



Encouraging
women into
political
and public life

Report on the

Conference in

Hillsborough Castle,

13 November 2006

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1. Introduction

For women to be truly equal, they must be equally represented in key areas of public life. This includes our political institutions such as Parliament, the Assembly and local councils as well as those public bodies which help to frame and shape public policy. It is important too that other high profile or influential professions have senior ranks which are representative of the population.

At international, European and national levels the promotion of gender equality for women remains a commitment. Women's active citizenship and participation in political decision making and in public administration remains a key objective. Promoting gender in decision making is recognised as socially and economically profitable; there is a competitive advantage to utilising the capacities of women in decision making.

To bring about change we need to look at how women are recruited into public life and how the problem of breaking into a male-dominated world can be overcome not just by a few exceptional and determined women but by many more.

2. Background

Women comprise more than 50 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland yet at the last two elections (2003 and 2007) for the Northern Ireland Assembly only 17% of MLAs were women (18 out of 108). In Wales 47%¹ of those elected in May 2007 (50 % in 2003) to the National Assembly of

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<http://www.assemblywales.org/memhome/mem-profile.htm>

Wales were women and in Scotland 33.3%² of the elected representatives in May 2007 (40% in 2003) to the Scottish Parliament were women.

In Northern Ireland at local government level after the 1997 elections women held 14% of Council seats. This increased to 19% after the 2001 election and to 21.5% after the 2005 elections. In 2006 women comprise 125 of Northern Ireland's 582 Councillors³ or approximately 21% compared to 30% in England.

From 1999-2005 the average figure for public appointments in Northern Ireland held by women was 33 per cent – a fall since 1998 when it was 35%.⁴

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2002⁵ reported that:

57% of men and 66% of women taking part said that there should be more women in the Assembly and in Parliament

74% men and 83% women say either that they would have more confidence in a woman representing them or that it would make no difference if a man or a woman represented them.

74% of people believe that political parties should be either required or encouraged to put forward a proportion of women candidates.

² <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/msp>

³ Prepared by: Bronagh Hinds, Senior Fellow, Institute of Governance, Queen's University Belfast

⁴ Source ;Women in Northern Ireland , DET, 2006

⁵ NILT Survey 2002; web: http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2002/Women_in_Politics/index.html

It was against the background of these figures and public opinions, accompanied by lobbying from representatives of Northern Ireland's women's groups that the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt. Hon. Peter Hain MP, hosted a conference at Hillsborough Castle on 13 November 2006.

The Conference "Encouraging Women into Political and Public Life", focused on political women in Northern Ireland. It set out to:

- Focus on political women in Northern Ireland, the barriers they faced and how they tackled those barriers
- Learn from their experience of combining political commitment with the demands of their private lives
- Explore and share models of good practice of positive action by the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament
- Offer a springboard for action by Northern Ireland's political parties and women themselves.

Encouraging and increasing women's participation in Northern Ireland's political and public life, and promoting more inclusive representation of men and women in decision-making, are embedded within the strategic objectives of Northern Ireland's first Gender Equality Strategy, which was launched shortly after the conference on 19 December 2006.⁶

In his opening speech⁷ at the conference the then Secretary of State Peter Hain said:

"The under-representation of women in politics continues at a time when issues affecting women, children and families, are more important, not

⁶ The Strategy is available at www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/gender-equality

⁷ Full text of the Secretary of State's Speech is at Annex A

just to this Government, but to all political parties and to voters.

Throughout the history of Northern Ireland women have played a significant role in social and economic development - but it is vital that this is true of politics too...

I hope that sharing experience... will encourage and enable action, both individually and as political parties, to increase the numbers of women who stand as candidates... in the past Northern Ireland became a watchword for religious bigotry, prejudice and discrimination. Gradually, painfully, the battle against such sectarianism is being won. Let Northern Ireland now push forward the frontiers for equal opportunities on gender so that women become the political leaders rather than the politically led."

