

BRIDGING THE GENDER GAP IN LOCAL POLITICS

Despite the introduction of a gender quota during the 2016 General Election, there are still only 35 female TDs in the Dáil. And at a local level the situation is somewhat similar, with a fewer female councillors than their male counterparts elected to city and county councils. However, will the local elections in 2019 bridge this gender gap? Lorraine Courtney reports.

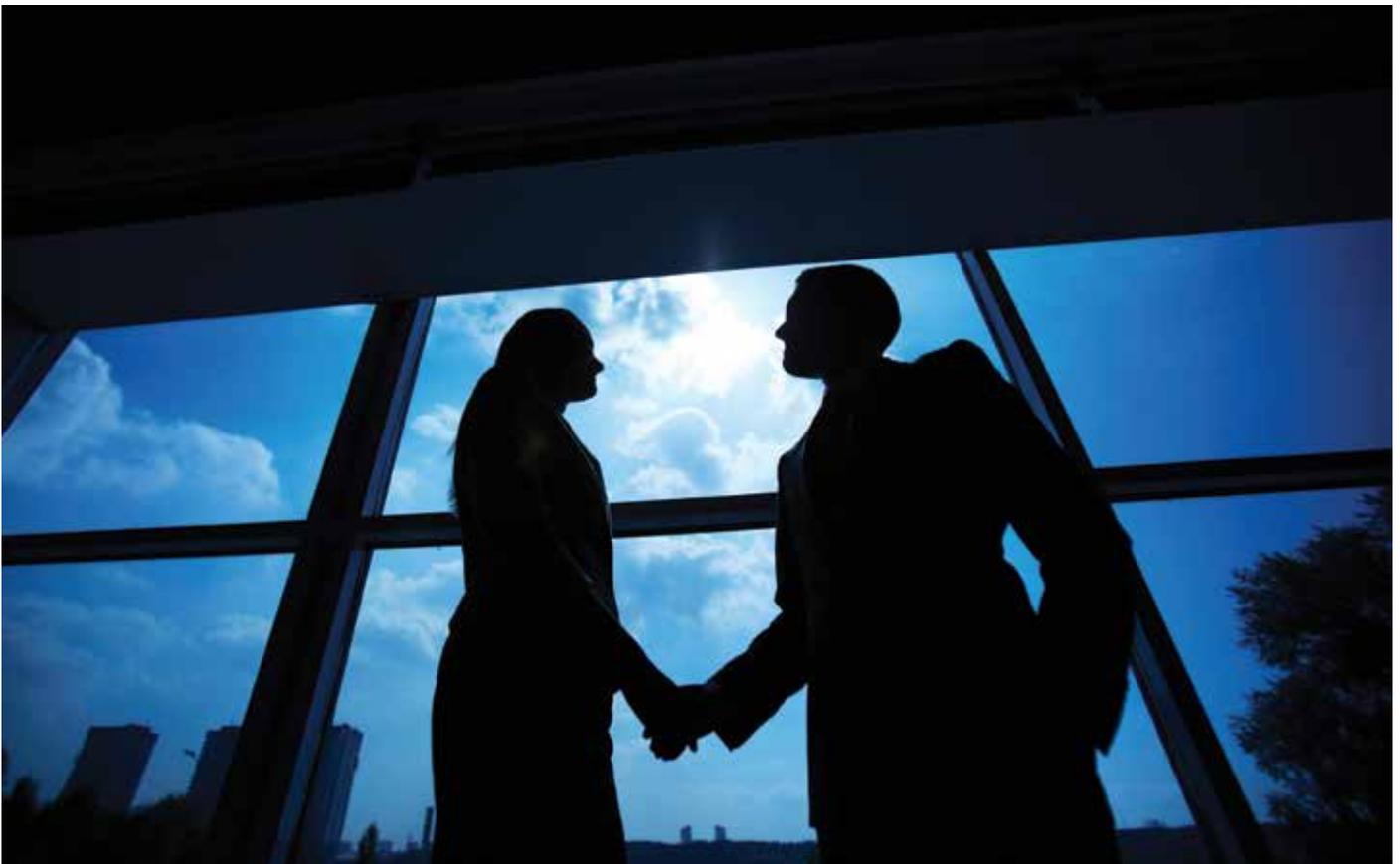
Irish women have had the vote since 1918 and we have had two female presidents in recent years – independent politician Mary Robinson who served as the seventh President of Ireland was the first female to hold this office (1990-97). She was succeeded by Mary McAleese, the first President to come from Northern Ireland, who served two terms of office until 2011.

However, there are 35 women TDs in the Dáil – an all-time high that was helped by the introduction of a gender quota in the 2016 General Election. This required political parties to ensure that at least 30% of their candidates were female or face a 50% loss of state funding.

At local level the story is similar. In the 2014 Local Election, 21.5% of the candidates who stood were women, and 20.5% of those elected were women – significantly below the EU28 average of 32% for women's representation in local politics.

Only three local authorities have achieved the so-called 'critical mass' status of 30% or more women councillors. And there was a notable urban-rural divide in terms of female vote and representation levels in the 2014 Local Election.

Experience at local level is crucial to shaping candidate selection for the Dáil – in the 2007 and 2011 Dáil elections, 76% of male candidates who were elected had local government experience while for women the figure was 81%.



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WOMEN IN POLITICS



Ciairín de Buis is CEO of Women for Election – an organisation that trains and encourages women in Ireland to run for election.

CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGN

The CEO of Women for Election (an organisation that trains and encourages women in Ireland to run for election) says that while there are no gender quotas in the local elections, increasing the number of women running is down to women themselves.

According to Ciairín de Buis, their main training course 'INSPIRE' is a one-day programme "where women gather to learn about confidence, communications and campaigning from proven political experts and elected female politicians".

