National Women's Council of Ireland
Comhairle Náisiúnta na mBan in Éirinn

WOMEN BEYOND THE DÁIL: MORE WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Commissioned by the National Women's Council of Ireland

November 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S COUNCIL OF IRELAND

The National Women's Council of Ireland's (NWCI) mission is to lead and to be a catalyst in the achievement of equality for women. We are the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups in Ireland. A non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation, founded in 1973, we seek to achieve equality for women. We represent and take our mandate from our over 190-member groups from across a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and geographical locations. We also have a growing number of individual members who support the campaign for women's equality in Ireland. Our mandate is to take action to ensure that the voices of women in all their diversity are heard. Our vision is of an Ireland and of a world where women can achieve their full potential in a just and equal society.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

NWCI commissioned this research as part of our women in leadership work to deepen our understanding of the barriers faced by women in running and getting elected to local office. This research provides us with a clear action plan to address the underrepresentation of women in local politics. The research highlights the need for investment and in a series of initiatives and leglislation that can ensure we have a critical mass of 30% female representation in the local elections in 2024. Local government provides essential services such as housing, roads, libraries, planning and economic development and as part of our democratic system. With its proximity to women's lives, it is uniquely positioned to strengthen women's participation and improve the representation of their interests. The numbers of women in politics matters. In a representative democracy, it matters who represents us, and what they represent. Increasing women's representation is essential to the quality of our democratic processes. We want to see an equal number of men and women public representatives. We want to see Traveller and Roma women, migrant women, working class women and women with disabilities in ministerial positions, chairing boards and leading the discussions at their county & city councils. To truly reflect local communities and their needs, we must improve the gender balance in local government.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

National Government:

— Implement legislation for a candidate gender quota for local elections

— Fund long-term programmes to equip women to run for local political office

— Target programmes in rural areas with lowest levels of female candidacy

— Organise training programmes designed for women underrepresented in politics including young women, Traveller and Roma women, migrant women and women with disabilities

— Provide more flexible working hours and meeting times to support councillors with caring responsibilities

— Introduce systematic entitlement to maternity/adoptive leave for women county councillors

— Increase remuneration for local councillors to address specific obstacles for women in low paid work to consider the role

— Introduce the use of technology to support councillors working in rural areas

— Introduce codes of conduct against sexism and an effective Standards Committee to enforce it

— Commission research under the planned Electoral Commission to further examine appropriate supports required to diversify candidate selection processes

— Support the development of regional and local women's caucuses to support women councillors

— Allocate adequate resources for organisations that are supporting marginalised women to participate in public and political life

Political Parties:

— Implement a proactive approach to recruit women from marginalised communities including Traveller and Roma women and migrant women

— Develop candidate selection processes that look outside the usual networks to seek a diversity of women including women from ethnic minorities, migrant women and women with disabilities

— Deliver gender awareness training to party members involved in selection to undermine gendered perceptions of candidacy

— Support long-term and strategic succession planning among women officeholders

— Increase women's access to leadership positions within political parties

— Invite aspirants to consider candidacy sooner to provide a longer lead in time

— Hold convention processes that support women candidates and mitigate attempts to undermine or question their legitimacy

— Develop a political party candidate placement strategy that enhances women's electability

— Introduce childcare allowance or other in kind supports for candidates with care responsibilities

— Provide expectation management and checking-in system during the campaign

— Ensure supports are in place during campaigning to orientate first time candidates

— Provide support for unsuccessful candidates in the aftermath of an election (debrief and supports to maintain engagement with party politics)

Local Government:

— Invite local women and women's groups to observe local council meetings

— Deliver mentoring, shadowing and internship programmes for women with local councillors and local authorities

— Sign up to the European Charter for Equality Between Women and Men in Local Life

— Increase visibility of elected women councillors

— Strategic outreach aimed at younger women, women living in poverty, ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, Traveller and Roma women and migrant women to increase engagement with politics

INTRODUCTION

Like national politics, local government in Ireland has historically been highly male-dominated and still has some distance to travel before a 'critical mass' of women councillors is achieved. Women continue to be a minority in senior decision-making roles, where key policy and operational decisions are taken.[1] Research has made the link between low levels of female representation in decision making and poor outcomes for women's interests in policy making.[2] Increasing the representation of women in local government challenges organisational cultures[3] and increases perceptions of inclusion and representativeness for constituents.[4] Understanding how to increase women's representation in local government can in turn improve public awareness and support of local government.

In the 2014 local elections, 21% of those elected to local government were female, significantly below the EU28 average of 32% for women's representation in local politics. Most recently, in the 2019 local elections, only 226 women candidates or 24% of women were elected to local government (see Figure 1). While a record number of 562 women contested the elections, up from 440 in 2014, they only made up 28% of all of the candidates.

Gender imbalances have implications for shaping the process for candidate selection for the Dáil. Local government experience is a key pipeline for national office and is statistically more significant for women candidates than it is for men. In the 2007 and 2011 Dáil elections, 76% of male candidates selected had local government experience while for women the figure was 81%.[5] Reforms of local government since 2014 have impacted on women's representation. The number of local authorities reduced from 114 to 31; the number of elected members has reduced from 1,627 to 949, 80 town councils have been dissolved and 8 regional authorities and 2 regional assemblies have been replaced by regional assemblies. To date there is no gendered assessment of these policy changes.

Figure 1: Gender representation in Local Government, 1974-2019 (%)

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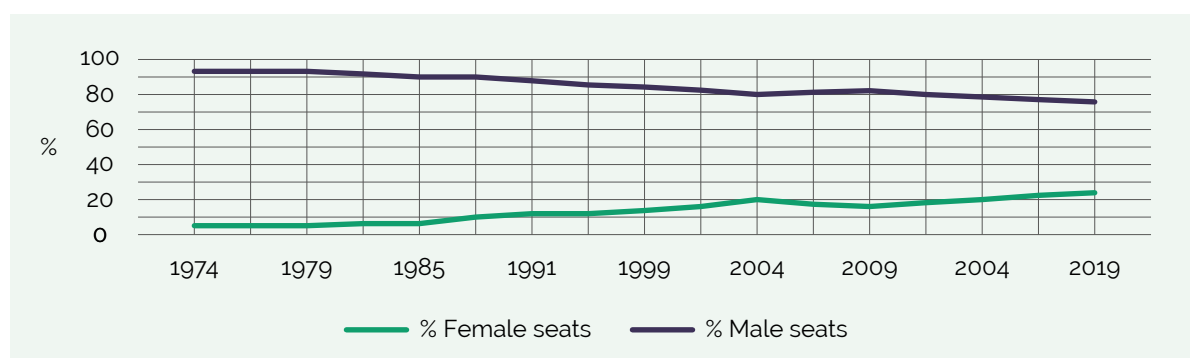
1   Carbert 2011; Buckley et al, 2015
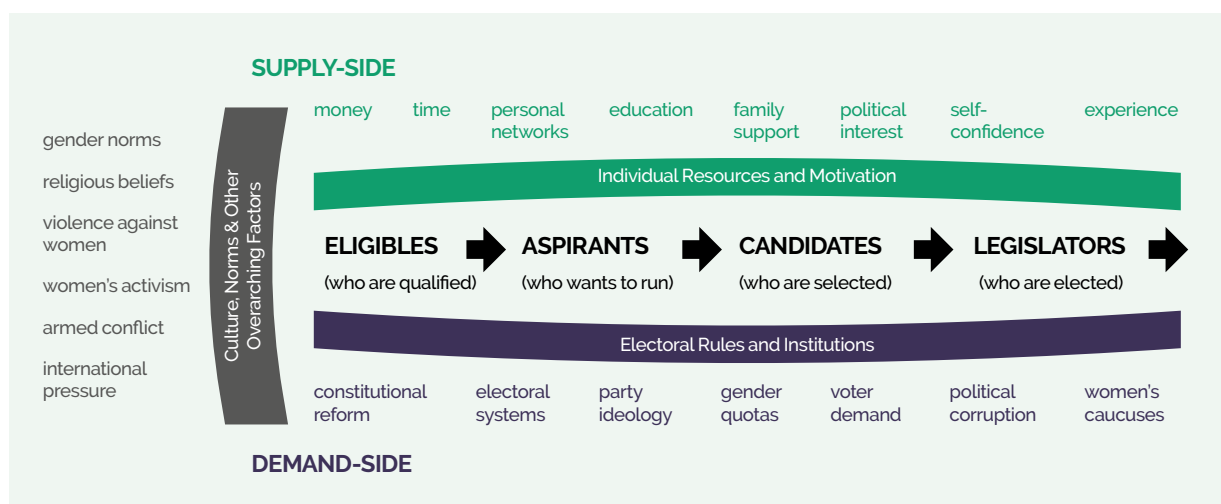2   Mackay, 2014, Fawcett 2017
3   Stainback et al, 2016
4   Hayes and Hibbing 2017
5   Buckley et al 2015

Scholars working in gender and politics research have mapped the 'pipeline' and the combination of demand and supply side dynamics to better understand how these affect rates of female representation. Analysis indicates that a combination of factors including informal institutions, networks and gendered power dynamics shape the process that brings women from the status of eligibility, aspirant to candidate and finally elected office. Research on women's access to local politics is increasing and organisations such as Fawcett (2017) in the United Kingdom have tried to map what may work to help increase women's access to local office.

While similar factors shape women's access to political office in both contexts, localism is a key issue that affects this process in Ireland[6] where local networks play a central role. However, scholars have identified a complex combination of factors (see Figure 2) as playing a part in this process and the interventions and strategies so far identified as efficacious in supporting women's entry to candidacy and office. Women do not experience a linear pipeline process, rather encounter a range of enabling and constraining factors that combine over time to support, encourage or derail their path towards elected office.

