

May 2021

NWC Submission on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament

Foreword

The pandemic has served as a reminder of the complexity of human life and poised unique challenges in maintaining a work-life balance with long-term home-schooling, caring responsibilities, and other difficulties prevalent throughout the pandemic. A rigid and outdated set of Oireachtas rules and policies has exasperated an already difficult situation for many. Positive action is urgently required to embed into the life of the Oireachtas a set of family-friendly policies that can alleviate some of the hardship currently felt by members and that is reflective of a progressive parliament. In addition, these actions will support the delivery of commitments in Our Shared Future, the Programme for Government, the National Strategy for Women and Girls, UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 and the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

The National Women's Council has been leading in calls for a family-friendly parliament, it is notable that many of the recommendations in our 2013 reportⁱ *'A Parliament of All Talents: Building a Women Friendly Oireachtas'* have yet to be implemented – almost a decade on these recommendations remain necessary for the transformative change.

The recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality call for urgent and transformative actions to diversify political institutions and provide family-friendly and inclusive policies. We need more women in politics, without substantive changes to the culture of Leinster House this is unlikely to happen. Parliament should be a model for a modern, inclusive workplace. Providing a space where women and men can successfully balance their family lives and parliamentary career will lead to greater retention, greater diversity, and better politics. 2020 saw the first Traveller women welcomed into the Oireachtas with the Taoiseach's nomination of Senator Eileen Flynn but there remains a woeful lack of diversity with no identified disabled person or person from a minority ethnic background. There is also a significant generational divide in elected representatives. Women in decision-making spaces, with young families, needs to be normalised, in 2021 women should no longer have to choose between their career in public office and their family commitments.

These past fifteen months have been incredibly difficult, as we emerge collectively from this pandemic we must look to the lessons learnt; flexible working, remote working, and a more empathetic view on the challenges of achieving a work-life balance.

Ireland has an opportunity to lead with a set of creative, generous, and highly beneficial policies that will have a significant positive impact of Irish politics. This process as an opportunity to increase and enhance women's participation in Irish politics, into the long term, while also shifting how politics is seen and experienced by all citizens.

Background

The National Women's Council's (NWC) 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.

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.

Our beliefs and values shape our work and include; Feminism, the need for solidarity between women and representation of the diversity of women across decision-making structures, the value of care and the need for the distribution of care work between women and men, the leadership role of women in the achievement of a more equal society and the importance of human rights, global interdependence and sustainability.

Executive Summary

- Greater access to affordable childcare on or near Oireachtas buildings for both members and staff.
- A family-friendly room and breastfeeding facilities.
- Introduce video-conferencing and remote voting.
- End the practice of late-night sittings and debates. Consider having the Seanad sit on two consecutive days to remove the requirement that members must travel, sometimes quite long distances, to attend on a Monday and Friday.
- Maternity, Paternity and Parental leave in line with public sector provision for elected members of the Dáil and Seanad. Consider Carer's Leave.
- Continued support and resourcing for the development of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus included specific ring-fenced budgets per the commitments in the programme for government.
- Pilot a four-day working week for Oireachtas staff.
- Roll out and develop training for all Oireachtas members and staff on gender, racism and equality which would assist in developing an understanding of the gendered nature of Irish society and the social impact of that gendering and stereotyping.

- Investigate and report on the Gender Pay Gap (GPG) among Oireachtas staff members.
- Combat low pay by ensuring all staff members are paid at least a living wage.
- Continued support and resourcing for the development of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus included specific ring-fenced budgets.
- The Ceann Comhairle should lead the development of a 'code of conduct' for acceptable and respectful behaviour in the Oireachtas between members and staff.
- Addressing adversarial and combative culture where competition is valued over collaboration.
- Carry out a regular survey on experiences of sexism and harassment with all members and staff of the Oireachtas, publish results and take necessary action.
- The Forum should recommend a gender audit of the Oireachtas and establish a clear plan, including benchmarks and indicators, for making the institution's policies and practices more gender sensitive.

