



**Women's Regional Caucus Submission to Joint Committee
on Gender Equality on the recommendations made by the
Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality**

Introduction & General Comments

Origins of the Women's Regional Caucus

The word "caucus" is becoming a familiar phrase within local government as local women caucuses emerge across the country at local authority level. The ambition of these new political institutions in local government is to enable women to strengthen their impact and bring about equality between women and men in the membership and work of local authorities.

Only 25.5% of county councillors throughout Ireland are female and there is a much lower percentage of female councillors in rural counties compared to local authorities in Dublin and the surrounding counties. It is because of this reality that the very idea for a pilot regional caucus was born and the WoMeN's Regional Caucus was subsequently formed in September 2021. Where the WoMeN's Regional Caucus differs from other women's caucuses and networks is the fact that our membership is spread across 13 local authorities across the Midlands, Northern & Western Regions; *Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Galway County, Galway City, Roscommon, Cavan, Monaghan, Longford, Westmeath, Laois and Offaly*.

Each participating county council was selected due to the fact that these neighbouring local authorities accounted for some of the lowest numbers of female elected representatives across the State and the fact that, individually, there were insufficient numbers of women councillors in each of these local authorities to form a meaningful caucus at the county level.

To paint the picture more clearly, the total number of female councillors across these 13 local authorities totals **45**, in comparison with **245** male members across the same 13 councils.

The purpose of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus is to facilitate peer support among the 47 women councillors across these 13 local authorities, to enable sharing of experience and knowledge and to enable women councillors to identify supports specific to their needs. It is our belief that the Women's Regional Caucus will not only help strengthen the existing body of female councillors in the Western Midlands and Northern area but also help support increased female participation in our local government system. An important aspect to highlight from the outset is the fact that the WoMeN's Regional Caucus is fortunate to have a strong secretariat resource from the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) and See Her Elected (SHE) who support the caucus from their own resources. Both organisations have offered joint complimentary secretarial assistance due to the fact that it brings their complementary aims together; to retain currently elected female councillors and to support more women to enter local politics in rural Ireland.

Trialling New Ways of Working

From the outset the WoMeN's Regional Caucus has trialled new flexible ways of working which are better suited to the needs of women councillors. The election for the position of Chair and Vice Chair was completed via a secret online vote and the poll was left open for 24 hours to ensure all members had equal opportunity to participate. Cllr. Carmel Brady (Cavan County Council) and Cllr. Shelly Herterich Quinn (Galway County Council) were appointed as Chair and Vice Chair of the caucus respectively. Following the appointment of the Chair and Vice Chair the caucus needed to draw up a programme of work and it was agreed collectively that a Working Group would be formed to drive that forward and to oversee the implementation of the caucus programme of work running from summer 2022 to early 2024.

With a brand-new political institution being added to local government across our region we did not wish to adopt the formal and informal norms of conducting council business unless they specifically worked well for us as women in local politics in terms of efficiency and flexibility. Instead, we have meetings and recap meetings held at different times and voting by polls left open for an extended period of time. We have tried different approaches in order to build consensus and facilitate more inclusive meetings and decision-making. When deciding on meeting times we have used online polls to allow each member to indicate their preferred method of attending, date and time.

In this way we were able to narrow down the ideas for the Programme of Work in a flexible way that better fitted with the day-to-day council, career and family commitments of caucus members. Having recap meetings, and extended voting hours are both examples of a new way of doing politics and show how flexibility can be a part of how council business can be conducted.

Gender Quotas and informed decision making

In putting together a programme of work for the caucus we strived for consensus where possible. There was unanimous support for including the support of more women to run in the local elections as a project within the caucus's programme of work. There was strong, but not unanimous support for the caucus to use its collective voice to lend support for the introduction of gender quotas for local elections.

In order to help the caucus collectively make a decision on how best to proceed in relation to gender quotas and ensure all members were coming from the same informed platform, the Working Group requested that an information briefing be provided to all caucus members on the subject to ensure any final decision came from an informed viewpoint. A remote briefing took place with the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC) in June 2022 and the meeting was recorded and made available to any member who was unable to attend. An online Poll was then issued 24 hours later to all caucus members so each councillor could vote on how they wished to proceed on the issue. Of the councillors who voted, 81.4% of councillors agreed that the caucus should support gender quotas for 2024. While there is a strong majority in favour of gender quotas, we acknowledge and respect the diversity of opinion within the Caucus including, in this instance, those who do not support gender quotas. It is important to note that some of the caucus members did not intuitively favour gender quotas but recognised that, in the short term, they were an important catalyst.

