

Cross Party Group on Women

Gender quotas in Ireland

Sponsored by Siân Gwenllian MS

9 July 2021

Zoom, 11:30 – 12:40

Attendees:

Sian Gwenllian MS (Chair)
Sarah Murphy MS
Jane Dodds MS
Sioned Williams MS
Fiona Buckley, University College Cork (Speaker)
Caitriona Gleeson, Women for Election (Speaker)
Catherine Fookes, WEN Wales
Megan Evans, WEN Wales
Jessica Laimann, WEN Wales
Abi Thomas, Plaid Cymru (Carms and Pembrokeshire Constituency)
Alison Parken, Cardiff Business School
Jen Ramsay, Office of Paul Davies MS
Cadi Evans, Office of Sian Gwenllian MS
Davinia-Louise Green, Stonewall Cymru
Debbie Shaffer, FTWW
Hade Turkmen, Chwarae Teg
Rachel Minto, Women in Europe (Wales)
Jackie Jones, Women in Europe (Wales)
Jordan Brewer, Welsh Women's Aid
Maria Mesa, Women Connect First
Melissa Wood, Equality and Human Rights Commission
Rosanna Johnston, Equality and Human Rights Commission
Patience Bentu, Race Council Cymru
Samsunear Ali, Bawso

Apologies:

Joyce Watson MS
Carolyn Thomas MS
Llyr Gruffydd MS
Heledd Fychan MS
Delyth Jewell MS
Laura McAllister, Cardiff University
Nancy Cavill, Office of Jane Hutt MS
Sarah Childs, University of London
San Leonard, Social Firms Wales

1	<p>Welcomes, Apologies, Introduction – Chair</p> <p>Attendees and apologies listed by Jessica Laimann</p>
2	<p>Experience with gender quotas in Ireland – Dr Fiona Buckley and Caitriona Gleeson</p> <p>The Chair welcomed to the speakers to the meeting and gave a brief overview of the important work they had done around gender quotas and women's representation in political life in Ireland.</p>

Fiona Buckley presented some wider research around the use of legal gender quotas in an international and EU perspective, demonstrating the increasing uptake and positive impact that these had on women's representation in parliament over the last 20 years. The approach had soon moved from voluntary to mandatory quotas as the former had not proved as effective in improving women's representation. Quotas could be introduced through specific laws, equality acts, amendments to electoral codes and laws as well as constitutional provision. Quotas in the EU 27 were ranging from 30-50% and there were different ways to incentivize compliance, e.g. through financial sanctions and the rejection of listed candidates. It was easier to fit gender quotas into a PR or mixed electoral system than into a majoritarian plurality electoral system and, within PR electoral systems, it was easier to fit gender quotas within a list system than an STV system. Some countries also had legislation around where to place women candidates on the ballot paper, e.g. through zipper lists, and requirements to place women on winnable seats.

Dr Buckley advised that the electoral law in Ireland had been amended in 2012 to provide for gender quotas of 30% which currently only applied to general elections. If political parties were running less than 30% women (or men) they would lose 50% of state funding. This quota was due to increase to 40% from 2023. Quotas were introduced in Ireland to combat the persistent underrepresentation of women in politics. In elections prior to the law's introduction an average of 17% women candidates were selected and 12% elected. The situation somewhat improved after the election Mary Robinson as the first women president in 1990, which had a strong mobilizing effect including a 71% increase in the number of women running and 22 women elected to the Irish Parliament in 1992.

Unfortunately, this progress was not maintained and the initial use of voluntary quotas failed to meet targets. The financial crash in 2008 initiated a massive political reform conversation which also looked at the lack of diversity in parliament. This led to conversations both inside parliament (led by Senator Ivana Bacik) and outside through women's mobilization (5050 group and Women for Election). The coalition of alliances inside and outside parliament drove forward gender quotas and resulted in the passing of legislation July 2012.

Since its introduction, the quota led to a 90% increase in women candidates and a 44% increase in women elected. As Ireland started from a very low baseline, the current percentage of women in parliament was still only 22.5%, but fast-tracked change was taking place, e.g. through a 7% increase of women's representation between 2011 and 2016. All parties generally met the quota, although there was a sense that this was seen as a target rather than a minimum standard by some and progress began to stagnate in 2020. Newer parties and those towards the left of the political spectrum tended to select higher proportions of women than other parties.

Parties had used gender directives in candidate selection but following controversy in 2016, there had been a steer away from this approach toward the add-on route in 2020. Due to the financial penalties of non-compliance, parties could no longer afford ignoring the issues of gender quota, but candidate selection processes had not been

transformed dramatically. Incumbency, localism, personalism and geography were very important in the candidate selection process in Ireland, as was the issue of “gene pool candidates” from well-known political families. These cultural factors presented ongoing obstacles to equal and diverse representation. At the same time, statistics showed that there was wide public support for gender quotas.