Care Facilities

Recommendations:

1. Greater access to affordable childcare on or near Oireachtas buildings for both members and staff.
2. A family-friendly room and breastfeeding facilities.

Making the Houses of the Oireachtas a more inclusive, family friendly, and gender-sensitive workplace for the parliamentary community will improve the lives of parliamentarians and staff. With the accommodation of care facilities, parliament can become a more attractive workplace for women and other underrepresented groups. There is an urgent need to improve the diversity of the parliamentary community to better reflect society in Ireland, making accommodations for those who have family commitments provides space for more diversity.

Women in Ireland are responsible for most of the care and domestic work, even when both partners in a relationship are working. The unrealistic expectation of politicians to prioritise their work over all else is to the detriment of politics. It asks parliamentarians to sacrifice family life to succeed and places an extra burden on women. Secondly, it disadvantages those who do not have the means to put themselves forward because of care responsibilities, including lone parents, 90% of whom are women. As a result, the national decision-making process misses out on the valuable experience and insight of the people with these experiences.

The democratic gains of truly representative political institutions are well known. Parliaments which favour equal participation and better reflect societies they represent are more likely to produce better policy and outcomes for all citizens per the Inter-parliamentary union (IPU)ⁱⁱ

Women and men with young families and caring responsibilities should be provided with a space within Leinster House to facilitate these responsibilities and to provide much needed inclusivity and flexibility.

Family Friendly and Inclusive Practices

Recommendations:

1. Introduce video-conferencing and remote voting.
2. End the practice of late-night sittings and debates.
3. Consider having the Seanad sit on two consecutive days to remove the requirement that members must travel, sometimes quite long distances, to attend on a Monday and Friday. Consideration should also be given to aligning the Oireachtas calander with school terms.
4. Provide Maternity, Paternity, and Parental leave, in line with public sector provision for elected members of the Dáil and Seanad.
5. Provide paid carers' leave.
6. Provide paid parental leave for Oireachtas staff.
7. Continued support and resourcing for the development of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus included specific ring-fenced budgets per the commitments in the programme for government.

Introduce video-conferencing and remote voting

Technology has been a significant factor in changing work practices throughout the world. Video conferencing has become a necessary proponent of the workplace to ensure staff safety but it has demonstrated that remote working is a viable workplace system, including in parliaments around the world. A hybrid model is widely expected to become the norm across many sectors, creating a hybrid parliament that provides for the ability to attend remotely at committee meetings for example will provide much needed flexibility to parliamentarians, particularly those in rural areas.

Remote voting takes many different shapes in various parliaments across the world. In the UK Members of both the House of Commons and House of Lordsⁱⁱⁱ moved to remote voting following the introduction of a remote voting system on 15 June 2020. Members were able to vote on a smartphone, laptop or other device. The move to online voting was cited as a means to ensure that members can fulfil an essential element of their constitutional role to examine and shape legislation whether they are in the Chamber or taking part remotely. The House of Commons later moved to a hybrid parliament system, removing remote voting and putting in place proxy voting. The House of Lords maintained remote voting and has seen increased voter participation as a result.

The Scottish Parliament adopted electronic voting and the Welsh Senedd has moved to app-based voting from any remote location. In New Zealand, where proxy voting was already in place before the pandemic, the House of Representatives, has reduced the restrictions on proxy voting.

Remote voting is possible in other countries, both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. One such example is the chambers of the Spanish Parliament, (Article 82 of the Standing Orders of the Congress^{iv}, modified in 2011, and Article 92 of the Standing Orders of the Senate^v, modified in 2013). In both chambers, remote voting is allowed under specific circumstances, namely pregnancy, maternity and paternity leave, and serious illness,

End the practice of late-night sittings and debates and consider the Seanad sitting days and the school calendar

There are two problems with Dáil sitting hours. Firstly, the normal sitting hours of the Dáil are not business hours and, secondly, important debates happen through the night. These hours are not conducive to the health of parliamentarians or staff members. In separating the Seanad sitting days parliamentarians face potentially long journeys to Dublin twice instead of being able to sit on two consecutive days.