Even where there is a strong majority in favour of proceeding with a specific action, the caucus as a collective acknowledges and respects the diversity of opinion within the membership and has ensured this is recognised before proceeding or when making any public comment. Deciding how decisions are made is a key component to ensuring the success of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus and must be handled with care and respect.

Women in Politics – National and Local Context

National Government

In 2012, the Irish Parliament adopted a law obliging political parties to select at least 30% women candidates and 30% men candidates to contest general elections. Part Six of the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 obliges political parties to select at least 30 per cent women and 30 per cent men. The threshold is now set to rise to 40% from 2023 onwards. Political Parties receive state funding in two forms and the funding linked to the gender quota accounts for slightly more than half of the state funds that parties receive. Any party that does not meet the gender quota loses 50% of their potential funding under this allocation if quotas are not met.

Women's representation at the national level increased by just five per cent points between 1992 and 2011 (Fiona Buckley, Yvonne Galligan, & Claire McGing, 2016). In one election, women's political representation in Dáil Éireann has risen to 22 per cent, a six-percentage point increase. The result of this new legislation was a seven-percentage point increase in women's representation in the Dáil between the 2011 and 2016 general elections. These figures demonstrate the success that gender quotas can have. The fact that such increases were not repeated at the 2020 general election shows that parity of representation in elections is not necessarily guaranteed by gender quotas and further

demonstrates the importance of quotas to focus political parties on candidate selection, build momentum as well as complement programmes that support women into politics.

Local Government

As this same gender quota legislation did not apply to the 2019 Local Elections, the increase in the number of women elected increased from 20.1 per cent to 23.9 per cent, a rise of just 3.8 percentage points. Research reports from Dr. Adrian Kavanagh of Maynooth University confirm that during the 2019 Local Elections, there were five hundred and sixty-one officially selected/declared female candidates (out of a total of one thousand, nine hundred and seventy-five selected, or declared, local election candidates). Female candidates accounted for just **28.4%** of the total number of candidates selected/declared in the 2019 Local Elections (Adrian Kavanagh, 2019).

What has been positive to see is the number of female co-options since the 2019 Local Elections has been the conscious decision of political parties to nominate a female councillor to replace elected members who have stood down from local politics. The total number of women councillors as of September 2022 now stands at 242 or **25.5%** which is a **1.4%** increase since 2019.

There is a clear “geography” to female local election candidacy levels across the Republic of Ireland, with higher levels in Dublin and the more urban areas and lower levels in rural Ireland. While female candidacy levels increased across much of the state’s territory in the 2019 local elections, a number of local authorities in the North Western Region experienced a decline in female candidates which included Roscommon (-5.8%), Sligo (-3.7%) and Galway County (-1.5%). In fact, there were some local electoral areas in the region covered by our caucus where there were no female candidates on the ballot paper, for example in Lifford-Stranorlar in Donegal, Ballymote-Tubbercurry in Sligo, and Athlone in Roscommon.

The low levels of female participation in the Northern, Western & Midlands Regions which are applicable to the local authorities within our own Women’s Regional Caucus can be seen in the table below;

Local Authority	Number of Female Councillors	Number of Male Councillors	% Female Councillors
Cavan	4	14	22%
Donegal	4	33	11%
Galway County	7	32	18%
Galway City	5	13	28%
Laois	4	15	21%
Leitrim	3	15	17%
Longford	2	16	11%
Mayo	2	28	7%
Monaghan	2	16	11%
Offaly	1	18	5%
Roscommon	4	14	22%
Sligo	3	15	17%
Westmeath	4	16	20%
TOTAL	45	245	

The above table highlights the number of female councillors versus male councillors elected across the 13 local authorities contained within the WoMeN’s Regional Caucus.

Barriers to participation - the 5 C's

Cash, Culture, Confidence, Childcare and Candidate selection

Post-2014 there has been a significant increase in the workloads of councillors arising from new structures and legislative obligations, including a 40% reduction in councillors, larger electoral areas and additional powers and responsibilities (Local Economic Development/Local Community Development/Local Property Tax/Climate Action etc). The decision last year by Government to approve an increase to elected members' pay in line with the recommendation from the Moorhead Report is a welcome step in addressing remuneration as a barrier for women and minority groups entering political life.

Additionally, the lack of proper maternity/paternity/adoptive leave provision for councillors has been identified as a major barrier to achieving greater participation at local government level and greater participation, particularly for female councillors and prospective female candidates. The WoMeN's Regional Caucus welcomes the publication of the General Scheme of the Local Government (Maternity Protection and Other Measures for Local Authority Elected Members) Bill 2022 in order to address this important issue.