3. Purpose of this report

Through publishing this report we wish to help raise the awareness and understanding of the men and women in the political parties in Northern Ireland, and in wider society, of the issues and barriers for women seeking to become involved in politics and public life.

The report will:

- Show why it is important that women's representation in political decision making is increased;
- Share the personal experiences as expressed by the women at the conference, how they dealt with the issues and barriers they faced and the lessons they learned; and
- Identify actions the political parties and women themselves might consider to increase the representation of women in political decision-making.

4. Why is it important that women's representation in political decision-making is increased?

MPs, MLAs and councillors who make decisions on our behalf should be representative of the population as a whole to ensure that the wide range of our views and concerns are represented at the decision making table. Balanced representation would better ensure that political priorities more closely reflect the concerns of all voters. In the UK the numbers of men and women who vote are approximately the same⁸.

Our society in Northern Ireland still has very clear gender roles and by bringing their particular experiences to the decision-making table women will be able to directly encourage change in issues that concern women. There is a high degree of public confidence in women's potential contribution to public life, as evidenced by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2002⁹, which reported that 57 % of those surveyed agreed that women MPs better represent women's issues than do male MPs. 57 % of those surveyed also agreed that, in general, things would improve if there were more women in politics.

Since 1997 when there was a large increase in the number of women MPs in Britain, issues of importance to women such as childcare and domestic violence have moved up the political agenda.¹⁰ There was a strong sense throughout the conference proceedings, that a better balanced

⁸ Gender and political participation by Electoral Commission 2004 ; www.electoralcommission.org.uk

⁹ NILT Survey 2002; web: http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2002/Women_in_Politics/index.html

¹⁰ See www.fawcettsociety.org.uk

representation should encourage more balanced decision-making, with a corresponding allocation of scarce public resources to meet the different needs of both men and women.

5. Promoting Women's Participation in Politics – Challenges faced and Lessons Learned by NI Women as MPs and MLAs

We have replicated key extracts from the texts of the speeches made in this session of the conference to illustrate the breadth of the experiences of the speakers involved, the range of lessons learned and what worked for them as women participating in politics.

Challenges Faced- Michelle Gildernew MP, MLA

“The experience of some women as elected politicians is not good. The political process can be slow and frustrating”

“I grew up with strong female role models. So for me, to get involved in politics was not unusual or something that caused any raised eyebrows. The fact that most of the women that I have known in Sinn Féin, and throughout the republican movement, have been involved in community activism seems to indicate a route that women are keen to take”.

“I have been lucky. I have found no barriers to my participation in politics, and the party has always afforded to me any opportunity that I was willing to take.”

“I am perhaps more positive than most because my experience has been so good. However, I want to see more young women, more girls at school, thinking about politics as a career”.

Lessons Learned

“In my party I have had great role models in people such as Bairbre de Brún, Lucilita Bhreatnach, Rita O’Hare and Dodie McGuinness.”

“Sinn Féin believes in positive discrimination in terms of getting women elected. A particular example was in the (Civic) Forum election, where there were five people on each ticket. We tried to have two men, two women and one person from the twenty-six counties to reflect the all-Ireland ethos of our party. We do actively go out to seek women to stand, particularly in winnable seats, and we have had great success with the women we have had elected”.

“Fortunately my home life has not been a barrier. I was elected as an MP before I had my first child, my children are young, but my husband is great, and I have an excellent support network, including a childminder. I could not manage without all the people who give me help and support. One thing that makes me want to carry on in my political life is that when I come home in the evening, I am Mummy. I close the door and do not answer the phone for a couple of hours until the boys are in bed. I do all the things that every other mummy does, and I try to ensure that my children do not feel that they are missing out on their childhood experience. They are only young for a wee while, and I still want to enjoy them”.

Challenges Faced - Arlene Foster, MLA

“I did not come from a political family . . . However, politics has always been part of my psyche..., I became involved in student politics through the University’s Unionist Association. Through the Students’

Union and the youth wing of the UUP, I became involved in the party's mainstream. I became a party officer; in the same year I acted as the party's election agent for the forum elections.

