



“How to elect more women”

Conference organised by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

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Speech delivered by Eóin Murray, National Women’s Council of Ireland.

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We’ve been asked to look at the issue of why more women should be involved in politics.

About six years ago, almost to the day, I found myself standing outside a United Nations school in the Gaza strip as an election monitor. For much of the previous year I had been involved in a campaign for quotas with local civil society, particularly women’s rights organisations. We successfully secured a 20% zipped list quota system.

As the boxes were opened and the ballots counted the scale of a Hamas victory became clear. The primary beneficiaries of the quota system were Hamas. It became very clear to me – at that sad moment – that quotas must only be the beginning of any campaign. Quotas can lead to a position where conservative and reactionary elites keep control of the political system and it is up to all of us to make sure that this doesn’t happen in Ireland.

There are three traditional reasons why we would want more women involved in politics.

(a) The justice argument

If there was any other matter, in any other country, where systematically more than 50% of the population was excluded there would be a revolution – and rightly so.

(b) The utility argument

Women bring different skills, experiences and views. In Scotland this was eloquently called “building a parliament of all talents.”

(c) Critical mass

The idea of a critical mass is a controversial one: the idea is that a minimum level of women involved in politics will change not only how politics is done but what policies are enacted. Is it true?

In Norway it was: a “politics of care” was introduced where Norwegian women ensured that the state assumed its responsibilities to allow women to become full economic participants as well as care-givers.

Under New Labour, in Britain, the evidence is less clear. Did the 103 women make a difference? In some areas yes but in the round the women of Iraq and Afghanistan would probably not think so.

In Rwanda – the country in the world with the highest level of women’s representation in politics (at 53%) – rape was used as a weapon of war and genocide. Rwanda today is still an oppressive society but women have made significant progress on issues such as violence against women.

In Ireland where lone parents (mostly women) endure the highest levels of poverty and the rates of women’s unemployment are going up (at almost 10% compared to men at 6.8%) the issue is still unclear.

We have also been asked to look at the issue of how to get more women elected. The NWCI believes that we need focus beyond quotas in a number of key areas:

1. Constitutional reform based on equality, human rights and political participation where would keep and improve the PR system, maintain and improve the Seanad and acknowledge in this new constitution that a women’s place is as much in the houses of the Oireachtas as it is in the home.
2. Create a family friendly Oireachtas with normal sitting hours from 0900-1700, clever use of technology, pairing arrangements and enhanced power to committees.

3. We must engage men in the conversation to show them that this is part of a mission to build a different kind of Ireland based on the equal sharing of power and resources. It is not a threat to most men but will benefit them too.
4. We must maintain an active and vibrant women's movement. This conference is taking place today in no small part as a tribute to generations of Irish women who have been written from history; including those involved in the Council for the Status of Women, now the NWCI, which was established in 1973. It is important also that women from civil society get involved in politics and maintain the duty of civil society to speak the truth to power.

I want to finish if I may with two quotes.

The first is from the Sudanese Women's Movement who said

'If it is enough to have equal representation of women and men then quotas are the solution. If, on the other hand, you want real political and policy change then quotas are only one step on a journey.'

The second is important because I want also to sound a note of optimism. It is from the African-American poet Maya Angelou from a poem called *On the pulse of morning*

'Here on the pulse of this new day

You may have the grace to look up and

Out

Into your sister's eyes, into

Your brother's eyes, your country

And say simply,

Very simply,

With hope

Good morning.'

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