She says the organisation's crowdfunding campaign has "helped to heavily subsidise" the training programme. The #MoreWomen crowdfunding campaign aimed to raise €50,000 to provide subsidised training to 300 women before next year's local elections.

However, it surpassed its target and finished with nearly €56,000, which has been used to subsidise training 300 women ahead of the 2019 local elections.

TRAINING COURSE TO 'INSPIRE'

Women for Election has a strong track record of providing practical support to inspire, equip and inform women entering politics. Since it was established in 2012, it has trained over 1,000 women to take the next step on their political journeys.

Of the 194 women who secured seats in the 2014 local elections, 50 per cent had undertaken Women for Election training, while in the 2016 General Election, 40 per cent of the newly-elected female TDs had participated in the programme.

"We can offer some places on full scholarship with all other places subsidised by 40%. That means courses that used to cost €350 now cost €199. We're actually aiming to run between eight and ten training programmes between now and the local elections in 2019."

She says they're also doing a huge amount of work on social media and through their 'ezine' in reaching out to women and encouraging them to think about running. "We hope to engage more and more with local and national media outlets in order to also reach the women who are not on social media. Every day women are getting in touch with us and we're getting steady bookings for our courses.

"Young women in Ireland are politically active, they engage with policy issues affecting them – this might be down to the recession, social media, watching the generation before them enter political life. Whatever the reason, it's good for Ireland."

De Buis wants to see more women on the training programme, running for the locals and getting elected. "If we have young women at the local level, we've a pipeline of politically-engaged and effective female candidates who can keep running at a local



Women for Election's one-day training programme 'INSPIRE' offers advice on confidence, communications and campaigning from political experts and elected female politicians.

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level and also get on a general election ballot.”

‘Women for Election’ training works, as evidenced by those who participated in previous training programmes. Of the 194 women who secured seats in the 2014 Local Elections, 50% were trained on the Women for Election programmes, while in the 2016 General Election, 40% of the newly-elected women TDs had been through the programmes.

EQUAL REPRESENTATION

“Women need equal representation in policy making and decision making at all levels of Government, both local and national,” says Fianna Fáil Councillor Sinead Guckian from Leitrim County Council.

“Traditionally, for the most part, women have not had the same opportunity to participate in the formulation of society and its policies at levels anywhere near their male counterparts.

“If more women are involved in decision-making, their unique insights and their unique social and economic experiences, will formulate better policies, create a more equal society and make for better communities.”

A survey undertaken by the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) in 2016 served to illustrate the significant pressures placed upon local councillors.

The findings highlighted, in part, the difficulties facing female county councillors in particular.

The AILG survey found that for rural-based women with care duties, additional burdens included the lack of proximity to council and constituent meetings.

INTEGRATION STRATEGY

The National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCi) National Strategy for Women and Girls (2017-2020) has also made a commitment to investigate potential supports to promote the participation of women in the 2019 local elections.

“As part of the Integration Strategy, migrants are encouraged to run for local office themselves and/or to encourage and support community members to do so,” says Catherine Lane, NWCi’s Women and Local Government and Development Officer.



“Women need equal representation in policy making and decision making at all levels of Government, both local and national” – Cllr Sinead Guckian (FF), Leitrim County Council ”

“Specific measures are to be put in place to improve the participation of Traveller and Roma women in political and public life as part of the Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy.

“NWCi is working with our members and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to develop proposals to bridge the significant gaps in knowledge and data about the experience of women working as locally elected officials,” says Lane.

“NWCi would be interested in working with all stakeholders to address barriers such as the provision of maternity leave, expenses, breastfeeding policies, impact of constituency size on women’s representation, remote voting, support from political parties and supporting women’s participation at local and community level.”

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Labour’s Cllr Lettie McCarthy from Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council was motivated to run when she found herself living in an area that was going to experience massive development following the rezoning of 200 acres of agricultural land to residential.

“People in our area couldn’t understand how developers would be allowed build thousands of new homes without as much as a swing or a seesaw in the area. Where was the community centre, playing pitches, recreational areas and schools for all these new families?

“Through our residents’ association, we engaged with public representatives who appeared to put a lot of faith in their county manager and planners, who agreed in principal. However, they said their hands were tied as the council didn’t have the resources to buy land and they couldn’t force developers to provide these amenities.

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"I felt so strongly that this area should be used as some form of public amenity and the only way I could really highlight this was to contest the election. I hadn't thought I would be elected as it was only a three-seater ward."

GETTING THE JOB DONE

Women bring something a little different to the political arena – and this is one of the reasons that representation needs to be balanced, claims the Labour Councillor. She says that women have an intolerance for nonsense, navel-gazing and talking about something rather than just getting the job done.

"So much time can be wasted talking about why something can't be done rather than looking at how it can be done. I believe females have a more straightforward approach without the nod-and-wink mentality," she says.

However, it can be hard to combine work, life and the role as a councillor, so it's understandable why certain women would be reluctant to run. "I can understand mothers and especially working mothers with young children being reluctant to run unless they have wonderful support from their spouse," says McCarthy.

"It's a role that requires tremendous flexibility as it's not a 9-to-5 job and it has become a lot more intrusive with social media."

To those women out there who are thinking of running next year, Lettie McCarthy's advice is: "Go for it. We have so many women doing voluntary work within their communities with great organising and leadership skills.

"Women are serving on parents' associations of their schools, sport clubs secretaries, residents associations, voluntary organisations, scout leaders...and the list goes on.

"These women are there because they see a job that needs doing and they just go and do it. Becoming a councillor just widens their net; they have already done the groundwork."



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Labour's Cllr Lettie McCarthy (Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council), says that women just get the job done and have an intolerance for nonsense, navel-gazing and talking about something.