“Throughout my political career I have not encountered too many direct discriminatory practices related to my gender, but that is a personal perspective. Discrimination is, by its very nature, often hidden behind the scenes. Undoubtedly, there are still too few women involved in politics in the UK, particularly in Northern Ireland.”

“Why are women not putting themselves forward as politicians? Northern Ireland is of course conservative with a small ‘c’. Furthermore, we are emerging from a violent period in our history. I believe that both factors have had a negative impact on the incidence of women putting themselves forward into public office”.

“Those two negative factors must be considered along with all the other generic off-putting, aggressive and adversarial behaviour of male politicians. What right-thinking woman wants to put herself into the bear pit of the Assembly?”

“Furthermore, there is the sense that when a woman becomes involved in politics she loses part of her femininity, and due to prevailing attitudes must become “as good as any man”.

Lessons Learned

“From a home perspective I have three young children; the youngest of whom is just eight weeks old ... Organising three young children

and myself requires organisational skills that are helpful in all aspects of life.”

“Tackling attitudes, be it the attitudes of potential candidates, the attitudes of their particular party, of the leadership or just the general public, can be a frustrating experience. Somebody once said that it was like nailing a jelly to a wall. The potential female members and candidates must not perceive any barriers to their membership or candidacy for a party. Parties therefore need to be proactive.”

“Often it is thought that it is solely the males in our parties who cause attitudes against the promotion of women. I have often found that opinion to be too simplistic. Many of the negative attitudes against the promotion of women into the front line of politics actually come from fellow female members who do not believe that a women’s place is out front. Rather, they believe that it should be in a more supportive role in the field of fundraising and catering etc. I have often heard people ask why I am not at home with my three children. Thankfully, that sort of talk is on the wane but we need to acknowledge that it still exists”.

Challenges Faced - Patricia Lewsley, MLA

“I did not come from a very political background and I got into politics more by accident than by design. I joined the party 20 years ago. Another colleague, Joe Hendron, asked me then to run in Upper Falls, and at the beginning I thought this was very nice — I was delighted that somebody thought I was capable of doing the job. But then I thought that I would not be able to do the job. I had five children at that stage, ranging from 16 to four, and I wondered who

would look after them, so I said: “Thank you, but no thanks”. Joe said that my name was just needed for the ballot paper and that I would not be elected. I put my name on the ballot paper, and I was elected, and here I am 13 years later. Sadly, I suppose like many women, when I went into council, I was thrown in at the deep end, not knowing what was in front of me. It was a scary place... “. One of the barriers faced, for me in particular, was childcare.

“Sometimes it is women who are the barrier for other women, both inside and outside the parties. The SDLP decided early on that it would reconstitute our women’s group within the party so that there was a support mechanism to encourage more women to become involved. ”.

“There was also a problem with training for me in those days. It would have been nice to have had a mentor and someone to shadow for a while as I found my feet, particularly at council level.”

“In 1997 I lost my seat in local government and had to decide whether I would stay in political life or move on. The women’s group [SDLP group] was trying to encourage women not to drop at the first hurdle, so I was encouraged to stay.”

“In 1995, seven women from seven different political parties got together and created the Northern Ireland Women’s Political Forum. The problem for us was funding. We could not draw funding from anywhere to carry out the projects that we wanted to do. We had hoped to go into schools and universities to try to create a platform... We struggled on for a while, but the momentum was lost”.

Lessons Learned

“The SDLP decided early on that it would reconstitute our women’s group within the party so that there was a support mechanism to encourage more women to become involved.”

“In times gone by the SDLP used a quota system on the executive. We now find because we have put that infrastructure and support mechanism in place that women are coming forward naturally and we do not need the quota any longer. In fact our management committee, or executive of the party, has over 50% representation of women and that is where some of the key decision making takes place”

“During my gap year between council and the Assembly, I became a tutor for “Women into Politics” (a women’s organisation), and that was certainly a good and positive experience. Some of those women have moved through the “Women into Politics” courses and into political parties from where, I hope, they will run for elected positions”.

