

NO MAJOR CHANGE IN GENDER GAP AT 'GE2020'

Ireland's General Election 2020 has been heralded as an election of change – change for the parties, the two larger parties now become three larger parties, and change in government – although no one is quite sure what that change will look like as yet. However, it was not an election of change for women, writes Ciairín de Buis CEO of Women for Election.

There are now 36 women in Dáil Éireann – one more than was elected in 2016. We have now reached the not-so heady heights of 23% of TDs in the Dáil being women. This percentage has not risen significantly since the last election, and while this has been disappointing, it was somewhat inevitable given the balance of candidates on the party tickets.

In 2016 we saw how the introduction of the 30% quota which doubled the numbers of women candidates, yet the larger parties seemed to regard the gender quota requirement as a target, rather than the minimum requirement. We called for all parties to aim for 40% or higher as this will be the quota from 2023 – only the Social Democrats and the Green Party did this and ran a balanced ticket.

The proportion of women amongst the Fine Gael candidates was just above the 30% requirement at 30.5%, while Fianna Fáil did not do much better with 31% and Sinn Féin were slightly better at 33%.

NOT MEETING 30% THRESHOLD

Unfortunately, this is not a great surprise when you look at last year's Local Elections. While there is not any requirement on the parties to run a balanced ticket, you would expect that the parties, at the very least, would meet the 30% threshold.

However, less than one quarter of the Fianna Fáil candidates were women (22%), and Fine Gael also missed the threshold with 29% of their candidates being women. Sinn Féin did reach a more respectable 34%, although still a way from a balanced ticket.

And while the Local Elections last year saw a record number of women elected, with 24% of the seats filled by women; it is still far too low. We, women, represent more than half of the population in Ireland. We should not be less than one quarter of our elected politicians.

However, if we are not selected, we will not



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be elected – if the parties don't run a balanced ticket, our electorate will not have the chance to elect a balanced council.

CHANCE TO REDRESS THE IMBALANCE

This General Election was a chance for the parties to redress some of the gender imbalance in local government. We have a new intake of TDs and 34 of those elected to Dáil Éireann were councillors, only two of whom are Independents.

So political parties, rather than independents, are the ones who will be influencing the face of councils after these elections. Selection conventions for their replacements are already happening. Now is the chance for parties to actually live up to their nice words about being committed to seeing more women in politics.



Parties need to ensure that more women are selected at those replacement selection conventions. For example, nine of the newly-elected Green Party TDs were councillors – only one of whom was a woman.

MEATH FEMALE COUNCILLORS MAKE THEIR MARK IN LOCAL POLITICS

Meath County Council marked this year's International Women's Day on 8 March with events in Kells and Navan which focused on the visibility of elected women councillors and to highlight their importance in local politics.

Over 300 female students from Navan attended the Solstice Arts Centre to participate in the morning event on Friday 6 March, following the first meeting at Eureka Secondary School in Kells the day before.

The Solstice Arts Centre event, which was co-funded by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, focused on the work and experience of the current female members of Meath County Council.

The councillors at both events discussed why they first became involved in politics, the barriers they faced as female politicians, and they also shared their advice for the next generation.

Meath County Council has also produced a video featuring Meath's 10 female councillors – Aisling Demspey, Annie Hoey, Sarah Reilly, Gillian Toole, Maria Murphy, Emer Tóibín, Yemi Adenuga, Sharon Tolan, Sharon Keogan and Suzanne Jamal – which was shared widely across their social media channels, following the two-day event in early March.



RTÉ's Eilis Sheehy, moderator at the Solstice Arts Centre event in Navan, with the panel of speakers who noted that only 226 women candidates (24%) were successful at the 2019 Local Elections.

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FROM THE COUNCIL CHAMBERS

The Green Party now has the chance to ensure their representation on local councils is much better balanced. Similarly, with Sinn Féin, 10 of their new TDs were councillors (two of whom are women). Fianna Fáil saw seven new TDs coming from amongst their councillors (only one of whom is a woman) while the two new Fine Gael TDs who came from council chambers were women.

Meanwhile, the Social Democrats, who tend to be the party with the best gender balance, have four new TDs – all of whom came from council chambers – with a perfect gender balance of two women and two men.

While none of these numbers are huge – no one party is going to change the face of politics with those whom they select to replace the outgoing councillors – together they could make a significant difference.

Parties should consider their overall gender balance when selecting replacement councillors. And, with the exception of the Social Democrats, parties don't do well in terms of balanced representation.

This is a chance to see 34 more women in council chambers across the country, it could be another step towards gender balance in political life and to see more women in politics.

The larger parties need to look at their candidate selection and their support structures if they are serious about addressing this gender imbalance. We urge all parties to ensure they have more women on the ticket next time around, and to start that work now.