Context: Female selection and seat-winning in the 2019 local elections

Figure 3 disaggregates candidates and elected representatives by gender and political affiliation at the 2019 local elections. Although gender quotas apply to general elections only, all parties appear to have been more conscious of selecting women candidates to ensure there is a 'pipeline' of experienced women available to contest future general elections. However, as with previous local and national elections[7] a review of female candidacy rates across the parties shows that smaller parties ran more balanced tickets than Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. As a result, smaller parties tend to have better gender balance among their elected councillors (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: The influence of supply-side and demand-side factors

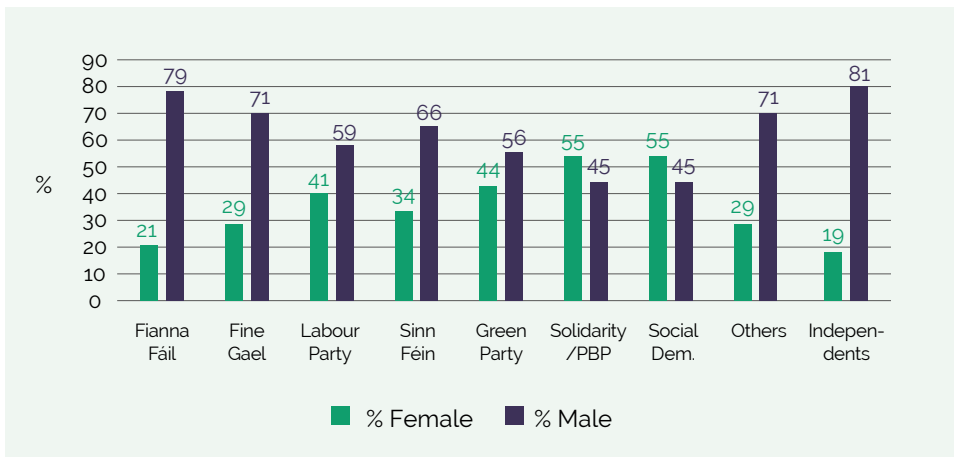*Sources: Adapted from Matland (2002); Paxton and Hughes (2016)*

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6   Culhane 2017

7   Buckley and Hofman, 2015

Figure 3: Candidates by party and gender, 2019 (%)

Source: Kavanagh (2019)

Figure 4: Seats by party and gender, 2019 (%)
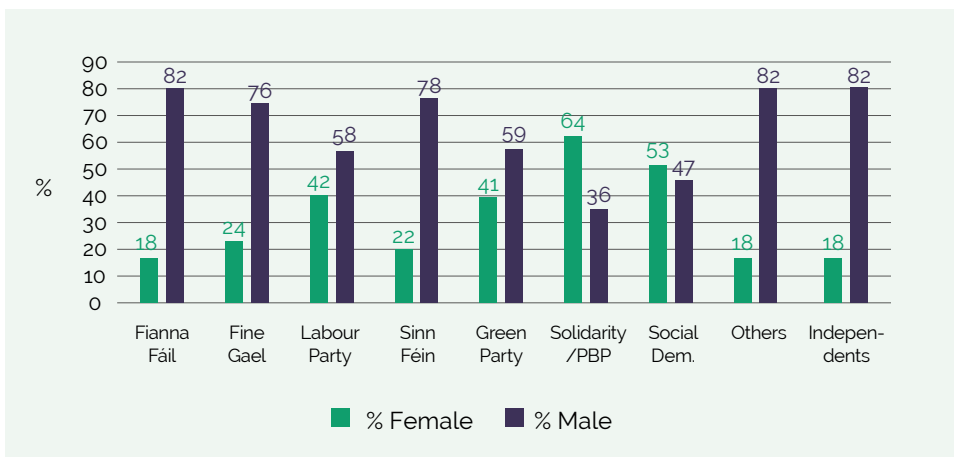
Source: Women for Election (2019)

Geography also matters for female candidacy and representation at a local level. The 2019 elections reveal a notable urban-rural divide in the likelihood of women being selected and elected, with urban areas overall considerably more gender-balanced than rural Ireland. Women accounted for 35% of candidates contesting for seats in urban electoral areas and 23% of candidates in the more rural constituencies.[8] Following the elections, councils with the highest levels of women are predominately in the Dublin and commuter-belt region (**Table 1**). Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown has the highest proportion of women councillors (48%), followed by Dublin City (41%), Kildare (40%), Wicklow (34%), South Dublin (33%), Cavan (33%), Louth (31%) and Meath (30%). At the other end of the scale, only one woman was elected in Longford (6%) and just two women in Waterford (6%). Mayo (7%), Offaly (11%), Carlow (11%) and Kerry (12%) are also highly male-dominated councils.

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8   Kavanagh, 2019

Table 1: Female representation in each Local Authority (2019 local election results)

Local Authority	No of Seats	No of Female Councillors	% Female
Carlow County Council	18	2	11
Cavan County Council	18	6	33
Clare County Council	28	4	14
Cork County Council	55	15	27
Donegal County Council	37	4	11
Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	40	19	48
Fingal County Council	40	11	28
Galway County Council	39	7	18
Kerry County Council	33	4	12
Kildare County Council	40	17	41
Kilkenny County Council	24	3	13
Laois County Council	19	5	26
Leitrim County Council	18	3	17
Longford County Council	18	1	6
Louth County Council	29	9	31
Mayo County Council	30	3	10
Meath County Council	40	12	31
Monaghan County Council	18	3	18
Offaly County Council	19	2	11
Roscommon County Council	18	3	17
Sligo County Council	18	3	17
Tipperary County Council	40	7	18
West Meath County Council	20	4	20
Wexford County Council	34	6	18
Wicklow County Council	32	13	34
Cork City County Council	31	6	19
Dublin City Council	63	26	41
Galway City Council	18	5	28
Limerick City and County Council	40	8	20
Waterford City and County Council	32	2	6
South Dublin County Council	40	13	33
Totals	**949**	**226**	**24**

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research methodology adopted a gender sensitive approach and feminist research practice[9] that combined desk research, analysis of existing data and quantitative and qualitative research with local councillors and key stakeholders. This included an innovative survey of sitting local councillors, semi-structured interviews with unsuccessful female candidates and with advocacy organisations interested in promoting women's representation in local government. Women's lived experiences are central sources of data. The combination of survey and interview data from a range of participants in different contexts sheds light on regional disparities and complex realities that women interested in and running for office encounter at the local level. The NWCI projects Women for Change, Women in Local Government (Celebration of 120 years) and recent submission to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee on 'Travellers: Towards a more equitable Ireland post-recognition' have all highlighted structural deficits that combine to maintain systemic underrepresentation of women and minorities in politics in Ireland. This research will build on these assessments and offer a basis to advance a strategy and set of recommendations to address the over representation of men in local government.

SURVEY OF THE 2019 ELECTED LOCAL COUNCILLORS: PIPELINE TO LOCAL OFFICE

Who did we survey?

Working from research on the factors shaping electoral candidacy[10], we constructed a survey aimed at learning about successful local candidates' experiences of candidacy, campaigning and holding local office. Our aim was to identify the resources that advantage candidates for local office in the Republic of Ireland and to assess how and why these forms of capital may be gendered in favour of males over females[11]. The survey also asked elected local councillors about their views on women's access to politics.

How did we get the data?

Constructing the sample was challenging given that contact details for local councillors are not accessible in a uniform or central location. The survey was disseminated by email which required us to manually search through all 31 local authority websites where we encountered a lack of uniformity and in some cases a deficit of functioning or available email addresses for councillors.

With 195 responses, the survey achieved a 20% response rate (of 948 local councillors). 76 responses were from females (39.2%) and 117 from males (60.3%). One respondent identified as Other (0.5%). We acknowledge that female councillors are oversampled relative to their actual proportion among local councillors (23.7%) (**Table 2**). We did not cross-tabulate these variables in a way that could compromise an individual's confidentiality or anonymity. This study was reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee.

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9   Letherby 2011
10   Norris and Lovenduski, 1995
11   Buckley and Hofman, 2015

Table 2: Survey sample versus actual distribution – Gender identity[i]

Survey Sample	Actual Distribution
76 female (39.2%)	226 female (23.7%)
117 male (60.3%)	722 male (76.3%
1 other (0.5%)	Unknown
195 total (100%)	948 total (100%)

Table 3 contrasts the political affiliation of the survey sample versus the actual distribution in the population. Overall smaller parties are over-sampled and the two largest parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, are under-sampled.

Table 3: Survey sample versus actual distribution – Party affiliation (2019 local election results)

Party	Survey sample (%)	Actual distribution (%)
Fianna Fáil	25.9	29.4
Fine Gael	21.2	26.9
Sinn Féin	11.4	8.5
Labour Party	10.4	6.0
Green Party	8.8	5.2
Social Democrats	4.7	2.0
Solidarity – People before Profit	1.0	1.2
Aontú	0.5	0.3
Independents 4 Change	0.5	0.3
Other	0.0	0.7
Independent	15.5	19.5

Profile of respondents

The survey data revealed that the majority of respondents were white Irish (99%). Male respondents were on average older than females and more likely to report being married. 22% of women who answered the survey are single compared to 16% of men. 54% of women respondents reported being married and 13% cohabitating. 67% of men respondents reported being married, with 11% cohabitating.

Table 4: Primary residence of respondents

Which of the following best describes your primary place of residence?	Which gender do you self-identify with?	
	Female	Male
City	26.32%	14.53%
Urban Town	27.63%	29.06%
Rural Town	11.84%	16.24%
Village	7.89%	13.68%
Countryside	26.32%	25.64%
No answer	0.00%	0.85%

Table 5: Age profile of respondents

Please specify which age category you are in.	Which gender do you self-identify with?	
	Female	Male
18-24	1.32%	3.42%
25-34	17.11%	14.53%
35-44	30.26%	22.22%
45-54	30.26%	25.64%
55-64	19.74%	20.51%
65+	1.32%	13.68%

Care Responsibilities of Local Councillors

Care has been identified as a significant factor influencing opportunities to enter politics.[12] Irish women spend on average double the time of men on caring and more than twice as much time on housework.[13] Over half of the men (54%) surveyed reported having no care responsibilities compared to 40% of the women. This may reflect the younger profile of women respondents, with 46% of females aged between 25 and 44 compared to 37% of males. 37% of women respondents indicated caring for a child, with 13% indicating care for an older or ill or disabled person. This compares with 34% of men reporting childcare responsibilities and 10% caring for an older, ill or disabled person. 13% of women survey respondents reported looking after the home on a full time basis compared to 2% of men. There is a higher proportion of men working full time in addition to council duties, with 46% of men reporting full time status compared to 19% of women. In addition, 20% of women who responded are working part time alongside their council role compared to 13% of men. Women councillors are often working a 'triple shift' combining paid work, unpaid care work and their council duties.[14]

Women respondents reported higher levels of education. Over half of them have a postgraduate degree compared to 27% of men. Research shows that women candidates often leverage education to compensate for a lack of local networks and other forms of gendered capital that advantage male access to political office.[15]

Factors that Support Candidacy and Electability

Residency:

Research on candidacy has established that residency is a key element of electability .Given the importance of place, name recognition and local reputation in local politics in Ireland, identification with the locality serves to distinguish candidates from one another within and across party lines.[16] 54% of men respondents were living in their constituency for their entire life compared to 31% of women. This may reflect the fact that historically women were more likely to move location when they got married, particularly in rural areas. This is an additional resource that can favour male candidates in highly localised electoral contests.