Other factors which have a huge impact on widening representation include;

- The difficulty of achieving an acceptable work-life balance, due to the demands of long and irregular working practices and living in the public eye
- Cultural and working practices within local authorities which do appear to be an issue based on feedback shared from caucus members such as not being able to log on remotely to some meetings
- Cultural practices within larger political parties, for many female candidates getting through the internal election convention system is extremely difficult.
- Women's continued role in assuming caring and household responsibilities poses another significant barrier, especially among younger women and those with young children.
- On top of the gender pay gap and the likelihood that women (often due to their caring responsibilities) are engaged in at least part-time employment.
- Motivational factors such as ambition, self-confidence, self-belief and dedication are also well-evidenced barriers

The Regional Caucus members have shared their own insights and experiences into some of the barriers to female participation most of which have been addressed above. While issues such as the lack of maternity leave and childcare supports etc are currently being addressed by Government, it is clear there is a wider issue of culture at play here.

Some caucus members reported that almost 90% of their Council Meetings had reverted back to in-person meetings without the option of remote attendance which made juggling study/personal/work balance unachievable. Some members cited that their local authority had cited cost issues around equipment and facilities which needs to be addressed and supported by Central Government Funding.

A cohort of Regional Caucus members also expressed a lack of confidence when it came to promoting the work that they do within their local communities for fear of it being misconstrued or receiving an adverse social media response. Localism is an important aspect of Irish politics and the ability to be visible and seen to be looking after the needs of one's constituency are key considerations in voter decision-making. It is vital therefore that self-development and media training are prioritised for women especially once elected, in order to increase their retention and enable them to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and networks to take on leadership roles and progress in government.

Comment on Chapter 7: Leadership in Politics, Public Life & the Workplace (Specifically Recommendation 20)

We note that *Recommendation 20 (a)* of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality's report is that the gender quota for party candidates at general elections is extended to local elections, elections to the Seanad and European Parliament elections and reviewed every 5 years.

The WoMeN's Regional Caucus agrees with the Citizens' Assembly that gender quotas are a necessary tool to accelerate gender equality and we wish to record the support of the caucus for their introduction. However, we note that the mechanism for their introduction is not necessarily straightforward.

The Women's Regional Caucus note that the Electoral Reform Bill 2022 includes conferring a policy, research and advisory function on the Electoral Commission. The Caucus has issued a letter to the Secretary General of the Electoral Commission requesting the Commission to include identifying an appropriate mechanism for introducing quotas for local elections as part of encouraging participation, especially by women, in the democratic processes of the State.

Conclusion

The WoMeN's Regional Caucus agrees with the Citizens' Assembly that they are a necessary tool to accelerate gender equality and we wish to formally record the support of the caucus for their introduction. Within the WoMeN's Regional Caucus, there is an acknowledgement of, and respect for a diversity of opinions, including those who do not support gender quotas. Nevertheless, there is a strong majority in favour of gender quotas being introduced for the 2024 local elections.

The past has told us that "hopes" to see greater gender balance on the ballot paper in the 2024 local elections are simply not enough. The caucus recognises and approves of recent measures to increase gender and diversity in local government, including but not limited to introduction of maternity leave; funding caucuses and support programmes such as See Her Elected and other organisations; increased remuneration; and creating a family friendly toolkit for local authorities. We believe that the introduction of gender quotas will complement these measures and accelerate progress towards gender parity in local government. This needs to be done in ample time, however, to ensure parties find viable candidates and support them in their candidacy rather than filling numbers to make a quota.

It is also worth stating that if we want to make our council chambers more representative of society, this implies diversity and inclusion which extends beyond women. We need more young people involved, people from different ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities to name a few cohorts not currently represented in local government.

The WoMeN's Regional Caucus's priority is to help and support our current elected councillors, especially our female councillors, encourage more women to consider putting themselves forward for election at local level and to promote better gender equality & diversity in our local government system.

We wish to commend the Citizen's Assembly on their work and conclusions and the WoMeN's Regional Caucus welcomes the opportunity to further discuss this topic with the members of the Joint Committee on Gender and Equality.

References

Buckley, F, Galligan, Y and McGing, C (2016) 'Women and the Election: Assessing the Impact of Gender Quotas' in M Gallagher and M Marsh (eds), *How Ireland Voted: The Election that Nobody Won* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan), 185-205.

Kavanagh, A (2019) 'City and County Council Members – Co-options and Changes since the 2019 Local Elections,' Available at: <https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2019/09/02/city-and-county-council-members-co-options-and-changes-since-the-2019-local-elections/>