tolerated.

3. ***From the three delegates of each local authority that are nominated to the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) there should be at least one woman and one man.***

This is a very simple recommendation, which is not difficult to implement. The AILG states: 'Once a local election takes place and

[2] On Tuesday, 22 November 2022, the cabinet approved legislation to provide maternity leave for councillors.

our 949 local councillors across Ireland are democratically elected, each local authority nominates three of their elected members as delegates to AILG and they remain in place for the full five-year term until the next local elections.' Currently, only sixteen of the ninety-three AILG delegates are women. Under this recommendation, that figure would rise to a minimum of thirty-one. This should also lead to an increase of women on the AILG Executive Committee – two out of twelve at present.

4. ***The Cork City Council Women's Caucus should be elevated to the status of a strategic policy committee (SPC), which would allow its chairperson to sit on the corporate policy group (CPG). Cork City Council should also introduce a rule that there is gender balance among SPC chairs and, at a minimum, there should be at least two women and two men as chairs of the SPCs.***

Cork City Council has six SPCs and the chairs of these committees sit on the powerful CPG:

- Housing;
- Environment, Water and Amenity;
- Strategic, Economic Development, Enterprise and Planning;
- International Relations and Tourism;
- Roads and Transportation;
- Community, Culture and Placemaking.

No woman councillor chairs an SPC and therefore female representation is lacking on this important body. Winning a seat on Cork City Council is only one part of the equation; another part is being in a position of influence as lord mayor, as chair of an SPC or as a member of the CPG:

> The CPG that we have is very pale, male and stale. It is not representative at all of the population of Cork.

> The divvying up of the SPC chairs and places was totally disgraceful. It wasn't democratic, it came down to men being men. This 'back-of-the-room' on an envelope approach is too ad hoc.

5. ***Cork City Council should develop a community-based educational programme to explain what local government does and the role of the councillor.***

This recommendation was raised frequently at focus groups and interviews. In the build-up to the 2019 local elections, Cork City Council's then Corporate Affairs Directorate did tremendous work in running the 'Shape Your City' education programme, aimed at the migrant population. We strongly believe that a similar programme should be introduced across Cork in 2023, in the lead-up to the local elections the following year, with the aim of increasing awareness and knowledge about local democracy. Based on its earlier programme, Cork City Council is well placed to become a leader in this space. As well as traditional information sessions through meetings, the council should also consider using local media, videos, vlogs, Twitter, Facebook and TikTok to enhance the exposure to local government and the role of the councillor:

> Voter education is needed. So many people don't understand how the system works. They don't understand the difference between Cork City Council and a cabbage.
>
> We need to get better at voter education and public consultation. Part of the problem is that lip service has been paid to democracy. It's all well and good wringing our hands and complaining that people don't vote but if they don't see the benefit of voting, then why should they vote?
>
> People need to appreciate exactly what the council is about and what it does. The council are the people managing the parks, managing the footpaths, managing the roads and the basic fundamentals which are important to people. Education around the voting system and how it works is also badly needed.

6. ***Cork City Council should provide post-election training to all newly elected councillors about council structures, processes, committees, policies and functions. This might also include a specific mentoring programme for newly elected women.***

In-house induction training is lacking for new councillors in Cork City Council. While some national training programmes exist through the AILG, Cork City Council can do so much more in this regard. To

some extent a 'sink or swim' policy pervades, which exacerbates the notion of *insider outsiders* (i.e. councillors who have won a seat but who are disadvantaged by the male-dominated existing networks).

Specifically for women councillors, the Women's Caucus can take the lead in developing a non-political mentoring group to support new councillors and help them learn how Cork City Council operates, at formal and informal levels.

7. Cork City Council should provide enhanced equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training for all staff and elected members. Part of this process should involve rewriting standing orders in relation to appropriate language and behaviour in the council chamber.

This recommendation is self-explanatory. Training raises awareness by addressing everyday workplace issues surrounding EDI. Many people may be unaware of the unfair treatment or discrimination that their colleagues are facing, or perhaps someone is suffering in silence and does not know how to address the issue. By staff simply taking a high-quality training course, the common issues that many people face at work are highlighted and learners are advised on how to address these issues. High-quality training helps all employees to see the true value of an inclusive workplace and how to create one.

It also must be acknowledged that the historic Cork City Hall council chamber can be a cold place for women. This is partly due to the dominance of men in the council since the first local elections of 1899, but can also be reflected today in language used and comments passed.

> The chamber is very old fashioned, partly because it is a historic forum. It is also an intimidating forum which doesn't invite different voices. It is a forum where men have to behave in a particular way; I think they are used to behaving in a certain way in a virtually all-male environment. This can be very off-putting to women. It is not a comfortable space for women to be in. It is almost unbeknownst to the men that this happens. If we did have someone from a minority background, they would be equally as intimidated because it is so traditional – almost to the exclusion of other ways of doing things, though I don't think this is necessarily intentional.

> Local government is a boys' club. I say that with respect for some of the individuals involved, because often they don't even realise

> it. It's a club in the first instance and then it's predominantly a boys' club. When you come in as a newly elected councillor, you are on the periphery and only told the bare minimum – the crumbs off the edge of the table.
>
> It is not in my nature to feel intimidated, but in the chamber there is a default misogynistic mindset, even in the nice guys. They don't mean it; it's just the way the boys are.

While this research report focused on gender in relation to Cork City Council elections and the role of the councillor, it is clear that there is scope for further research.[3] Many groups are currently under-represented on Cork City Council; for example, young people, people from ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, members of the Traveller community. On a number of occasions in our study, participants drew attention to issues negatively affecting women, before adding that it could be even more difficult in the council chamber for people from a minority background.

It is encouraging that conversations around equality of representation are starting. The aim has to be that our council chambers are more reflective of the society that they serve.

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