Table 6: Care responsibilities of respondents

Do you have any of the following caring responsibilities? Please select as many as apply.	Which gender do you self-identify with?	
	Female	Male
Childcare	36.59%	34.17%
Caring for a dependent with an illness/disability	6.10%	5.00%
Eldercare	7.32%	5.00%
No caring responsibility	40.24%	54.17%
Other	8.54%	0.83%
No answer	1.22%	0.83%

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12   Campbell and Childs, 2014
13   Russell et al 2019
14   Mackay, 2001

15   McGing, 2019
16   Childs and Cowley, 2011

Kinship networks:

Analysis of routes for men and women into political office have often detailed how family connections play a key role in advancing political careers at local and national level.[17] This factor is most relevant for women survey respondents, with 34% reporting that somebody in their family had held political office prior to their first successful election compared to 26% of men. Since family ties are in general more significant for women, without such links, we could predict even lower levels of women representation in the Republic of Ireland.

Party activism:

A long tenure in a political party advantages aspirants for elected office.[18] In this sample, male respondents were more likely to be long-term members, however a trend of longer membership for women was also evident. Party membership and activism remain a key prerequisite for candidacy and electoral success for both men and women. Local branch office holding is hugely important for building a local base, with men more likely to have held a role at branch level and women marginally more likely to have experience at constituency level. Office holding for survey respondents remained predominantly at the branch and/or constituency level, with little involvement in national party roles although interestingly political experience at this level is more significant for women than men. 26% of women and 22% of males had worked in a paid capacity for a TD, senator or MEP.

Previous political experience and community involvement:

Previous experience as a candidate has a strong effect, with 69% of men having previously ran for political office at local level, compared to just over 33% of women. This is illustrative of an increase in female candidacy in 2019 relative to previous local election contests.

Incumbency maintains a strong gendered effect, 63% of men having held local office prior to 2019 compared to 34% of women.

A quarter of women who responded held a role in a public sector body compared to 28% of men. 75% of women and 82% of men surveyed reported holding a role in a civil society or community organisation (this was a broad category including Tidy Towns etc.). This indicates the importance of local visibility for all candidates, however, it also reflects the high levels of representation of active women in civil society compared to party and electoral politics.

Local associations are also a key source of political capital. Approximately one-third of both male and female respondents indicated a role in a private community body such as a Chamber of Commerce.

Notably 54% of all men surveyed entering local government held a role in a sporting organisation, including the GAA, compared to 23% of women.

The role of the GAA has long been assumed as a central recruitment pool and support network for male politicians.[19] This data is a significant indicator of the prevalence and significance of this network for the advancement of political candidates. In our qualitative data we find that women candidates at the local level are also more than likely to be active in the GAA. However, we can suggest that they are more likely to occupy support roles (e.g. attending their children's matches) and therefore they may find it more difficult to leverage their involvement into a source of political capital.

While women are active in local community organisations, these spaces do not feature in a significant way as contexts where political parties seek candidates. 12% of women respondents indicated they held membership in a women's organisation. 20% of women and 17% of men respondents reported belonging to an organisation concerned with equality, diversity or human rights, reflecting these contexts as less important recruitment grounds for local politicians.

17   Galligan and Buckley, 2018
18   Norris and Lovenduski, 1995
19   Culhane, 2017

Involvement in a referendum campaign was more of a significant element in successful candidates' backstory, with 32% of women compared to 24% of men indicating involvement.

Preparing for campaigns:

Men respondents reported a longer lead in time in preparation for candidacy. 63% of men indicated planning for longer than a year to run compared to 46% of women, partly reflecting the higher proportion of male incumbents. We also note from a review of the narrative reporting on selections that some women candidates, particularly in the larger parties, were added to the ticket later on in the process. Time is a valuable resource for the preparation of an election campaign and women have less time at their disposal as a result of care responsibilities.[20] The practice of adding women to the party ticket later on in the election cycle and/or delaying selection conventions has implications for their capacity to plan, generate resources and mount a successful camapaign.

Encouragement to run matters for candidates, but especially for women, given the myriad of barriers they face in accessing political office.[21] Asked if they were encouraged to by anyone to stand, 68% of women respondents responded positively compared to 55% of men. Encouragement from party members and/or party branch or constituency office holders was an important source of encouragement for both genders. Family and neighbours/friends were also an important source of encouragement, particularly for women respondents.

Training is a key support for women interested in seeking political office.[22] 39% of women surveyed reported having received training from *Women for Election* prior to the 2019 election.

When asked if they were considering a run for national office, 18% of women answered yes compared to 10% of men.

Research shows that previous experience in local office is a key springboard to higher office for men and women in the Republic of Ireland, and when women serve in local government, the likelihood of election to the Dáil increases significantly.[23] Despite the high level of interest in a Dáil bid among these female respondents, the proportion of women representatives at local government level must be increased to meaningfully impact on gender representation in future general elections.[24]

Campaigning and canvassing:

Political and sociological resources are a critical element for campaigning for elected office.[25] Asked about resources for mounting a campaign, own income was key with women respondents slightly more dependent on family and friends for resources compared to men. Given the gender differentials in women and men's economic status, this has implications for women's access to adequate resources. Asked about support for running their campaign "on the ground", political parties were more important for women and family was an important source for both genders but more important for women than for men. The voluntary and community sector played a role in campaigning for 22% of women and 31% of men respectively. Overall family and political parties remain the most important source of support for both male and female respondents.

Campaigning and in particular canvassing is time intensive and requires candidates to spend evening hours and weekends away from family and care commitments. In response to the question of how caring responsibilities were managed during canvassing and other aspects of campaigning, three times the proportion of women than men reported bringing their children on canvassing duty. 16% of women and 9% of men reported being reliant on unpaid childcare and 9% of women and 4% of men indicated a reliance on paid care. Women are more likely to bring their children with them on the campaign and are more reliant on care than

20   Houses of the Oireachtas, 2009
21   Dittmar, 2015
22   McGing, 2019
23   Buckley et al, 2015
24   Buckley et al, 2015
25   Norris and Lovenduski, 1995

their male counterparts. Lone parents would seem to be specifically disadvantaged by these dynamics.

Notably, 51% of men (compared to 35% of women) surveyed answered *not applicable* to the question about managing childcare responsibilities during the campaign.

Attitudes about female representation in politics:

When asked about the reasons for the low proportion of women in Irish politics, both genders disagreed that this was due to a lack of experience, that women lack interest in politics or that women candidates lose votes. Respondents were more inclined to agree that women lack confidence and resources, with women in stronger agreement than men on both indicators. There was strong agreement across both genders that women do not come forward to seek candidacy. When asked if women placing their family first was a factor in the low numbers of women in politics, 79% of females strongly agreed/agreed. 52% of men also indicated agreement, yet 32% of men selected *neither agree nor disagree* suggesting men are reluctant to give an opinion or are more neutral on this issue. This data suggests that attitudes about family commitments shape candidacy for both women and men, yet have specific implications for women running for political office. Women respondents were considerably more likely than men to acknowledge that women face discrimination in public life (58% of women strongly agreed/agree and 37% of men). Councillors in general believed political parties offer women opportunities to enter political office, although women were more negative on this than men.

Gender quotas are a controversial albeit effective mechanism to increase women's candidacy and and/or representation levels.[26] When asked if they supported gender quotas, 68% of women respondents strongly agreed/agreed compared to 27% of men. 13% of men indicated that quotas were not at all important, compared to 5% of

women. Male resistance to affirmative action measures in politics is well documented and can have a "chilling effect" for women candidates selected in a quota system.[27] A majority of both genders agreed for the need for better childcare options for politicians. This was also the case for the option of more flexible working hours for local representatives. When asked about the need for greater financial support for women candidates, 47% and 19% of women respondents strongly agreed or agreed. 42% of male respondents disagreed, with a significant proportion indicating neutrality on this issue. Women and men agree with providing training programmes for aspirant women candidates, but women are more strongly in favour than men.

Gender equality issues in local government:

Having more women in local political office is suggested to raise the profile of gender equality as a policy issue.[28] This is somewhat supported in that over 70% of women respondents indicated that gender equality was either very important or fairly important. This said, over 50% of male respondents were also in agreement. However, 13% of male respondents indicated that gender equality was not at all important as an issue for local government. The corresponding figure for females was 5%.

Asked about the statement 'as to whether more women in politics would lead to better decision making at local level', 82% of women respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 56% of men.

34% of men indicated a neither agree nor disagree on this question perhaps having less direct experience of this phenomena. A majority of women and men strongly agreed/agreed that local government is a good place to progress women's policy issues.

Asked if they would describe themselves as a feminist politician 46% of men neither agreed nor disagreed, alongside 27% of women choosing this option. 60% of women either strongly

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26   McGing, 2019

27   Krook, 2016

28   Wangnerud, 2009

agreed or agreed with this statement, although almost 13% disagreed. This suggests that higher proportion of women councillors may raise the profile of feminist perspectives in council work.

The role of a local politician:

When asked about influence in their role as local councillors on specific issues, for many newly elected representatives this was an unknown. However, nearly double the proportion of men compared to women feel they have influence over the annual budget. This question may reflect the gendered perception of influence, where men overestimate their role but is also indicative of other gendered dynamics of length of tenure and experience (with women less likely to possess these). Both male and female respondents indicated a lack of influence over local economic processes, except for commercial rates with both genders indicating a perception of influence in this realm. Overall both genders indicated a role in local area plans and funding for the community and voluntary sector, rather than any direct influence over these areas. This reflects more general trends in local government reform and the changing landscape of responsibilities and resource base for local government more generally.

The survey also asked participants to reflect on the processes used to allocate or seek committee roles at local level. Male respondents were more likely to strongly agree that the process was efficient, while women were more likely to see the process as complicated. Women were also more likely to see the process as unfair. This may be indicative of an 'incumbency' effect, where men have more experience and a degree of comfort and familiarity with rules and processes.

