

Grassroots campaign empowers women



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Grass Roots Campaigning for the Equal Representation of Women in Politics

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In response to a historically low level of women’s political representation in Ireland, the National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWC), the umbrella body for women’s organisations, led a campaign to change policy, raise awareness and empower women to play an active role in politics.

Elements of the campaign were the introduction of electoral quotas, constitutional reform and a women-friendly parliament. These were supported by consciousness-raising and networking activities, especially at local level, where involvement in politics starts. A model that is being rolled out across the country is that of the Women’s Manifesto Group in Longford. It held a national workshop for women candidates, helped first-time candidates to network (all of them were subsequently elected), and organised a post-election debrief on what worked in helping women to get elected, and the barriers they came up against.

The first of NWCI's goals was achieved in 2012 with the introduction of a 30% quota of women candidates for parliamentary elections; this will rise to 40% seven years after it is first applied. A sanction of a 50% cut in government funding for parties that do not comply. However the voting system and the male-dominated political culture mean that a lot remains to be done before equal political representation for women is achieved.

NWCI's local empowerment strategy is transferable to other countries, particularly those with few women politicians.

A history of low women's representation

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) is an umbrella body representing women's organisations across the country. It has a longstanding commitment to improving the representation of women in politics and has been at the forefront of campaigning for and raising awareness on this issue. It supports gender quotas, and believes that if there are more women in politics this will result in more gender-sensitive policy-making, which could make a major contribution to gender equality.

Through its member organisations, including the 50-50 Group and Women for Election, NWCI has mobilised women to advocate policy changes, including changes in the Irish constitution, to improve women's political representation and to empower women to engage in politics.

This issue is very important in Ireland as men greatly outnumber women in all political decision-making structures:

- Women make up only 15.7% of representatives in the lower house of the Irish Parliament (Dáil); this up from 13.9% in 2009, but is the fifth-lowest proportion in the EU and well below the EU average of 27.8%;
- Only 13.3% of government ministers and just over one-quarter of ministers of state were female in 2013;
- There is slightly better gender representation in the upper house (Seanad), where nearly one-third of representatives were female in 2013. The Seanad is partly elected and partly appointed;
- Less than one in five elected members of local authorities were female in 2013;
- Under the EIGE Gender Equality Index, Ireland scored 26.5 on the domain of power, the ninth-lowest score and below the EU27 average of 38.

These low figures have led to criticisms from the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which stated in 2005 that it "is concerned at the significant under representation of women in elected political structures".

Thirty per cent quota

The under-representation of women in politics has led to a lively debate in Ireland and the launch of a national campaign by NWCI and its member organisations, which resulted in the introduction of legislation on electoral gender quotas in the Dáil under the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012. This requires a minimum of 30% of women electoral candidates, this will rise to 40% seven years after the quota's first implementation; if this target is not achieved political parties will lose half their government funding. Whilst it affects the number of women candidates, the law does not regulate the number of women actually elected.

The current Dáil electoral system, based on multi-member regional constituencies with TDs (members of parliament) elected under the single transferable vote (STV) system, represents a barrier to women's entry into politics because it demands a lot of constituency work, which is difficult for women who bear most childcare and family responsibilities. This is in addition to a male-dominated culture and low membership and representation of women in political parties.

Obstacles to women's participation in Irish politics identified by the parliament's Joint Committee on Justice, Equality Defence and Women's Rights (2009) include access to cash and resources, responsibility for childcare, confidence in going forward for selection, a gendered political culture and candidate selection processes. NWCI says that care responsibilities and male-dominated structures of power and decision-making are major barriers (NWCI 2013).

A national campaign

NWCI's aims are to:

- implement change in policy and legislation to improve the representation of women in local, national and European politics;
- raise awareness of the need for women-friendly political systems and gender-sensitive political structures;
- empower women to stand for election and participate in politics;

- engage women in seeking political change by challenging politicians and electoral candidates to address women's issues in their election campaigns.

Having identified better political representation for women as a strategic priority, NWCI launched a national programme of campaigning, awareness-raising and empowerment. Its main activities were:

Campaign for electoral quotas

NWCI and its member organisations have been very active in successfully campaigning for electoral gender quotas (see above). This has had an impact nationally and locally in making people aware of the extent to which women are under-represented in politics, challenging male-dominated decision-making, and pressing for concerted action. The campaign for gender quotas involved a wide network of NWCI member organisations across the country, including the national women's campaigning groups, the 50-50 Group and Women for Election.

