

GENDER EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

One of the key messages from the 'Promoting Gender Equality & Diversity in Local Government' event, recently hosted in Ennis by Clare County Council, in association with the 'See Her Elected' project, is that more women need to support each other as allies in a bid to bring about a cultural shift in politics.

Women are often driven by a sense of social injustice as a pathway to politics, participants who attended Clare County Council's 'Promoting Gender Equality & Diversity in Local Government' seminar heard.

Finance and childcare are still major barriers to women running for election, but a strong inner belief and demystifying of politics are part of some key solutions.

One of the pathways from the event in the glór theatre in Ennis was an 'Introduction to Politics' course from See Her Elected, which 'SHE' ran on 23 and 30 May for women from County Clare.

The aim of the free online course was to empower them to engage in electoral politics, with classes held twice on each day to fit into day-to-day life, with a morning option from 11-12.30pm and evenings from 7.30-9pm.

"We want to see more women elected to county councils. Our free online 'SHE School' is all about explaining local politics, where you fit in, and what you can do to have a say in what goes on," noted Dr Michelle Maher, SHE's Programme Manager.

There are two classes on the 'Introduction to Politics' course – the first covers 'Active Citizenship and Public Participation in Council Decision-making', while the second focuses on 'Who Does What in the Council' and the 'Role of a County Councillor'.

LOW NUMBER OF FEMALE COUNCILLORS
"Only 26% of county councillors

in Ireland are female and we have a much lower percentage of female councillors in rural counties compared to more urban centres such as Dublin.

"For example, there are only four women out of 28 councillors on Clare County Council; it was 1979 before women were first elected to Clare County Council when Madeline Taylor and Patricia McCarthy were elected," Dr Maher pointed out.

"In total only nine women have ever been elected. It is important to have a female perspective at decision-making level to ensure more balanced decisions are made on a range of issues. Issues which matter to us as women; whether that's

climate change, employment, parenting, care or violence against women," she told the participants.

Madeline Taylor-Quinn said that finance and childcare issues are still some of the major barriers for women entering politics as well as a lack of maternity leave for county councillors.

"My first child was only two weeks old when I got a call to say, 'you better be in Dublin tomorrow for a vote of the Government could fall'. Imagine being put under that sort of pressure," she noted.

OFFERING UNIQUE PERSPECTIVES
Women could bring a "unique perspective and a can-do attitude with a focus on



Madeleine Taylor-Quinn addressed the Clare County Council event 'Promoting Gender Equality & Diversity in Local Government' in Ennis on 17 May.



Dr Michelle Maher, Programme Manager of 'See Her Elected', pictured at the launch of SHE's 'Guide to Running in the 2024 Local Elections' in November 2021, which provides practical and user-friendly advice for women who may consider running in the 2024 Local Elections. It is available to download free of charge from www.seeherelected.ie.

problem solving at decision making tables", according to Noeleen FitzGerald, Clare County Council's Director of Finance & Support Services. She thanked the young secondary school students who also attended the event, and praised them for their positive engagement and feedback.

Speaking on the diversity panel Victoria Olukitibi said that politicians often dismissed young people as 'the snowflake generation' but she noted that the housing crisis was a major issue for young people in society.

"Many of the men in the Dáil are coming from permanent pensionable jobs into the Dáil – they don't know the reality of life for us as young people whereby we can't move out of our parents' home due to the housing crisis. This has a knock-on effect on our careers," Olukitibi said. "Being a woman can be hard enough but if you were to run for election as a black woman you face racism on top of everything else," she added.

GENDER QUOTAS AT LOCAL LEVEL
Clare Local Development Company's Bridget Casey pointed out that settled women and Traveller women needed to support each other and that Traveller women needed allies as a pathway into politics.

"Is it a case of men standing down or a case of women standing up," asked Cllr Clare Colleran Molloy, a keen advocate for gender quotas at local election level. Colleran Molloy pointed out that this

"affirmative action" of gender quotas could then cease when it was no longer required, and the council chambers were more reflective of the society it represented.

Senator Roisin Garvey urged women to become involved in politics. "When I was 12, I asked the priest could I serve Mass and he said 'no' it was only for boys. It made no sense, and that injustice sowed a seed in me that day to effect change. Politics is not as highbrow as you might imagine – it's about real people with real heart who really care about their community," said Senator Garvey.

Clare TD Deputy Violet Ann Wynne urged women to believe in themselves: "Your lived experience is enough, don't listen to anyone who tells you that you can't – Believe in yourself – politics is about representing people and making your community better," said Deputy Wynne.

Elaine D'Alton of the Women's Collective Ireland in Clare pointed to the often-undervalued work by women in society. "The underdog never has a voice – don't be afraid to use your voice. There is a serious problem with the non-recognition of unpaid work which women do in society and their huge contribution is often undervalued," she claimed.

**'See Her Elected' is a joint initiative between Longford Women's Link and 50/50 North West, and is funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. For further information and to register for the 'Introduction to Politics' course visit www.seeherelected.ie or email info@seeherelected.ie.*



Participants and attendees pictured at the seminar 'Promoting Gender Equality & Diversity in Local Government' in Ennis on 17 May.