Women are men are often assumed to have different perspectives and therefore pursue different issues in political office.[29] An expression of interest in specific issues during campaigning can help or hinder a candidate. Women respondents indicated a clearer and more consistent preference for a defined set of social issues. Poverty ranked high for women with 59% of women reporting it as a priority issue compared to 42% of men. Racism was indicated by 51% of women compared to 31% of male

respondents. 10% of men reported that racism was not important, indicating that they do not see this as an issue for local government.

Gender, Candidacy and Political Competition:

How gender affects political competition is well established with the barriers for women running for political office understood as higher than for men.[30] This is often understood with a pipeline analogy, that includes supply and demand side factors at play. Supply-side factors are understood to include the gendered division of labour in society that shapes women's access to resources that include time, money and experience that influence motivation, ambition and interest in politics alongside women's own strategic calculations of their potential and the costs of running. Demand side factors include electoral systems, party political culture and ideology, and understandings of voter demand that shape the processes both formal and informal of how candidates are selected. Once applicants come forward their selection as candidates hinges in large part on the preferences of political elites and their ideas about what makes a good candidate. Selection processes are shaped by conscious and unconscious forms of gender bias embedded in ideas about what makes the ideal candidate that has historically privileged stereotypically male traits. These are embedded in political institutional rules and party political norms and practices (both formal and informal) that shape the procedures and culture in which party decision making takes place. Selection of candidates, and the dynamics of political competition then often reflect, reinforce and reproduce broader patterns of societal gender relations that are identifiable in women candidates' uneven access to resources, visibility and influence alongside super surveillance of their performance reflected in gendered patterns of recruitment and candidate placement. [31] These factors are generally assumed to account for why women are both fewer in number in seeking selection and less likely to be selected as candidates.

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29   Wangnerud, 2009
30   Dittmar 2015, Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015; Kenny and Verge 2016
31   Kenny and Verge 2016

UNSUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES: INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES AND GENDERED ORGANISATIONS

As part of this research we conducted interviews with unsuccessful women candidates running in the 2019 local elections. The candidates represented a range of political parties and those who ran as independents. Interviewees were sampled from regions, urban and rural where women candidates had been particularly successful and where this was not the case. The interviews provide indicative rather than representative data, and reflect in part the difficulties of accessing participants who had experienced an unsuccessful run for political office. The methods used align with standards of validity in social scientific research and as an initial study this research points to the need for further exploration of the issue.

We place women candidates' experiences at the centre of the analysis to explore the gendered networks, capital and pathways to elected office at local level. We asked our interviewees to reflect on their journey towards candidacy, their experience of campaigning and how they navigated the aftermath of their defeat. We assessed the statistical evidence on the performance of our interviewees, to assess their performance against their chances for success e.g. whether they were running against incumbents and how competitive the ward was and the history of women's representation. While each woman's race is unique, what was evident was how across a diverse range of candidates, similar dynamics operated at local level and within political parties that gendered the experience of campaigning and ultimately the opportunities to secure election.

Participants' perspectives showed similarities in how institutional rules, cultural practices and aspects of social conservatism undermined women candidates' potential to succeed. How women candidates navigate electoral contests and how they experience defeat is in part influenced by political party strategy on the placement of women candidates.[32] In other words, women candidates are at times placed in contests where they are unlikely to succeed. Post-election party political response to unsuccessful candidates was also a key element in how women candidates processed their defeat, and in their assessment of any future plans to run for election.

Individual expectations, realism and optimism: From individuals to structures

The majority of interviewees had knowledge of the nature of political competition and were aware of what to expect in terms of public exposure, opponent strategies and the required investment of time and resources. Yet all were surprised at the difficulties they experienced and what they viewed as additional obstacles they faced as women candidates.

All candidates expressed a mixture of optimism and realism in their assessment of their chance for success. In particular, candidates running outside of the mainstream parties or in competitive 'two candidate' competitions and in areas with historically low levels of female representation, acknowledged the low probability of their success. This is important to recognise, as...

most of these unsuccessful candidates, were aware of the high bar they needed to pass over

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32   Kenny and Verge 2016

and the role of factors outside their control that could influence electability.

Interviewees were self-reflective about the choices they made in their campaigns, eager to discuss what they would have done differently and to 'own' what they perceived as their mistakes. They did not make excuses for their loss or place blame but were more interested in understanding how their experiences might be related to broader factors that suppress female candidacy and maintain the over representation of men in local political office.

Given their knowledge of political competition, their decision making around the launch of a bid was considered and deliberative and included the input of family and friends but was bolstered by the encouragement and enthusiasm of party officials. The women experienced, from their perspective, less party-political support than they anticipated. They experienced forms of opposition including those rooted in gender stereotypes and for some sexist behaviours and or harassment, yet all of those interviewed persisted with their campaigns. This indicates the seriousness in which these women candidates undertook their campaigns, and the responsibility they felt to their supporters.

All interviewees were keen to underline their motivation to be role models particularly for other women including young women considering a future in politics.

This responsibility to illustrate to others that women candidates can and should succeed at local level was a crucial motivating factor to launch a run and to continue even in difficult and unpromising circumstances.

While all of the interviewees expressed disappointment at the outcome, and some were clear that the experience had dissuaded them from a future run, all testified to the positive aspects of campaigning and their deep belief in the value of local political office. All those interviewed indicated their continued commitment to work for change in other capacities at the local level.

Journey to candidacy: Motivations, Encouragement and Selection

The candidates interviewed possessed many of the resources considered essential to seek an elected role, with most having high levels of educational attainment and were working outside the home in professional contexts.[33] Others had long-term involvement in community organisations and other forms of organisational experience at local level. Many had a long history of involvement in politics, either through a family connection, most often times a father or uncle involved in party politics or as a former politician at local level. These candidates recounted childhood experiences of being involved in campaigns 'at the kitchen table'. Some women also reported direct involvement since their teenage years in party politics, most often in supportive or committee roles, less often in senior decision making contexts. A smaller number of women were new to party politics, although they had been involved in community organising or canvassing on constitutional amendments on marriage equality or repeal.

Yet almost all did not consider a run for political office until they were approached and encouraged.

Most were asked directly by party officials or local elected representatives to consider running for local government. Some had not seen themselves as qualified to run or they had apprehensions about the process and what being elected would mean for their professional or family responsibilities. Women and men do assess the costs and benefits of political candidacy differently with many women having less confidence in their abilities. This also makes women more reliant than men on external encouragement to run for elected office.[34] Sanbonmatsu (2013) argues that women make the decision to run (or not) for office, more acutely aware of the potential costs to candidacy. Women also perceive the financial costs of

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33   Murray, 2015

34   Dittmar 2015

campaigns as a significant hurdle to candidacy and office holding.[35] The pressure to adapt to accepted norms of gender and/or candidacy, the anticipation of greater scrutiny, and the evidence of institutional racism and sexism are also unattractive to many who may otherwise pursue political office.[36] In weighing whether or not to run, women need to perceive the electoral terrain as navigable, political success as possible, and officeholding as worthwhile. In assessing the gender power dynamics at play in existing institutions, they may also need to see the potential for institutional evolution and change.[37]In line with this a core motivation to run expressed by all interviewees was a deep commitment to the idea of local democracy and advancing change for their constituents. Many reflected on the skills and experience that they have gained in education, employment and in family life and their desire to relay these into a political role. Others were motivated by their organisational or grass roots level involvement in referenda campaigns. Greater gender balance was also viewed as essential in improving the quality of local governance and as a motivating factor especially for candidates in areas of historic low female representation. Acting as a role model for other women, especially younger women was cited as especially influential in how these candidates weighed up the costs against the potential benefits of running. For many their candidacy was in itself an opportunity to disrupt gendered perceptions of who is best to run or lead.

Candidacy and Caring responsibilities:

The majority of those interviewed were married with children, although there were also lone parents and unmarried candidates without children. All women candidates indicated that child bearing was a significant variable in their decision making with regard to candidacy.

For some having young children had stopped them from even considering a run, for others they had consciously decided to run because their children were older and less dependent on them.

All interviewees stressed that the issue of childcare was a major constraint for female aspirants and candidates. Research confirms women's domestic and family responsibilities feature as a major supply-side factor in political representation, and one that constrains women once they are present in political institutions.[38] Moreover, gendered political institutions operate on the basis that political actors are 'unencumbered'. Women and their 'baggage', that is their children, their elderly parents, their homes and their relationships are problematized. This in turn impacts the design of political institutions, creating political practices, structures and norms that are inhospitable, if not exclusionary, for those with caring responsibilities.[39]

As more women run for office and are elected, political elites and voters may also question how women can serve constituents and take care of family responsibilities at the same time.[40] Women candidates, already aware of the 'cost' that a campaign would exact from their family responsibilities, were also aware that some would question how they could balance those commitments with the demands of being a local representative. Kinship or partner support enabled these candidates to manage the logistical elements of care responsibilities while campaigning. Yet many expressed how difficult this was to manage and characterised it as a constant source of stress throughout their campaign.

Time frame for Candidacy:

Many interviewees indicated that they been asked to run at relatively short notice. As one candidate stated,

"ideally you need to be running at least a year in advance for any realistic chance."

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35   Murray et al 2019
36   Dittmar 2015
37   Hawkesworth 2003
38   Mackay, 2001; Campbell and Childs 2014
39   Campbell and Childs 2014
40   Campbell and Childs 2014

A longer campaign window allows women, who have been historically marginalised and excluded from party politics, with the time needed to mobilise support and mount a competitive campaign. Longer and earlier contests may also provide non-traditional contestants with confidence that there is not a preferred candidate. There are many reports, in each election, of parties delaying and holding very short nomination contests to allegedly ensure the nomination of a favoured candidate.[41]

A minority of women had considered running for a longer period of time and had been preparing networks and increasing their local visibility for a number of years. Overall most unsuccessful candidates indicated that the short time frame was a significant factor in constraining their campaign and undermining their chances at success. Longer and earlier races likely signal to potential candidates that the nomination is indeed open for a competitive race and that the local constituency organisation does not have a strongly preferred candidate. It is not uncommon for local party constituency organisations to orchestrate late or short nomination contests to ensure that their preferred local candidate goes unchallenged or to meet a gender quota.[42]

Women may need more time to mobilise support and assemble the necessary resources (financial and otherwise) to be successful candidates compared to men. Earlier nomination contests may also leave more time for women to organise their lives and arrange the necessary family and personal support systems to enable an entry into political life. This is especially relevant given that family and childcare obligations fall disproportionately on women.