Challenges Faced - Naomi Long MLA

“I never set out to be a politician. I got involved gradually. Some of my friends were trying it and I guess I was curious.

“...I think on the first day of any new job there is always a bit of apprehension and anxiety. The imposing surroundings and the kind of political who’s who on the benches in the chamber certainly did

nothing to relieve that... It was also something of a baptism of fire for me”

“I have to say that my experience in politics within my party has been a really positive one. I have not faced barriers to progress or discrimination as a woman, or at least if I have, I have not been aware of it...”

Lessons Learned

“I am fortunate in that my husband is also a councillor. He was elected at the same time as me, and he understands better than most people the demands that politics make on my time and is totally supportive. On the downside, he faces similar demands himself, making us even less likely to get time to ourselves unless it is planned like a military operation”

“I think that building networks of support — not just with other women, but also with their male colleagues — is a critical skill”

“We also need to develop strong female role models and mentors to challenge the kind of gender stereotyping that leads some women to believe that politics is a man’s job. We need to address those ways of doing things, designed in the past by men for men.”

“In my experience, the party has lived up to its principles of choosing people for positions purely on the basis of merit, and for me this is the only credible and acceptable way to make those choices.”

6. Key Issues and Recommendations from the Morning Session

The speakers identified a range of key issues and associated recommendations which we have reported below with the intention that they help point the way for future action to tackle under representation of women in public life and decision-making:

- There are not enough women elected to public bodies or given public appointments. Where policy makers reflect the society in which they live, policy should be better suited to that society. As long as women are heavily underrepresented, policy-making will not represent their views and opinions. Increasing women's representation would make for better policy, more fully addressing the wider needs of society.
- We also need to ensure that the women, and the people, we elect are reflective of the richness of society. We need to see disabled women, women from ethnic minorities, lesbian women, traveller women; we need to see mothers and single mothers; we need to see everybody included in political life.
- We want to see women across all the mainstream parties because they have a contribution to make. There is a need to increase the supply of and the demand for more women into politics.
- To actually see women participating in public life impacts on attitudes of the parties, and the general public. The more women participate in public life, the less our participation is regarded as a novelty and the more it is accepted as a norm.

- The political parties should be proactive in regularly reviewing their practices. We need to address those ways of doing things that were designed in the past by men for men.
- Women should be welcomed into the party at all levels. The key in all of this is ensuring that we get women into elected positions within the parties e.g. encourage women to go forward as the Chairs of the branches instead of going as the secretaries.
- Introduce female-friendly practices and policies in parties - understanding of caring commitments at home, be it with children or with elderly relatives - to encourage women into politics. Having such practices and policies could do more to encourage women into politics than anything else.
- Value women's life experiences (recognise that organising childcare for three children is a valuable skill!) There is a need to send out signals that women members and candidates are valued, needed and important, and that their work at home and in the family is valued.
- There is a need to target women from rural areas, because inaccessibility and rural isolation exacerbate the barriers to their participation.
- The media have a big role to play in changing attitudes in that they should seek out the voices of female, as well as male, politicians.
- There should be consideration given to setting up a women's caucus in the Assembly to deal with women's issues and to have a forum for debate among women Members.

- It is important to build support networks — not just with other women, but also with male colleagues — this is a critical skill.
- It is important to have childcare support.
- Mentors in political parties should be considered. We need to develop strong female role models and mentors to challenge the kind of gender stereotyping that leads some women to believe that politics is a man's job.
- Funding for training is needed. Some of the biggest challenges are around funding for training for women, and around mentoring and support. There is a need to consider funding opportunities for groups and organisations that are promoting women into political life, such as DemocraShe and Women into Politics.
- A challenge for us all is the Review of Public Administration. After downsizing, the number of councillors we will have in 2009 is unknown....This is not just about elected women but also about how women will be affected through health, education and even local government. We also have to ensure that councils take this issue of gender balance on board and, of course, central Government too where the Secretary of State and others have a part to play.
- We have heard a lot about quotas and positive action this morning ... That is a controversial issue, and we must tackle it head on.