Caitriona Gleeson advised that, due to the strongly embedded nature of the patriarchal system, quotas alone were not enough to get to equal representation but they were an essential element. The increase of legislative gender quotas to 40% at the next general election would help to prevent further backslide. Going forward, it was crucial to extend quotas to local government elections, as this was an important stepping stone into national politics. Ireland currently had 25% women in local government and 40% in the Seanad (upper house), however the latter was not democratically elected.

Importantly, the increase of quotas to 40% would prevent further backslide. It had increased parties’ attention regarding the supply of female candidates and had changed the way they were engaging with organisations like Women for Election that provided training and support for women in political careers.

Catriona Gleeson seconded Dr Buckley’s observation that there was a problem with women not being selected to winnable seats and if they were, they often lacked support. She emphasised that quotas needed to be part of a wider package that addressed obstacles to women in politics, such as the lack of provisions for maternity or parental leave in Ireland.

The wide public support for quotas was evidenced by that fact that a citizens’ assembly had supported the recommendations Women for Election’s recommendation on quotas for local government. Following deliberations on gender equality, the assembly of 100 people selected from a stratified sample had voted 80% in favour of quotas and over 75% in favour of sanctions.

The coronavirus pandemic had exposed Ireland’s critical supply issues of women in parliament with had led to no women being present at the decision-making tables discussing the response to Covid-19. This had led to harmful results for women in Ireland, such as the fact that partners were still not allowed to attend birth in some hospitals. The abuse of women in politics presented a further critical barrier.

3 Discussion and questions from attendees – Chair

The Chair thanked the two speakers for their insightful presentations and emphasised parallels between the situations in Ireland and Wales, e.g. the need to prevent further backsliding on women’s representation in parliament and the importance of addressing local councils, where only 25% of elected representatives were women.

Several questions and comments were raised in the discussion, including:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Had discussions around gender quotas in Ireland linked in with wider diversity of representation?</i> Fiona Buckley advised that a forum looking at diversity in parliament had been established and the first women from the Traveller community had been appointed in the last election. Parties' discussions around diversity were increasing but were not always accompanied by the necessary support for candidates from diverse backgrounds. Caitriona Gleeson added that there were only three women of colour elected at a local government level Women for Election were running intercultural anti-racism programmes for politicians and were supporting diversity quotas, e.g. through assigned seats. - <i>Was there discussion on legislation around other areas, e.g. flexibility and timing of meeting to combat culture of presentism that was difficult to reconcile with caring responsibilities?</i> Caitriona Gleeson advised that there was now an emphasis on family friendly politics at a local and national level and the provision of safe spaces as online and offline abuse was strongly affecting women candidates, especially BAME women. - <i>As quotas would incentivize parties to invest in mentoring and training programmes, we should look at best practice for effective mentorship to go hand in hand with introducing quotas.</i> Caitriona Gleeson advised that practical and informal training programmes along with mentoring worked best in her experience. It was suggested that coaching/ shadowing opportunities could be promoted to potential BAME candidates in Wales through organisation such as Bawso, that were well connected with BAME communities - In response to a query on the <i>nature of resistance to gender quotas</i>, Dr Buckley advised that this was due to the patriarchal structure of political parties. Quotas had exposed gendered advantages and privileges that were in place previously. The continued resistance of the patriarchal structures could be seen for example in the move from gender directives to the add-on system. Constitutional challenges were still going through the courts and one woman had been boycotted by members of her own party after being elected. Gender quotas were exposing these structures and leading to conversations about them. -
<p>4</p>	<p>Update from the Women in Europe (Wales) Group – Rachel Minto</p> <p>Rachel Minto advised that, prior to the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the Women in Europe (Wales) Group had put together a document that outlined the five objectives around legislation, funding, social inclusion, access to European networks and representation in decision-making that were of key relevance in the withdrawal process.</p> <p>It was important for the CPG to keep these in mind given that way Wales, in a letter from the First Minister to the President of the European Commission, had positioned itself as a 'European nation' and expressed the wish remain aligned with the EU's social policies and standards.</p> <p>Under the new President Ursula von der Leyen, there was lots of progressive activity in the EU around women's rights and equality. It was crucial for Wales to stay plugged into these discussions, for instance with regard to the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). The Wales Civil Society Forum, coordinated by</p>

	<p>Charles Whitmore, was facilitating third sector organizations' engagement with the Brexit process and was pushing to ensure a devolved representation in debates on the TCA.</p> <p>Rachel Minto emphasised that it was important for the CPG to be alert to these discussions to ensure Wales could have a voice in these structures and women's rights and gender equality were adequately represented.</p> <p>There were other ways in which Wales was seeking to remain plugged into European discussion, e.g. through the EU-Wales Friendship Group hosted by the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, and the European Economic and Social Committee. All these initiatives could help Wales take a more progressive approach to women's rights and representation.</p> <p><i>Action: Women in Europe (Wales) will put together update email and circulate together with key objectives document.</i></p>
5	<p>AOB</p> <p>The Chair advised that the next meeting would be held on 17 September 2021 at 11:30.</p>
6	<p><i>Close</i></p>