Convention Dynamics and Selection:

Candidate selection and recruitment has been notably described as the "secret garden" of politics — an obscure process, often hidden from view, that is regulated largely by internal party rules, informal practices, and power relationships. Party regulations may tell us very little about actual recruitment processes on the ground.[43] Even when female candidates are nominally selected, the process of their confirmation can be shaped by resistance from incumbents and myths associated with the use of gender quotas.[44] In the 2019 local election an incentive scheme that provided monetary rewards to parties that met a 30% quota of female candidates while a welcome initiative, may have encouraged parties to add female candidates at a relatively late stage in the electoral cycle reducing time to conduct a comprehensive campaign.

Many of those interviewed were 'added to the ticket' after a convention. For some, the process of selection was 'deeply bruising'. In these situations, they had been strongly encouraged to run, and were given assurances that their candidacy would be well supported, yet at convention they had not received the support they expected and or another candidate had emerged 'out of the blue' to contest the seat. For some women the process of selection had left them feeling undermined and de-legitimated as they embarked on their campaign. As one candidate stated, "I felt betrayed and on the back foot as a I began my campaign". Others reported being described as the 'quota candidate' in a disparaging way. Another candidate recounted being assured they would be supported as the sole contender at convention, yet when the time came 'no-one got behind me'. This was a "horrible experience". She entered the competition after being added to the ticket, which in turn left her open, from her perspective, to being questioned.

The timing of and manner of selection matters. A typical explanation for women's lower rates of participation in party and electoral politics is a lack of resources. This includes both socioeconomic resources such as time and money[45] and political resources such as knowledge, interest and efficac.[46] Given that women tend to have fewer of these resources, and that in most political parties membership is predominantly male, it should not be

41   Cross and Pruysers, 2019
42   Cross and Pruysers, 2019
43   Bjarnegard and Kenny 2015
44   Krook 2014
45   Norris and Lovenduski, 1995
46   Buckley et al 2015

surprising that women candidates may be viewed as "outsiders". As such how they are selected is consequential to perceptions about their credibility and ultimately electability. The dynamics of nomination contests are key elements shaping women aspirants and candidates' assessment of contesting elections at the local level.

Local networks as gendered capital

Localism and incumbency act as informal norms of candidate requirement and selection in Ireland. They are in effect unwritten codes that determine the terms of access and they work as gender and power mechanisms that favour male selection prospects.[47] A strong clientelist network is another informal prerequisite for becoming a candidate.[48] Yet, these informal "rules of the game" have gendered consequences, as women are far less likely to be in strategic positions with access to the resources needed to build and maintain these networks, make political careers, and gain electoral power. At the local level, a web of organisations are central hubs for resources, visibility and support essential to launch and secure political office.

While nearly all of the unsuccessful women candidates were involved in a number of ways in their local area, their involvement had not leveraged them the influence and resources they observed for their male opponents. Our survey data suggests that electability at the local level is contingent in part on involvement with organisations such as the GAA and other local civic and business groups. This said, women interviewees reported involvement in these contexts but occupied support or secretarial roles, and as such their labour while essential to the operation of such organisations did not afford them influence and visibility. Such organisations are sites where local candidates draw human capital support for canvassing and fund raising. Involvement can also reinforce name recognition and reputation at the local level. These resources were less available for women candidates. Such in-kind resources are essential in maintaining and articulating a campaign, they are less tangible than other kinds of financial support,

yet can advantage one candidate over another. For instance the labour required to hang posters and leaflet can be acquired through volunteer networks or purchased requiring use of finite resources. Interviewees indicated that for the most part they had to rely solely on family and friends for support with these tasks and were aware of their relatively smaller 'network' or base of support in this regard. While success may require networks, this resource seems to be gendered in ways that disadvantage women candidates.

In effect women candidates, excluded from local valuable powerbroker networks, were in turn less able to raise funds and access human capital and were more likely to rely on support of family and friends. Our survey data also indicates political parties used such networks, specifically sport and business related, to groom or recruit candidates. Women are more likely to participate in parent or resident associations or women's community organisations where parties are less likely to seek potential candidates.

Party support: Mixed signals

Political parties are gendered organisations, in that they are characterised by traditional (and often unacknowledged) conceptions of gender relations that generally disadvantage women.[49] The gatekeeping of resources or a lack of proactive support for women candidates who may be disadvantaged compared to other candidates can undermine women candidates especially in competitive races. Identifying and creating political opportunities for female candidate requires considered and context specific supports that include placing candidates in areas where they have the best chance to succeed.

While some candidates referred to their party as initially supportive, a common denominator for many candidates was a lack of financial and personal backing for their campaigns. This was especially frustrating for some candidates, as they had been encouraged to run, yet found their campaigns lacked consistent and or comprehensive support. As one interviewee stated, "at the beginning it seemed that the

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47   Culhane 2017, Galligan and Buckley 2018
48   Franceschet and Piscopo 2014
49   Lovenduski 2005

party was fully on board, but then in reality there was very little tangible help." A consistent theme throughout the data was that despite proclamations of party support, "in the end you were on your own." While the nature of elections often requires candidates to invest high levels of personal resources into their campaigns, for first time women candidates, additional supports from party organisation may be required to compensate for structural gendered disadvantages.

Mixed experience of canvassing:

Some interviewees characterised canvassing as generally unproblematic, affirming, humbling and of specific value in allowing them to get a deeper sense of constituents' concerns. Most described it as a privilege and an 'eye opening' experience. Most also realised that a positive response 'on the doorsteps' did not guarantee support at the ballot box. Yet all reported incidences of patronising or sexist behaviour. For some women candidates this was described as 'normal' or expected and included remarks about their appearance, to name calling and or sexual innuendo. Candidates that had high visibility in repeal campaigns did also experience verbal harassment, occurring in both rural and urban contexts. There was also reported incidences of a more serious nature, that included stalking and for ethnic minority candidates' racist and sexist abuse. While much of this occurred in the process of canvassing in public or on door steps or on door steps, social media was also an arena where women candidates experienced abuse. Sexism and sexual harassment in politics has been identified as key institutional and cultural barriers for both women candidates and those elected to office.[50]

Women candidates all relied on a core group of family, friends or people they knew through parents association for canvassing. This illustrates how women candidates have less valuable organisational networks and are more reliant on family and friends for canvassing support. Many also indicated that at times they ended up canvassing either alone or with perhaps only one or two supporters. Women candidates had to approach canvassing in a strategic way as canvassing alone in isolated rural areas or

in large housing estates particularly in evening hours was generally considered ill advised.

While some interviewees reported having their teenage children accompany them or help them distribute leaflets or put up posters, most did not bring children along. Arranging care of younger children was cited as a significant barrier for women who at times ended up canvassing during the day while children were at school rather than at the prime evening slots. One party did attempt to arrange a network of care for women candidates with young children. In effect for almost all interviewees,

"childcare was the biggest stumbling block"

and was noted previously as "definitely keeping women out of politics". For others they had consciously delayed running or refused earlier approaches because their children were too young or 'taking exams.'

Traditional views - local but not local enough:

When asked to reflect on why they thought their campaigns had failed, women candidates were self-aware and thoughtful underlining that they felt that they could not have worked harder. At the same time they were equally ready to disclose examples of where they had miscalculated, made mistakes and overall were open to sharing "where things had gone wrong". However, the short time frame and lack of networks already signalled above, were central in their reflections. Others located resistance to their candidacy as a specifically gendered issue, where in some areas,

'the idea of a female councillor is still not a runner'.

Traditional ideas within the electorate and parties at local level about who is best suited for the role were cited as a specific constraint in rural contexts. Candidates suggested that in part women found it difficult to get elected because of the persistence of older ideas about women's role in the home and as the primary source of childcare. These ideas placed women candidates, especially if they had children as ultimately

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50   Collier and Raney 2018

incompatible with the qualities and capacities required for a local councillor. However, this was not just about the difficulties associated with reconciling family life with working hours of a local councillor. This was a more fundamental belief that politics is a 'dirty and tough business' a view communicated to them that suggested women lacked the qualities needed to survive a political career. This was evident, in responses they received which included,

"why would a nice girl like yourself want to get involved in such an unpleasant job."

Fundamentally, interviewees speculated that despite their accomplishments in the public sphere of employment and education, there was still a sense that they either lacked the capacity or 'know how' to get 'things done' at the local level. For some interviewees this was exacerbated if they had left the area for a period of time for higher education and or employment. In this case ideas about women's lack of suitability for elected office interacted with claims made by competitors that they 'were not from here' or 'had lived away and did not understand local issues'.

Even for women candidates with a long tenure in an area, if this was their first candidacy, they were characterised as 'not one of us' which they believed worked to undermine their credibility. Some interviewees described practices including other candidates 'buying rounds of drinks in the local pub' or using local contacts to resolve privately problems including poor road conditions during their campaign. These tactics were described by women candidates as 'old school' and clientelist and not how they perceived a campaign should be run. What it means to be local is gendered and reliant on both geographical connections but made legible through being embedded in local social, economic and political networks. The later 'capital' was most easily leveraged by male candidates. Political experience, name recognition, and reputation in the local area equate to electability, and these are the key attributes local party leaders look for when selecting candidates and that candidates use to differentiate themselves from opponents (even within their own party).[51]

Campaigning: a gendered experience

While all political campaigning involves making or discrediting claims to credibility, women candidates perceived some forms of campaign rhetoric to be gendered in specific ways. Personal attacks on their credibility were linked to assumptions about where they should prioritise their time and energy, especially if they were mothers to small children. Media engagements, especially local radio was singled out as an arena where they had faced in their view gendered or sexist assumptions and behaviours. One interviewee noted being consistently asked questions in media engagements about her home life, her childcare arrangements and her views on issues she perceived to be stereotypically understood as women's issues. Overall most interviewees contended that in their experience different standards were applied to women running for office compared to men. A common element amongst all interview data on the issue of campaigning, was the sense that the female candidates often 'were made to feel that they did not belong'.

The job of a councillor: time and money

The low pay and working conditions of local councillors has been an issue for advocacy groups and also featured here as part of unsuccessful candidate's assessments. Many interviewees remarked on how for low paid women or lone parents, seeking local office and or then acting as a local representative would be extremely difficult in financial terms. Many of the candidates outlined their reliance on personal and family funds for the campaign alongside the salary of their partner or spouse to compensate for time they had taken off work to conduct their campaign. All indicated that they would have to continue if elected in paid employment alongside their council duties in order to meet their financial commitments. While committed to the role, many reflected on how in reality they would have managed the demands of the role including evening meetings, attendance at social events, funerals etc.