Maternity/Paternity/Parents/Carer's Leave for elected members

The Citizens' Assembly overwhelmingly endorsed maternity/paternity leave for all parliamentarians, and whilst a temporary exception has been made for Minister for Justice Helen McEntee a long-term solution needs urgently brought forward. Consideration should also be given by the Forum as to the allowance of paid carer's leave for elected members.

Paid parental leave for Oireachtas staff

Paid parental leave is an important support to help parent's balance work and family life while remaining connected to the labour market. Available to both parents, it offers the chance of a better sharing of care responsibilities between women and men and more opportunity for fathers to take on caring roles. The Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration Report^{vi} on pre-legislative scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Parents' Leave and Benefit (Amendment) Bill 2020 provides a pathway to making sure parental leave works for men and women.

The following could be delivered by the Oireachtas as an employer but also could be recommended for national policy;

- Increase paid parental leave to 9 weeks of paid leave per parent to ensure Ireland will meet its commitments under the EU Work Life Balance Directive
- Ensure equality for lone parents by providing an additional entitlement to the parent that is caring in a one parent family so that lone parents and two parent families have an equal total leave amount
- Increase the rate of Parent's Benefit to €295 per week to bring more in line with EU norms and to ensure that taking the leave is a more realistic option for all parents

- Ensure paid parental leave is available to parents of children older than 2 years of age by converting existing unpaid parental leave to paid leave

A Family Friendly and Inclusive Leinster House

Recommendations:

1. Pilot a four-day working week for Oireachtas staff.
2. Roll out and develop training for all Oireachtas members and staff on gender, racism and equality which would assist in developing an understanding of the gendered nature of Irish society and the social impact of that gendering and stereotyping.
3. Support legislation for collective bargaining rights for Oireachtas staff
4. Investigate and report on the GPG among Oireachtas staff members.
5. Combat low pay by ensuring all Oireachtas staff members are paid at least a living wage.
6. The Ceann Comhairle should lead the development of a 'code of conduct' for acceptable and respectful behaviour in the Oireachtas between members and staff.
7. Addressing adversarial and combative culture where competition is valued over collaboration.
8. Carry out a regular survey on experiences of sexism and harassment with all members and staff of the Oireachtas, publish results and take necessary action.
9. The Forum should recommend a gender audit of the Oireachtas and establish a clear plan, including benchmarks and indicators, for making the institution's policies and practices more gender sensitive.

A four-day week for Oireachtas staff

COVID-19 has provided us with a unique opportunity to re-examine our approach to work to ensure it is sustainable into the future. In this context, the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament should look at how reduced working time, such as a four-day week, would help to facilitate a more equal distribution of care between women and men, supporting both to play more of a role in child-rearing as well as care of older family members. As well as the benefits to workers, the four-day week has benefits for both business and the environment. **The Forum should recommend the Oireachtas trial a four day working week pilot for staff.**

Collective bargaining for Oireachtas staff

Research has indicated that countries with a high coverage of collective bargaining tend to have shorter working hours for both women and men, more flexible work options under secure employment conditions, better protection for non-standard workers, as well as a reduced gender pay gap. However, the proportion of employees covered by collective bargaining agreements in Ireland is low. Legislation is of particular necessity in Ireland, as our laws allow employers not to recognise unions in pay disputes. The Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality recently recommended a right to collective bargaining. **The Forum should recommend the Oireachtas facilitate collective bargaining processes for staff.**

The Gender Pay Gap and Oireachtas staff members

The economic cost of being a woman, the gender pay gap, (GPG) stands at 14.4%. The GPG almost trebles between the 30's and 40's, when women are stepping away from the workforce for caring responsibilities. Even among young workers, there is a gender pay gap with female workers under 25 earning 19% less than comparable males in 2018. The Gender Pay Gap Information Bill is currently going through the Houses of the Oireachtas. This important legislation should help to expose pay discrimination. Low pay is also a contributor to the gender pay gap. **The Forum should recommend the Oireachtas investigate and report on the GPG among Oireachtas staff members**

A code of conduct for all

The principles of respect for the dignity of every person are integral to our understanding of a modern workplace. The Oireachtas should function as the role model for other organisations across Ireland. Sadly, some members of our national parliament have yet to apply this principle in their day-to day activities. While a gender audit of the Oireachtas will help uncover a range of processes which need to be overhauled there are some areas where the need for reform is evident already. The Ceann Comhairle can take the lead in promoting these reforms. At the centre of this reform must be a system of rules which outline what is expected of all members and hold to account those responsible for infractions. This would ensure a welcoming and safe environment for women from minority ethnic backgrounds and Traveller and Roma women.

