

# REPORT HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR MATERNITY LEAVE FOR POLITICIANS

A new report has found that the lack of maternity leave is one of the barriers inhibiting women’s chances of election success, while other challenges highlighted in the ‘Women for Election’ report include an increasing risk of sexist, racist and misogynistic online abuse and lack of access to campaign financing to recognise care responsibilities. Report by Grace Heneghan.

The overwhelming message from women who have contested, won and lost Local, General and European elections in Ireland over the past two years is to “Go for it and run for election”. However, despite the endorsement, critical barriers still exist that inhibit women’s chances of election success, according to a new report ‘More Women – Changing the Face of Politics’.

One of the key findings of the research report, published by Women for Election\*, which is based on interviews with women who contested local, European and general elections over 2019 and 2020, is that political parties continue to be resistant to new candidates, particularly women candidates, and more so if there is a male incumbent in a “winnable seat”.

Peter Burke TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, whose department funded the research, described the report as “invaluable in setting out a roadmap of actions towards the Local Elections 2024”.

During the online launch of the report in early March, the Minister said that he was committed to overcoming constitutional difficulties to ensure the provision of maternity and paternity leave for politicians.

He added that he will seek to amend the Local Government Act 2001 to allow local politicians to take full paid maternity and paternity leave quickly if they choose to do so. At the moment, a councillor cannot miss more than six monthly meetings without having to step away from the seat.



The report’s online launch by Minister Peter Burke featured Women for Election’s CEO Catriona Glesson and Chairperson Alison Cowzer, co-author of report Dr Fiona Buckley, and a panel of women who have previously run for election – Cllr Claire Byrne, Thoiba Ahmed, Cllr Seána Ó Rodaigh and Maria Walsh, MEP.

Caitríona Gleeson, CEO of Women for Election, said that the Government could move swiftly to address many of the structural barriers that block women from running for election. While acknowledging the complexities with regard to the constitution, she said that paid maternity leave for elected local politicians could be quickly introduced, and pointed out that it was quite astonishing the issue is now only being addressed.

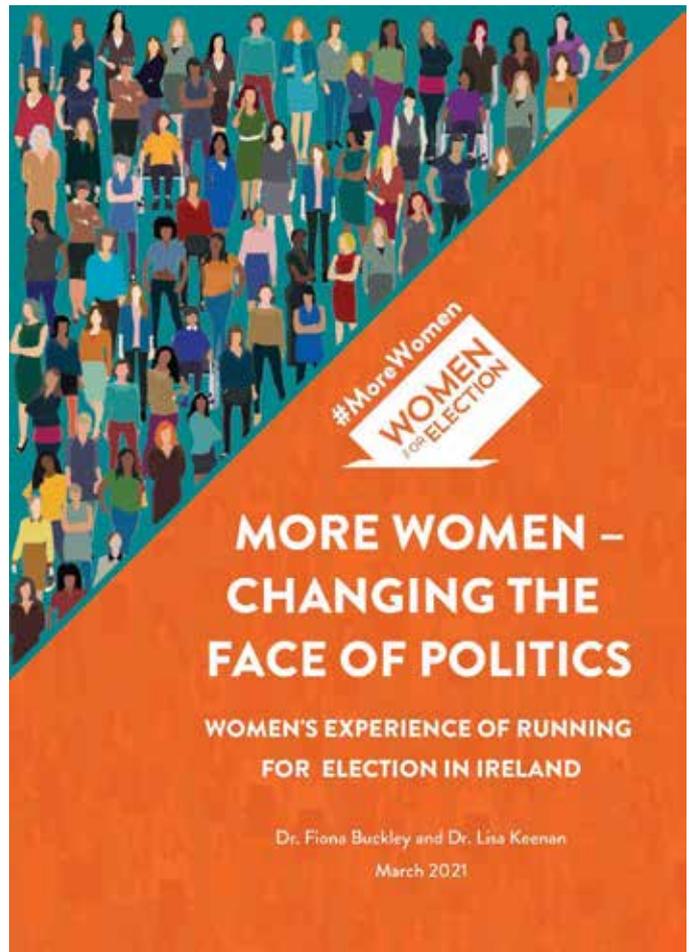
“It is indicative of how far behind we are in accommodating diversity and equality in political life. Currently, when decisions are made about our lives, homes, communities, businesses, the diversity and value of the contribution by women is missing.