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51   Buckley and Brennan 2017

Aftermath: retention of 'failed' candidates

All of the interviewees described the emotional toll of their unsuccessful bid. Interviewees used words such as trauma, grief and characterised it as 'a very difficult time of my life'. The physical and emotional toll for women, particularly those with significant work and/or family commitments that now required immediate attention, was evident in statements such as "I was feeling very low and exhausted but had no choice but to get back to work to make up for the time I had taken off to campaign." Candidates outlined how they had felt let down by their party and or people in their local community that had not supported them at the ballot box. Disappointment was then not just on personal level, but connected to the feeling of letting their supporters down especially, "this was a huge responsibility as I had the backing of so many people including young women."

Yet many of the interviewees felt 'abandoned' after their loss, recalling experiences in the count centres in both urban and rural areas of being literally left standing on their own once the results were clear. Others observed other unsuccessful women candidates in count centres, with little or no support aside from direct family. In the days and weeks after their campaign loss, aside from an initial phone call in the immediate aftermath, women reported, "not one person from the party approached me or came to see me and how I was doing." Asked about advice for other women seeking local office, one interviewee stated, " make sure you are physically and emotionally fit, you really need to be made of stone and 100% committed, even then if you lose the disappointment will affect you in ways that you can't imagine." Another interviewee stated that when she raised the issue of 'being dropped' directly after her loss, she was told "well that's politics for you." This she felt was used often as a way of concealing differential treatment of candidates and a lack of care and support more generally for newcomer or 'non-normative' candidates outside of the usual 'mould.'

Most interviewees indicated that they would not seek re-election, although some did suggest they might run again if given the appropriate political party support. All of the interviewees endorsed the idea of a gender quota at local level. Asked to reflect on changes needed to better support women candidates at the local level, most interviewees concurred that political parties needed to take the lead in moving beyond superficial forms of support for women seeking election, to more substantive and coherent efforts to embed a commitment to gender parity in cultural and practical terms. This included longer term strategy for supporting and preparing female candidates. Training programmes, supported by government and parties and available in both rural and urban contexts. Such initiatives were perceived as essential in changing a "male system, designed by men and run by men."

Campaigning as a positive experience:

Despite their lack of success, some candidates in particular those focussed on running again in the future, were keen to stress how much they had learned from the process. The majority of unsuccessful candidates also indicated that they had received significant support from their 'campaign team' and had enjoyed many aspects of the process of seeking elected office. Meeting one on one with constituents in the community, learning more about the issues facing their localities, gaining confidence in public speaking and learning the ropes of a campaign were all cited as immeasurably positive experiences. Some also recounted support and friendship from other candidates, mostly women and across party lines. All candidates expressed feelings of satisfaction, accomplishment and pride in their candidacy especially as first time women candidates.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS: SUPPORT AND ADVOCACY

As part of the study stakeholders from relevant sectors were interviewed for their views, experiences and recommendations on improving women's representation in local government. These included organisations advocating for local councillors, representing women from ethnic minority communities, Travellers and migrants, women's organisations involved in community development and those working specifically to equip women candidates to run for political office. While we worked to include a diverse range of organisations advocating for greater female representation in politics, we acknowledge that our sample was limited and does not include organisations representing other categories of women (or woman identified) including those with disabilities.

An Inside View: Local Councillors Representative Organisation

Many stakeholders drew attention to how the 'terms and conditions' of local elected representatives play in a role in constraining women's access to local office. The representative organisation for local councillors the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) acknowledged the current review of the role of local councillors by Ms. Sara Moorhead, SC and efforts to improve women councillors access to maternity leave. However, this organisation drew attention to changes including the abolishment of town councils as disadvantageous in reducing the presence of women as elected representatives. However they believe the low levels of women in local office was best explained as a supply side issue. Working from the input of its members, it was suggested that a loss of privacy and extra scrutiny of councillors was of particular concern and the "shift from being a private citizen to being 'fair game' coupled with antisocial hours combined to make the job unattractive to many women." From their perspective "if the terms and conditions for all councillors were improved all boats would rise."

How best to 'attract' more women into considering a run for local office is an issue that the organisation has grappled with. AILG commissioned a survey in 2016 that revealed gendered burdens for women councillors particularly in rural areas. A study group convened in 2017 composed in part of women councillors was also tasked with examining the issue. However, its conclusions were inconclusive. There was also a recognition of regional disparities with more progress made in urban compared to rural contexts. Based on the experience of male and female councillors, it was suggested that gatekeeping institutions such as the GAA or the IFA were more important in rural contexts and worked in different ways to support male candidacy while less advantageous for female candidacy and electability.

The slow progress made in female representation in the 2019 local elections was considered disappointing as expectations were high given the role of women at the local level in constitutional referenda campaigns. Other possible factors put forward for this outcome included low turnover in seats more generally. Solutions put forward included going back to the beginning, schools, Dáil Óg to raise awareness and create a sense that local office is an important and an appropriate role for women." There was also an assertion that gender was not the only issue of under representation, and that other sectors in society were also under-represented including other nationalities. Overall the organisation has a strong interest in addressing the dearth of female councillors, yet the issue is perceived as complex and that "there is no magic bullet" available to resolve the over representation of men in local elected office. While low levels of women in elected office

animate discussions amongst councillors, to date there has been a lack of agreement about the most appropriate remedies and actions to take to resolve the lack of gender parity.

Training Women Candidates: Women for Election

Established in 2012, Women for Election (WFE) equips and trains women interested in a run for political office. Initially the organisation had calibrated their programmes to coincide with the electoral cycle. More recently they recognised that the best approach is to take a longer view, with a central recommendation on the need for a longer term approach to providing support to potential women candidates from diverse backgrounds. In their experience, while women on the programmes indicate an interest in training for campaigning it is their modules on building confidence that are evaluated by participants as most valuable. The training programmes are non-partisan and focussed on "the practical nuts and bolts of how to get elected." They reported that political parties use their service to support female candidates especially closer to electoral competitions. Training often centres on equipping women to present themselves and communicate in ways that resonate with the public and parties while maintaining their sense of authenticity. Media performance and the technical elements of building a campaign also feature.

The organisation is conscious of a lack of diversity within the pool of female candidates and works to offer free or subsidised training to women in poverty, ethnic minority, migrant and asylum seeking women interested in political office. For women who are new to the Irish context, educational content on the political and electoral system is an essential element of training. This training is operated in partnership with organisations representing diverse groups and includes a focus on issues including racism.

Women for Election believe that supports for women must recognise the urban rural divide. In particular rural areas, where few candidates run are identified as contexts where training is needed, but where resources and networks are absent. However, rural areas vary and different contexts present different challenges.

Efforts to address these issues need to happen now not in four years' time as local elections "tend to be forgotten about and not planned for in the long term."

Parties should also be involved in succession planning that places gender representation at its centre including identifying women candidates where a vacancy arises for co-option. Gender quotas at local level are recommended but with sanctions.

The experience of WFE indicates that often female councillors as with all councillors face challenges presented by anti-social working hours and relatively low pay. This presents a particular challenge for women working in low paid jobs. In addition, working practices should change where "We must make it normal to bring children to meetings, to breastfeed at meetings." In working with female elected representatives, this organisation offered additional insight commenting that

"Getting elected is one challenge after that may arise a series of negotiations that women are marginalised from, and this results in them not accessing the most important roles. The outcome is that we find women councillors being nominated to unpaid roles on boards."

In this sense, access to political office does not translate into influence in the same way for male and female councillors.

Supporting women on the ground: Women's Community Development Organisations

Women's organisations identified structural constraints on women candidates that included the responsibility for childcare and care work and the gender pay gap that reduced women's economic resources to launch a campaign and or sustain themselves and their families given the pay and conditions of local elected office. Recent research confirms the gendered penalty that care work paid and unpaid places on women in Ireland.[52] Organisations also identified masculine organisational culture and sexism as specific barriers to women's engagement with local governance and or interest and capacity to seek elected office. These barriers, are confirmed in our interview and survey data as acting as 'brakes' affecting women's motivation and experience of candidacy to different degrees in both urban and rural contexts. However, these obstacles create specific barriers for younger women, lone parents, women in poverty, ethnic minority and migrant women, from aspiring to and or being successful as candidates for elected office.[53]

"Longford county council has had no more than 2 women elected in the past twenty years, in 2019 that number halved, there are now 17 male councillors and one female councillor"

Women's' Community Development Organisations such as *Longford Women's Link (LWL)* have been involved in training programmes for female candidates since 2009. The Women's Manifesto Project, is an example of efforts to raise women's rates of participation in and awareness of decision making at the local level. This programme alongside other initiatives linked to Local Government policy and strategy have worked to establish regional networks with reach across local government and civil society groups that enabled women to secure roles in local decision making structures. These include Education Training Boards, Public Participation Networks, Local Community Development Committees and Strategic Policy Committees. These programmes have benefited from the support of Department of Local Government and philanthropic agencies. They delivered tangible outcomes that increased often marginalised women's knowledge of and participation in local governance.[ii] Funding streams have ended for some of these programmes, which in turn created a challenge to maintain momentum. Alongside these efforts, LWL have built an evidence base of women's experience of and access to local government that informed a series of reports focussed on making local authorities and councils more accessible. Other programmes have addressed supply side dynamics, on initiatives such as the See Her Elected programme organised with the North West 50:50 group, that work to secure gender parity in elected office.[iii]

Addressing Supply Side Factors:

Organisations such as LWL have worked with NWCI in their Women for Change project aimed at supporting a diverse range of women's representation and participation in decision making in their local communities. Assessment of these programmes suggests a range of initiatives at different levels has proven most powerful in supporting women to engage with local governance including a possible candidacy for local office. These include making links between women's diverse experiences and deficits in gender equality at local level. Filling knowledge gaps about how local government works, workshops aimed at personal development, leadership training and tactical orientation on how to campaign to seek policy change. These programmes had worked to generate interest among participants to seek political office. For instance, organising for local women to attend council meetings as members of the public gallery, had in itself a demystifying effect, with many women participants exposed for the first time to the mechanics of local democracy in action. Other organisations arranged for women to attend leader's questions in the Dáil and to observe networking between politicians in the broader social context of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

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52   ESRI 2019
53   Friedenvall 2016

What is clear is that educational programmes on the role of local authorities and local elected officials have provided women insight into processes and duties associated with these contexts. This was essential in "putting the idea of assuming a role on a board or running for elected office as an option for women and even as a career for some." Other partnerships have included organisations such as Irish Rural Link and cross border initiatives on gender equality and peace such as the Next Chapter.