To tackle sexism in all its forms the Oireachtas needs to develop rules for members and staff which should penalise any behaviour which is considered sexist and have a zero tolerance to racist and or anti Traveller remarks sentiment. The code should specifically state what constitutes unacceptable behaviour:

- Inappropriate and/or unwanted touching
- Name-calling
- Interruptions during debates
- Sexist, racist or other derogatory 'jokes'

- Behaviour which would reasonably be deemed to breach equality legislation
- Anti-bullying stipulations
- Guidelines on behaviour inside and outside the Oireachtas, including on social media.

A Gender Audit

The reality of women being excluded is quietly supported by the history of the Oireachtas as an institution. This is neatly illustrated by the dominance of photographs of men on the Oireachtas walls. The Houses of Oireachtas Commission, established in 2004, governs the day-to-day management of the Oireachtas, its staff and its facilities. A wide range of policies, strategies and procedures applies to the civil service staff within the Oireachtas.

The Oireachtas Commission's Code already commits the institution to promoting positive workplace values, preserving health and safety and implementing socially and environmentally sustainable work practices. Assessing the impact of planning and resourcing on staff is an essential lens in understanding the different challenges faced by women and men. The first step for achieving this is to understand the operations and practices of an institution through a gender audit. An audit would aim to:

- Identify and analyse gender segregated data on staffing and employment, including any gender pay-gap.
- Collate all current work practices and policies and an assessment of how well they are being applied.
- Develop benchmarks and indicators for future progress on the recommendations.

The Pipeline

Over 80% of women TDs have served as Local Councillors. Local government is a crucial springboard for women to serve at national level. Expanding the candidate selection quotas to local elections will ensure that not only our local government is reflective of the communities it serves but there is a greater diversity coming through at national level. Broader supports and investment are required at local and community level to engage women from marginalised backgrounds to connect them to public and political life and to facilitate their participation and for their voices to be heard in our democratic structures.

We need to make this an attractive a sustainable option and possibility for younger women. In a survey of 5th year girls on girls' ambitions in public and political life, carried out in 2017 by the Department of Business and Enterprise. 769 girls were interviewed across 23 schools and only 2% said their dream career was a politician. 75% felt that women make career sacrifices to have children BUT 68% still feel that a family friendly role is something that is important to them for the future.

For a career in public office to be attractive to the next generation of women sweeping reform is required across political institutions.

Key Recommendations

- Greater access to affordable childcare on or near campus for both members and staff.
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- Consider having the Seanad sit on two consecutive days to remove the requirement that members must travel, sometimes quite long distances, to attend on a Monday and Friday.
- Maternity, Paternity and Parental leave in line with public sector provision for elected members of the Dáil and Seanad. Consider Carer's Leave.
- Continued support and resourcing for the development of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus included specific ring-fenced budgets per the commitments in the programme for government.
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- The Forum should recommend a gender audit of the Oireachtas and establish a clear plan, including benchmarks and indicators, for making the institution’s policies and practices more gender sensitive.

ⁱ https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/A_Parliament_of_All_Talents.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ipu.org/national-parliaments>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2020/june/lords-online-voting/>

^{iv}

http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Hist_Normas/Norm/standing_orders_02.pdf

^v

<http://www.senado.es/web/conocersenado/normas/reglamentootrasnormassenado/detallesreglamentosenado/index.html?lang=en>

^{vi}

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_children_disability_equality_and_integration/reports/2021/2021-02-26_report-on-pre-legislative-scrutiny-of-the-general-scheme-of-the-parents-leave-and-benefit-amendment-bill-2020_en.pdf