“A 50/50 gender balance in government is the key to Ireland becoming a thriving vibrant society, but there’s a long way to go, based on current figures and current systems,” she noted.

### LOW REPRESENTATION AT NATIONAL LEVEL

Ireland ranks 101st in the world for the percentage of women elected in national parliament, behind countries like Afghanistan or China. Currently only one in every five TDs and 25% of elected councillors are women. Only four of 15 Ministers at the Cabinet table are women. In total, women are currently completely absent from 40% of critical government decision-making tables, including health and the Covid-19 national response.

Local representatives should be remunerated appropriately for the hours they realistically work, according to Women for Election (WfE). The organisation has also called for a reform of financing rules to facilitate allowances for candidates with care responsibilities and on political parties to recruit women from



*The research report is based on interviews with 15 women who contested (successfully and unsuccessfully) the 2019 Local Elections, 2019 European Parliament Elections and the 2020 General Election.*

outside the party, particularly women from under represented and marginalised communities.

The research report sets out to understand what motivates a woman to run for office, tracking the electoral experience, from party selection to the campaign trail to count day and afterwards. The organisation maintains that there should be better funding for groups working to support and train women to go forward for election.

### MEASURES TO REMOVE BARRIERS

Dr Fiona Buckley, who led the research report, spoke of the barriers preventing women from entering politics and the measures to be adapted in order to remove those obstacles.

The online launch featured a panel of women who have previously run for election – Cllr Claire Byrne, Thoiba Ahmed, Cllr Seána Ó Rodaigh and Maria Walsh, MEP.

In sharing their experiences, they each outlined systematic changes they would like to see in place to encourage more women to run for election. Maria Walsh referred to a WfE training session that she attended before deciding to stand for,

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Introduce paid maternity leave for elected politicians.
- Legislate for gender quotas at local and Seanad elections.
- Remunerate local councillors at an appropriate level.
- Reform campaign financing rules to facilitate allowances for candidates with care responsibilities.
- Enable prosecutions for online and other forms of abuse including sexism against women running for election.
- Review and expand candidate recruitment processes to engage women from outside parties particularly those from migrant and marginalised communities.



*Pictured at the launch of the Women's Local Government Network at the ALLG Conference in March 2020 were (l-r): Catherine Lane, National Women's Council of Ireland, Tara Farrell, Longford Women's Link, and Cllr Elisa O'Donovan, Limerick City & County Council.*

## WOMEN IN POLITICS



*“A 50/50 gender balance in government is the key to Ireland becoming a thriving vibrant society, but there’s a long way to go to get there, based on current figures and current systems” – Caitríona Gleeson, CEO of Women for Election*

and referred to the advice Cllr Claire Byrne gave her during that training.

The overwhelming consensus during the launch was that building and creating networks ahead of campaigning are key. The advice for women is to register and sign up for upcoming training sessions to meet like-minded women and start to create their team ahead of the 2024 Local Elections.

### ALL-FEMALE WORKING GROUP

At the end of March Minister Peter Burke hosted the first meeting of an all-female working group, which has been set up to examine the provision of maternity leave for county and city councillors, and to agree their terms of reference.

Sinn Féin’s Joanna Byrne, the Green Party’s Darcy Lonergan, Labour’s Elena Secas, Fine Gael’s Lorraine Hall, Fianna Fáil’s Norma Moriarty and Independent Cllr Karey McHugh Farag make up the membership of the new working group.

Justice Minister Helen McEntee, who is taking six months’ maternity leave, is the first Cabinet Minister in the history of the State to be pregnant in office. Minister for Social Protection Heather Humphreys, who is also Minister for Rural and Community Development, will take on a third justice portfolio while Minister McEntee is on maternity leave.