Given a decade of work at the local level and the 'on the ground' in supporting women, particularly disadvantaged women, to participate in local governance, LWL were particularly disappointed at the low levels of women elected in the region in 2019.[iv] This was consequential given the significant political, social and economic challenges facing the region, including "the impact Brexit will have on rural women in Ireland".

Supply and demand interact in rural areas:

Supply side constraints in rural areas were identified as important in supressing rates of female candidates and the subsequent low rates of success of those women who did run for elected office. Rural contexts had very specific challenges related to long traditions of political dynasties as routes to elected office[54] and in some areas "no culture of women going forward". Where little tradition of women in elected office existed, it was suggested that sexist stereotypes can be left unchallenged regarding the fit between political office and ideas about women's societal roles. The density of social ties in smaller communities can generate strong support for candidates but can in turn narrow the field and exclude 'newer' candidates from essential sources of support.[55]

For organisations that had supported female candidates they observed that most of the successful women had strong party links. Other women that had lost contests recounted

how they struggled to be considered as local despite being resident for 7 or 8 years in their constituency they "were still considered outsiders and also disadvantaged by having no family name behind them". In addition, the 'machinery' of the GAA and other organisations, acknowledged as vital organs of community life, are observed to maintain continuity in the kinds of candidates going forward and those elected. This confirms findings in our survey data and candidate interview data where respondents emphasized the essential role of the GAA in processes of candidate selection and campaigning. Local women are involved in community organisations yet "The Irish country woman's association might be relevant for some candidates but it doesn't have the same power or resources as the GAA." Involvement in senior roles in organisations such as the GAA were considered as "key to electability in that you have to be visible somewhere and well networked with name recognition." Research confirms a preference for parliamentarians that can claim 'local roots', this intensifies in local electoral contests, works at different intensities in urban and rural areas yet has exclusionary implications, especially for historically underrepresented groups that do not conform to masculine ideas about what a good candidate is.[56]

Political Parties: Key drivers of change

The major party-level factors that influence the representation of women include the composition of party selectorates[57], candidate selection rules and party ideology (Krook, 2010). Largely left out of this party-level story is what political parties do on the ground. For many parties, it is their local organisation that plays a crucial role in identifying, recruiting and nominating candidates for the general election[58]. Parties act as crucial gatekeepers to elected office.[59]

Political parties are seen by women's community organisations as key actors with the power to progress women's representation. Political parties had engaged periodically with many of these organisations, but not in their view

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54   Galligan and Buckley 2018

55   Culhane 2017

56   Quinlivan and Weeks, 2009; Child and Cowey 2011

57   Pruysers et al., 2017

58   Cross and Pruysers, 2019

59   Norris and Lovenduski, 1995

not always in a consistent or proactive manner. Lists of female candidates were supplied to the equality officers of parties, but there has inconsistent engagement. Political parties have generally failed to move beyond their usual networks when seeking candidates.

It was also observed that in general women were less likely to occupy roles of influence and visibility in local party structures and this seemed to also diminish these 'party' women's possibilities to run. Research confirms where local party associations have women in positions of power and where they that hold earlier and longer nominations, they are significantly more likely to see a woman enter the contest.[60]

Support for Female candidates:

Female candidates working with these organisations shared experiences of exclusion and or marginalisation in party political contexts. This was reported to organisations as a form of male organisational culture and practice that shaped aspects of local democracy such as speaking time, where women experienced forms of silencing or difficulties in getting their voice heard. Confirming our interview data with female candidates, organisations relayed how "Female candidates – expected a machine behind them – but found that they were on their own." Some women reported their perception that they were a 'sweeper candidate' placed there to satisfy internal party efforts to achieve a gender quota.

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60   Cross and Pruysers, 2019

WHAT WORKS?

Stakeholders concurred that training programmes needed to be long-term and well resourced, ideally building capacity now for the 2024 elections. A more holistic approach to developing women's political agency included exposing women to local council processes through attendance at council meetings, and on a more fundamental level building a knowledge base on the electoral system, mechanisms and processes to "take the mystery out of politics." Such programmes need to be better funded particularly at the local level "and not only by the big national organisations."

Gender quotas for candidates at the local level were also a central recommendation. The 2016 general election had informed these organisations perspectives and established how a punitive gender quota could deliver tangible outcomes for women's representation. However it was remarked "But they are only part of it, we really need to encourage women with a wraparound support network. The bigger question is "why is it going so right for men?" Ultimately, positive supports for female candidacy included maternity leave for councillors, better wages and family friendly timetabling of meetings.

The Women's Caucus

With only eight female Councillors in Limerick city and county compared to 32 men, the representation of women in the Limerick Council is at just 20%.

The National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks, NCCWN Limerick women's Network, also a participant in the NWCI Women for Change Project, has a long tradition of supporting women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds in community action at local level. Working with local female councillors and drawing on research establishing the main barriers for women in accessing political office, NCCWN Limerick Women's Network have developed a specific programme, Representing Women, that will allow women to learn more about the system before they commit to public representation roles.

While newly elected female councillors had engaged with this training, Limerick Women's Network had also moved in June 2019 to construct a local Women's Caucus. Working from the National Women's Party Caucus established in 2017, this was the first structure of this kind at the local level in Ireland. The first session with local female councillors had "allowed them to see themselves as a group and aimed at taking a multiparty approach to work at the local level on women's issues". This space had enabled women to transcend party lines to share their experiences and process the 'emotional' elements of running and now assuming office. A key aspect of making the caucus work is to provide a space for trust to be established between female councillors. This is enabled by the fact that many issues are endorsed at the national level and not up for debate. However, there is "also an effort made to build community in the group". Women's caucuses have proven to be important contexts to support all party efforts to secure progress on women's issues such as period poverty in Ireland. They are also contexts that can provide space to confront masculinized institutionalized rules and norms in political institutions.[61] They are also an opportunity for female politicians to build their understanding of gender equality yet they are not absent of competitive dynamics as women fully anticipate being in contest with each other in the next electoral cycle. Fundamentally they offer a context for female politicians to construct their own gendered network to leverage common experiences where they occur and to collaborate in ways that may address issues of gender inequality.[62] Caucuses can also have role modelling

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61   Adams et al 2019
62   Childs and Allen 2019

effects wherein they provide the public and in particular women with examples of how women politicians can effect change, and how gender can be the basis for forms of political work.[63]

Limerick Women's Network, has also worked with national organisations dedicated to training women interested in political office. Working with Women for Election they had provided training programmes that educated disadvantaged women about politics, explaining the ideological spread across parties and offering opportunities for women to locate their own values and align with a political party of their choosing. These programmes were evaluated as most helpful when they did not try to "fix women" but focused on increasing personal effectiveness.

Other women's development programmes such as the cross border Next Chapter, offers capacity building and media training for women interested in local politics. Women who participate are often older and already politicised through working in community organisations dedicated to local development and peace keeping in the border region. Many participants already belong to political parties and work across the border counties. A minority of these women are elected representatives or did run in 2019. Three first time candidates took part in the 2019 programme but were observed to have not returned to the programme since they lost their respective contests.

For all of these organisations, understanding the distinct dynamics of rural and urban contexts in shaping women's interest in and capacity to engage with local politics is essential if progress is to be made. As one representative stated "the rural context is a key variable, there is a general lack of opportunity and training outside of the cities and large towns in particular and even in contrast between East and West coasts." Urban areas, especially those with significant pockets of deprivation can also be characterised by low levels of connection with politicians, low interest in electoral politics and or distrust of political processes that combine to distance women from engaging with politics as voters as well as potential candidates. The most successful efforts to breach these gaps in knowledge, interest and awareness had involved groups working together

and designing context specific networking events that enabled women to " become aware that 'we can do this' and that politics is not only for people in suits in Dublin. You don't need to study politics or law, politicians are ordinary people."

In the 2014 local elections 3 identifiable migrant background candidates were elected and in 2019 this had increased to 9, still less than 1%. Migrant candidates were majority male however 3 men and 6 women were elected.

In 2019, 4 candidates in local elections openly identified as Travellers and 3 of these were women and none were elected.

Indigenous and Ethnic minority women and political candidacy:

While many stakeholders suggested that supply side factors were driving the low levels of women in local elected office, with statement such as the "biggest barrier is that women won't put themselves out there", other organisations were keen to emphasise structural factors that suppressed demand for women especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Weak demand to recruit women from indigenous or ethnic minority communities for candidacy interacted with structural constraints that exacerbated the existing challenges that majority community women face in accessing political office.

The National Traveller Women's Forum work to include Traveller women in national and local decision-making structures, with some success placing women on committees on Health and Education matters to input into the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy. This organisation also supports a network of Traveller women's groups at local level that aim to increase the visibility of Traveller women in policy making. This includes Local Traveller Accommodation Committees in local authorities. Traveller women are then politically active and eager to participate but

"these are always not easy spaces – but despite this, women work hard

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63   Mahoney and Clark 2018

to try and shape local authority processes."

However, in some contexts local committees that deal with Traveller issues do not function well which frustrate women who dedicate their time to participation. From this perspective, Traveller women report when they participate in local processes at times 'power' leaves the room and decisions are made elsewhere. Traveller women also face obstacles including challenges with literacy and organisational cultures that can make meetings inaccessible or alienating, including agenda and minutes being issued at short notice. All of this combines to undermine Traveller women's efforts to remain politically engaged.

Racism is placed at the centre of analysis by organisations aiming to increase Traveller women's representation. For instance, this may occur in local political discourse where rhetoric used to resist allocation of Traveller accommodation may use racial and ethnic stereotypes that demean Traveller experiences. This acts as an inhibiting factor that shapes Traveller women's perceptions about local office.

Supply side issues are also evident in barriers associated with lack of access to childcare and the constraints more generally of poor educational attainment, poverty and poor living conditions. High rates of unemployment (over 80% of Traveller women are unemployed) interact with other barriers to suppress candidacy. Even when "Traveller women see a role for themselves in politics and many do see themselves in those spaces, supports are not there." In addition, it is suggested that "Political will is not there to make it happen either."

