



Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the General Scheme of the Electoral Reform Bill

June 2022

Introduction

Founded in 1973, the National Women's Council (NWC) is the leading national women's membership organisation. We represent and derive our mandate from our membership, which includes over 190 groups and organisations from a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations across Ireland. Guided by our Strategic Plan 2021-2024, No Woman Left Behind, our mission is to lead and to be a catalyst for change in the achievement of equality for women. Our vision is of an Ireland and of a world where women can achieve their full potential and there is full equality for women.

This work is kindly supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development through the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) administered through Pobal.

The Alliance for Local Quotas, convened by NWC, is a collective of civil society organisations, both local and national, and academics working in political representation, to advocate for candidate selection gender quotas to increase women's representation in Local Government. Membership includes the Immigrant Council of Ireland, AkiDWA, Women for Election, See Her Elected, Independent Living Movement Ireland, National Traveller Womens Forum, Womens Collective Ireland, Dr Colette Finn, Dr Claire McGing, Dr Fiona Buckley, Dr Pauline Cullen, Dr Margaret O Keeffe, Shane Gough and Dr Sandra McAvoy. We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to assist the committee in their work on the Electoral Reform Bill.

This is an opportunity to address Ireland's current democratic deficit in Local Government and tackle systemic gender inequalities in Irish political institutions. The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future identifies a need for greater diversity and gender equality in Local Government, in particular that a more sustained effort is required to increase the representation of women in local government:

“continue to support proactively measures to increase the participation of women and wider diversity in local government, through awareness and capacity building, candidate training, research and other incentive schemes and programmes”.

The citizens assembly on gender equality have provided a very clear direction to government on how to increase women's leadership in Irish Society, they don't want soft measures; they voted over whelming in favour of quotas. 87.6% voted to extend the gender quota for party candidates at general elections to local elections by the end of 2022.¹

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women 2017 report recommended "that the State party increase the use of temporary special measures, including statutory quotas, in all areas covered by the Convention in which women are underrepresented, such as in local government elections."² The general public acknowledge and recognise that work is needed to address gender inequality in politics. A recent Eurobarometer survey found that 72% of people in Ireland think there should be more women in political decision-making roles and 79% are in favour of legal measures to ensure gender equality in politics.³

The alliance believes that the Electoral Commission would be suitably placed to investigate and report on the legal mechanism that can deliver a candidate selection quota at local level of 40% in advance of the Local Elections 2024.

Promoting political and electoral participation

Registration of political parties (Chapter 6)

Tying candidate selection to party registration would underline that their purpose is to remedy the hindrances that women face when they decide to enter the world of politics. The alliance recommends that qualifying criteria for registration of political parties should include a requirement to run a balanced ticket at the preceding election and this could be reported on a European election constituency basis.

¹ <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/previous-assemblies/2020-2021-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality/about-the-citizens-assembly/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf>

² https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CEDAW%2fC%2fIRL%2fCO%2f6-7&Lang=en

³ European Commission (2017). Eurobarometer on Gender Equality. https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/news/79-per-cent-of-Irish-people-in-favour-of-legal-measures-to-ensure-gender-parity-in-politics_en

Boundary review (Chapter 8)

In relation to the Local electoral area boundary review, a gender impact assessment should be included. The larger electoral areas generally favour women as they encourage parties to run more candidates.

We note the following and welcome their inclusion;

1. Through the provision for membership of the ordinary members of the commission, it is important that the commission is reflective of a diverse population from all backgrounds.
2. Establishing a sub-committee with representatives from those communities historically under-represented in electoral matters

Research, advisory and voter education function

We welcome the research, advisory and education role of the Commission outlined in the bill. This should be targeted towards barriers in participating in the electoral system and safeguarding equality of access and outcome for all, including Travellers, young people, disabled people and people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Minority ethnic women interested in political candidacy report that ‘they didn’t fit’ or experienced rules and political culture as exclusionary. Increasing minoritised women’s inclusion in electoral politics requires confronting sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination. Combating underrepresentation of minoritised women demands specific and targeted measures including nested quotas.⁴

This bill has presented a timely opportunity to show that the State is serious about achieving gender equality in political life. What is still missing from the Electoral Reform Bill is provision for the introduction of quotas for local elections to address the ongoing

⁴https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/filefield_paths/Different_Paths_Shared_Experiences_Report.pdf

democratic deficit in Local Government. This is despite the Committee recommending that the proposed bill “mandate the Electoral Commission to encourage and promote gender balance in all elements of the electoral process.”⁵ The alliance calls on committee members to explicitly call for the research and advisory function within the Electoral Commission to identify the most appropriate mechanism to ensure the seamless extension of gender quotas to local level and oversight for their implementation. The alliance is seeking the following to be included in Chapter 9: Under Research, advisory and voter education functions of particular reference to research on mechanisms to address the underrepresentation of women and marginalised groups specifically gender quotas and ethnic quotas.

RECOMMENDATION

The alliance is seeking the following to be included in the Bill

Chapter 6

- **Addition of running a balanced ticket to qualifying criteria for political party registration**

Chapter 8

- **Provide for a gender impact assessment in any boundary review**

Chapter 9: Under Research, advisory and voter education function

- **particular reference to be made to research on mechanisms to address the underrepresentation of women and marginalised groups specifically gender quotas and ethnic quotas**
- **Collection and publication of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion data on candidates running and elected**

Funding for civil society

NWC notes that the provisions relating to political advertising will also apply to 'third parties' so defined under the Electoral Act, and believe that it is essential that definitions of what constitutes 'political advertising' under the Electoral Reform Bill must be aligned with

⁵https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_housing_local_government_and_heritage/reports/2021/2021-08-19_report-on-pre-legislative-scrutiny-of-the-general-scheme-of-the-electoral-reform-bill-2020_en.pdf

the existing definition of 'political purpose' in the Electoral Act. We fully support the Coalition for Civil Society Freedom's submission on the definition of political purposes as contained in the Electoral Reform Bill. It is disappointing that the electoral reform Bill has not so far addressed this very important definition issue.

In this regard, it will be essential that the proposed Electoral Reform Bill also considers the amendments to the Electoral Act set out in the Electoral (Civil Society Freedom) (Amendment) Bill which is also before the Oireachtas at present. This is an issue on which the Coalition for Civil Society Freedom of which we are a member, has set out a detailed position.⁶

RECOMMENDATION

The Electoral Reform Bill adopts the amendments to the Electoral Act set out in the Electoral (Civil Society Freedom) (Amendment) Bill in order to protect the legitimate advocacy role of civil society organisations.

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⁶ <https://www.iccl.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Coalition-for-Civil-Society-Freedom-statement-on-Electoral-Act.pdf>