The chair of the Dublin City Council Cross-Party Women’s Committee, Green Party’s Cllr Darcy Lonergan, has said legal provisions are needed for councillors seeking to avail of maternity leave.

She noted that two Green party councillors – Claire Byrne and Janice Boylan – had felt pressured to return to work just two weeks after giving birth.

### ‘50/50 DÁIL REPRESENTATION POSSIBLE BY 2030’ – AN TAOISEACH MICHEÁL MARTIN

**An Taoiseach Micheál Martin set out his vision to achieve 50/50 representation of women and men in national politics by 2030, and his aspiration for women in Irish politics during an online event organised by Women for Election to mark International Women’s Day 2021.**

The organisation is driving a five-year strategy to get more women elected in the next local and general elections with the aim of achieving, at least, a 30% representation of women in local and national government by 2025, increasing to 50/50 representation by 2030.

An Taoiseach said that he was enthusiastic to see more women, and more young women particularly as “activist politicians”. He acknowledged that Ireland’s current position at 101st in the world for female participation in national politics was not a comfortable position to be in.

“We need young women in particular to go forward. And we



probably need a new type of participation in politics. Over the past few years we’ve seen more activism in social issues like Marriage Equality. We

need electoral reform and to rethink the models through which people enter politics to help more people and more women move from this type of activism into politics.”

He also said that he was committed to bringing forward the reforms required to facilitate paid maternity and paternity leave in Irish politics. He said that quotas were very important in term of national politics and he had found them very useful within his own party in increasing gender diversity. While he had no problem with quotas being expanded to local politics, he said however that he had more fundamental concerns about local politics in general because of its lack of diversity, and its increasing burden and complexity of workload.

He welcomed the Moorhead report which recommends adequate remuneration for local politicians. While quotas exist for Dáil elections, there are currently no quotas for local or Seanad elections. Currently, 22.5% of TDs, 25% of local councillors and 40% of Senators are women. He also said that he would talk to President Joe Biden about the establishment in the US of a Gender Council, accountable directly to the President, which will examine gender issues across the whole of Government.

He said that he would be open to exploring an Irish Gender Council, reporting into the Office of An Taoiseach. Finally, An Taoiseach said that he was concerned about the “very damaging” levels of online and off-line abuse that candidates and politicians received, particularly candidates from migrant and ethnic communities.

“An ideal system would allow for a substitute, so our constituents are still represented, and we don’t feel pressure and guilt about taking the time off,” Cllr Lonergan added.

### URBAN AND RURAL CONSTITUENCIES

Minister Burke said it was important that the group represented female councillors from urban and rural constituencies and a “demographic that will have first-hand experiences of the issues facing female elected representatives”. He pointed out that plans for measures will be put in place as soon as possible.

“To say that maternity leave for female politicians is overdue is an understatement, and establishing a maternity-leave system for female councillors is a political priority of mine. While attention was drawn to this subject by Justice Minister Helen McEntee, it has been an ongoing issue not just in the Dáil but in our local authorities.

“Many candidates start their political careers in our council chambers. If we want to increase female participation and retain the talent we have in local government, we must take steps now to address one of the main barriers to female representation – a lack of maternity leave and policies which do not favour family life.”

The Moorhead Report recommends working conditions for councillors to be examined by a stakeholder committee, and out of this committee he convened a sub-group dedicated solely to the consideration of how to best implement maternity leave and provisions in county and city councils.

“The Programme for Government commits to increasing female participation in local and national politics, and we must strive to have our council chambers reflect the make-up of society. For too long, women have been under-represented in politics and we’re failing dismally to

achieve equality of representation. Introducing maternity leave will provide support for female candidates and politicians and enable increased participation in the years to come,” noted Minister Burke.

*\*Women for Election is a non-partisan, independent, not-for-profit organisation that provides training and supports for women considering election at all levels. For further information visit <https://www.womenforelection.ie/>*