- **Women's political representation in the Constitutional Convention**

NWCI was instrumental in getting women's political representation onto the agenda of the Constitutional Convention which voted in favour of measures to improve the representation of women in politics, including an explicit new provision on gender equality and a gender-neutral amendment to the 'women in the home clause'.

- **A Parliament of all Talents: Building a Women Friendly Parliament**

NWCI believes that quotas are only one part of the solution to the under-representation of women in politics, and argues that the way the parliamentary system works needs to be improved: its male culture needs to change so that women that are elected, seek re-election. Core objectives are to shift how women see and experience politics, and to value the contribution women make to politics. NWCI's 2013 report A Parliament of all Talents: Building a Women Friendly Oireachtas sets out six ways forward: family-friendly policies, promoting women to senior cabinet and parliamentary committees, carrying out a gender audit, introducing rules to promote a culture of respect, investing in politicians and gender-sensitivity, and promoting solidarity amongst women politicians.

- **Women Rising**

In 2013 NWCI commenced an innovative project called 'Women in Politics and Decision-Making', funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which implemented a wide range of initiatives to improve the representation of women in politics and decision-making. As well as lobbying and campaigning for gender quotas and other measures, NWCI carried out a consultation process known as 'Women Rising' which addressed women's issues and the representation of women in politics in the lead-up to the 2014 local and European elections. Large meetings were held with candidates and women voters in three places in Ireland at a series of café events, with the aim of providing a space for women to have their say on the issue important to them, as they relate to the election campaign, and encouraging women from the grassroots to play an active role in local politics. The Women Rising Manifesto (NWCI 2014) drawn up in consultation with NWCI member organisations, was used as the basis for these large meetings.

● **Women's Manifesto Group**

One example of a local initiative is the Women's Manifesto Group, established in 2009 by Longford Women's Link, which has worked closely with NWCI. The group aims to make communities and politics more inclusive of women's perspectives by increasing the number of women in local decision-making, and in local and national politics. It was created as a response to women's dissatisfaction with their under-representation. Examples of its work include a national workshop for women standing for election, national networking for first-time candidates (all of whom were subsequently elected), and a post-election debrief on what worked in helping women to get elected, and the barriers they came up against. It is a good example of how networking and sharing experiences can contribute to a culture of change. The model is currently being rolled out across Ireland.

Empowering the grassroots is a transferable approach

This example of grassroots campaigning and organising shows the importance of empowering women to become involved in political decision-making. This has been needed in Ireland as many women feel alienated from the male culture of decision-making and are put off standing for political office. By focusing on women's talents, campaigning to make political structures women-friendly, networking and consulting, women have been empowered to involve themselves more actively in politics, either by pressing political representatives to take women's issues seriously or by opening up spaces for women to stand for election. The focus on local initiatives linked to national campaigns and lobbying is important because many Irish politicians only find a role in national politics after they have first held office locally.

NWCI's approach is transferable to any country as it focuses on engaging women in local and national politics and empowers them to make change from the grassroots. It is especially relevant for countries where there is a low representation of women in politics. The 'Women Rising' and 'Women's Manifesto Group' initiatives have been effective in empowering women to influence politics at a local level, and through this to open up spaces for women to network and enter politics. The 'A Parliament of all Talents: Building a Women Friendly Oireachtas' initiative is transferable as it sets out six ways to build a woman-friendly parliament that could be used and adapted by any country. One of the successes of the NWCI's work is that it has stimulated a wide-ranging debate in Ireland about women's representation in politics, and this has challenged the existing male-dominated political culture.

Along with strong commitment from member organisations, a key factor of NWCI's success was that it appointed a policy officer specifically to deal with this area of work. She has been instrumental in agreeing national policy changes and in mobilising women at the grassroots.

Even though there have been significant achievements, many politicians still oppose quotas and resist changes to existing power structures. For this reason it is vital that the grassroots work continue. However projects like 'Women Rising' demand resources. NWCI's funding has been cut since the economic crisis, restoration of funding is critical to achieving its organisational goals in the long term.

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Further information

[A Parliament of all Talents: Building a Women Friendly Oireachtas, National Women's Council of Ireland, 2013](#)



[Second Report of the Convention on the Constitution on Women in Politics, Constitutional Convention, 2013](#)



[Women Rising Manifesto, National Women's Council of Ireland, 2014](#)



[The Women's Manifesto model. Longford Women's Manifesto Project, Longford Women](#)



[Women's Manifesto Brochure. Longford Women's Manifesto Project, Longford Women](#)



[Young Women Rising](#)



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