A common assessment made by a number of organisations representing ethnic minority women was that political parties, specifically at the national level must take the lead for inclusion. Currently ethnic minority women – "are not even on the bottom rung of the ladder in terms of participation." Political parties were urged to more often censure racist comments and to support voter registration programmes in indigenous and ethnic minority communities.

While acknowledging the work of training programmes aimed at supporting female aspirants, the overall assessment was that most programmes that aim to improve gender representation are not designed to attract ethnic minority women. Women for election were singled out by both Traveller and ethnic minority and migrant organisations as providing good engagement. When Traveller women, migrant and ethnic minority women did not see themselves reflected in their training, they began a collaboration to tailor training with a specific focus on media training. This was seen as key, as for Traveller women the media was often experienced as a hostile environment.

Engagement with organisations such as Women for Election was also useful in facilitating links with political parties.

Notably in 2019, 4 candidates in local elections openly identified as Travellers and 3 of these were women.

They all ran as independents. While at least one female Traveller had been approached by a political party to run, she had declined citing a poor fit between her values and the party and their record on Traveller issues. Some additional 4 or 5 Travellers also ran but did not reveal their identity.

Specific recommendations for supporting ethnic minority women include a broader equality commitment across all measures to increase women's representation and specific targets for marginalised women. In addition, extra resources including childcare are required "for this to be real".

Gender quotas were also roundly supported but with the caveat of looking at the issue of ethnic minority women and working-class women as categories where targets could be applied.

Akidwa represents ethnic minority and migrant women, and has worked with women's community development groups (including Traveller women) to advance ethnic minority women's voices in local governance. They have also worked to place migrant women in roles at the local level and training women in leadership since 2006. A mapping project in 2012 on migrant civic engagement established that migrant women in particular lacked visibility

and presence in decision making at all levels. Often at the local level ethnic minority and migrant women feel isolated and excluded from local community committees and structures. In the 2014 local elections 3 identifiable migrant background candidates were elected and in 2019 this had increased to 9, still less than 1%. Migrant candidates were majority male however 3 men and 6 women were elected. As immigration is no longer a new phenomenon, low levels of representation indicate structural issues that suppress both the supply and demand for migrant (women) candidates and narrow their chances of securing elected office.

The obstacles for ethnic minority and migrant women's candidacy are deemed to include those that disadvantage other women such as disproportionate responsibility for childcare. Yet as research confirms, gendered factors that undermine female candidacy, interact in intersectional ways with racial and ethnic minority status.[64] For example, migrant and ethnic minority women candidates lack support systems that include extended family networks for canvassing, for childcare and financial resources to travel to cities for training. Overall migrant networks in particular are smaller and less deep.[65] The relationship between the race and ethnicity of a candidate and the likelihood that their 'own community' will vote for them is a complex one shaped by factors including whether voting at the local level in Ireland means rescinding a vote at home (such as is the case for the Polish community).[66] Research also indicates that affinity between the racial and ethnicity of a voter and a candidate is mediated by a combination of how interests and identity are or are not politicized in different racial and ethnic communities.[67] Fundraising is then also a particular challenge as migrants and ethnic minority groups are not homogenous communities and they can be fragmented and may not provide the supposed support. Advice to migrant candidates from support organisations included efforts to manage expectations,

"You will be up against people who went to school, worked in the area all their lives and are in the GAA, that will give them 400 or 500 votes to begin with that you won't have to rely on."

As one representative stated "Given these obstacles parties could use their brand to compensate for these lack of networks."

Candidates also have a higher bar to mobilise local party members(predominantly majority population) for canvassing as people will drift towards supporting those they know best or have established friendships and networks with, often underlining their shared racial and ethnic status.[68]

"Political candidacy for majority women is tough enough but for migrant women it is very difficult."

As such what they share with indigenous Irish women is that they also experience racism. Correspondence with African women candidates that ran in the 2019 elections indicate sexual and racist harassment experienced face to face as they canvassed and on social media and by phone. While the ethnic minority women who ran and lost were 'demoralised' their contribution was underlined in

"there is great value in having these candidates challenge stereotypes."

Ethnic minority and migrant women aspirants had been identified and supported through candidacy through regional workshops with identified leaders and in partnership with other women's organisations. This was resource intensive, easier to articulate in urban contexts, whereas in more rural areas migrant and ethnic minority women were more difficult to reach and or lacked the resources to travel to participate (especially the case if they were resident in Direct Provision).

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64 Ocampo 2018
65 Sambanatuso 2015
66 Fanning 2018
67 GoodYear and Tolley, 2019
68 Tolley 2019

Political parties enabled some shadowing and mentoring programmes for migrant women, however, "they lacked at times proactive engagement and an awareness that migrants have votes."

Other organisations representing migrants such as the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) characterised mentoring by politicians as limited so far but where it happened it was very successful. The ICI had placed five migrants on internships with local councillors. The intern had become a conduit or liaison between their community and the councillors/local government. Three out of five of the 'interns' ran for election. This strategy involved political parties and was aimed to "encourage parties to go outside their comfort zone of how and where they look for members and candidates". The ICI had experienced some good practice from parties where "reaching out to them, usually the equality officer, did result in a couple of people getting on tickets."

Anecdotal evidence so far from migrant candidates male and female echoed what women's community development groups reported, in that some candidates felt they were added to tickets as tokens to make "the party look good" with little realistic chance of securing a seat. Expectation management is then key and stakeholders argued this should be the responsibility of parties that encourage migrant candidates to run to ensure that they, "provide them with the big picture". The ICI worked to ensure that their candidates had a good idea of their chances as a way to retain people who did not get elected to try for another run. They had cultivated the idea that even for majority community candidates –they may have experienced loss- persisted and often ran again. Fundamentally it was about convincing them "to stay in the game."

However, again affirming other female candidate experiences, "It is clear that some migrant candidates were very disappointed at the level of support they received from their party." They are also subject to the dynamics of the candidacy 'cycle' where they may be asked to run at relatively late notice when it is clear

that a vacancy will arise. This also undermines their candidacy.[69] In some contexts where ethnic minority aspirant secured political party candidacy at convention over the majority population incumbent, the party subsequently added the incumbent undermining the minority community candidate. In this sense, organisations advocated for parties to take risks – to look beyond the usual suspects and broaden their sense of what a good candidate is. [70]

The ICI and Akidwa concur on the dearth of knowledge within especially migrant communities about the right to vote in local elections, the mechanics of voter registration and the processes and competencies of local government. Some communities come from contexts where party politics has a poor reputation with high levels of corruption and few women involved and with low knowledge that compounds low voter turnout.[71] The ICI support voter registration drives and targeted efforts to capacity build and support migrant candidates. Programmes that include structured liaison with political parties alongside a peer support network of those that ran and got elected are planned to further encourage aspirants. Future plans include a more elaborated internship programme which "went very well and there was lots of positivity from both sides."

All stakeholder organisations suggested that solutions to migrant and ethnic minority women's under representation should be migrant led and involve key actors such at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Justice and be tied to Integration strategies. Gender quotas were also widely supported. However any such initiatives should happen now rather than in 2024 to minimize backlash against minority female candidates. The planned electoral commission and the CSO were highlighted as actors that could commission data and research to inform the adoption of gender quotas for local elected office. Gender disaggregated data on minority community party membership and participation rates would also support better policy design including reforming voter registration processes.

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69   Cross and Pruysers 2019

70   Kenny and Verge 2016; Murray 2015

71   Mc Gregor et al, 2017

CONCLUSION

Local government has experienced significant change that has created challenges for how local representatives engage with and deliver for their constituents. While women have made some gains in access to elected office at the local level, men remain widely overrepresented in local government. Women's lack of representation is evidence of unequal access to power and deficits in the quality of local democracy. Increasing women's presence and influence in local office has the potential to improve trust in local government, increase political engagement, and democratic accountability. A systematic lack of women in local government may signal to women that the system is unfair, illegitimate, or biased against them and work to erode interest in and engagement with local governance. Women's underrepresentation then has consequences for whose voices are heard in local government, and how policy is made and implemented. Local office also serves as a path to higher levels of office, if women are underrepresented at the local level, this contributes to women's continued lack of parity in national politics.[v]

This research illuminates aspects of how systemic and structural barriers suppress women's candidacy representation in local political office. We have found that local government has failed to evolve in ways that support more diverse and inclusive representation. The supply side dynamics of candidacy remain deeply gendered in Ireland, with traditional gender stereotypes, including disproportionate responsibility for care work and low pay alongside sexist attitudes inhibiting women's interest in and capacity to engage with local politics. Working conditions of local politicians that do not serve parents, evident in the lack of entitlement to maternity leave, also act to suppress female candidacy. Demand side processes, including male culture and narrow recruitment networks and conceptions of a 'good candidate' also restrict the field of female candidates. Candidacy as an experience is in turn more difficult for many women who face sexist harassment, and processes that lack inclusivity or supports that could increase the viability of their campaigns.

Women in all their diversity are committed to and interested in effecting change in their local communities. Our survey respondents and our interview participants are highly motivated to become councillors with the expressed aim to improve people's lives. As such, we found a readiness amongst women from all political parties and none to generously share their experiences so that we can try to make things better. We have been repeatedly impressed and inspired by our research participants in their humility, self-awareness and knowledge of the challenges that all local politicians face. However, what is clear is that beyond individual experiences, structural and cultural factors combine and interact to hinder women's access to and representation in local government. While expansion of recruitment networks and the provision of training are essential to improving this situation, and are amongst the key recommendations made here, the introduction of a legal gender quota at local level offers the most promise to ensure concrete progress on female representation in local politics.[vi] The continued lack of gender balance at the local level signals an important problem with the health of local democracy and addressing this deficit in a robust and comprehensive way offers the best chance to make local government work for women and deliver for all.

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ENDNOTES

i   Data sourced from Women for Election website, https://womenforelection.ie/le19/ (accessed 29 September 2019).

ii   http://www.lwl.ie/services/women-in-decision-making/

iii   The SHE Project is a collaborative and innovative regional partnership between Longford Women's Link and 50:50 North West. The overall aim of the SHE Project is to empower women in the North West and Midlands to engage in electoral politics. Funding is provided by the Dept. of Housing, Planning and Local Government. http://www.lwl.ie/services/women-in-decision-making/

iv   https://www.thejournal.ie/women-represent-less-than-1-of-seats-on-some-councils-4660423-May2019/

v   Holman Mirya (2017) Women in Local Government: What we know and where we go from here, State and Local Government Review

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OF POLL

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AREA, in the Year 1920.

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