Afternoon session

The Panel



From left to right:, Cllr Lynne Fraser, Cllr Helen Quigley, Wendy Austin, Cllr Marion Smith, Cllr Lynne Fraser and Cllr Michelle McIlveen

7. Promoting Women’s Participation in Local Government – Challenges faced and lessons learned

Here again we have included extracts from the texts of the speeches made in this session by women active in local government to illustrate the breadth of their experiences the lessons they learned and what worked for them.

Challenges Faced- Michelle McIlveen, Councillor

“Nothing prepared me for the selection, the election or council itself. I....work in my family business, and I am used to working in a predominately male environment and dealing with financial issues.

To that end, I was prepared for some of the conditions that I would face as a councillor”.

“I certainly was not prepared for the amount of time that that would take up and the sheer number of meetings that take place each month. ..., time commitment is an issue that is given little attention when the problems of female participation are discussed”.

Lessons Learned

“The key to any new system is flexibility.... “If we can get the work/life balance within local government, and make it attractive for people to join, I believe that we will go a long way towards making local democracy more inclusive and ensure that women achieve the proper level of representation throughout all our councils”

Challenges Faced- Angela Nelson, Councillor

“The hostility I met when I first joined local government knocked me back at first. The culture of people talking about you and attacking you is especially hard for women and young people who join the council. ...”.

“At the minute I am spending approximately 80 hours a week doing council, constituency and party business. Luckily my family is grown up so I don’t have to take them into consideration.”

“Being a councillor gives me great opportunity to challenge as well as to work with statutory agencies.”

Lessons Learned

“I have found that when new councillors are elected, they find themselves thrown in at the deep end with little support and guidance. ... I feel that every party should initiate a proper induction programme set up by councils to guide and develop the new members. Subsequently, there needs to be a proper induction process with ongoing training to develop and maintain skills and update knowledge. We need mechanisms, opportunities for support, mentoring, and networking

Challenges Faced- Kate Lagan, Councillor

“I was also a full-time teacher at that time (when I was elected), and it was very difficult juggling school, home and meetings..... I was never at home.

Happily, now I am retired, and I am a full-time councillor — and a very happy one at that. I really love my work. Every day is different; every day is a challenge, and I am thoroughly enjoying it. Like all new councillors, at the time when I was elected, I was not prepared at all for my new role as a councillor. I believe I was more scared of the media than I was of the other councillors..... At one point during the lifetime of one council, I was the only woman councillor. It was not that I was given a hard time as the only woman councillor — I was well established at that time and the men did not mess with me — but it was really lonely”.

“Council chambers are often viewed as battlegrounds where bullying and ridicule are the order of the day. Women need to be able to cope with that and counter what can often be very personal attacks”.

Lessons Learned

“There have been many very welcome changes on the political front, and yet nothing seems to have changed to redress the gender imbalance within council chambers.... We need to look at the culture that has developed around councils, and particularly begin to set higher standards of behaviour.”

“I also agree with my colleagues about the need to tackle the “long meetings, many meetings” culture. You cannot think straight after 11.30 pm if you have been there from 7 pm. It is just not possible to make good decisions, and it is not fair on constituents...”

“Women's confidence to run for council will be boosted when they know that training and preparation are available beforehand... I am happy to report that men as well as women are interested in the mould being broken not only to get more women into the political arena but also to achieve a better work-life balance, to make the council chamber a place that people feel is more accessible and interesting, and to reflect the makeup of our community better.”

Challenges Faced - Lynn Frazer, Councillor

“I had no experience of campaigning or of dealing with the media, and I certainly had no idea of what being a councillor meant. Neither had I any idea of council structures, protocol or even the time commitment involved.... and it was quite a while before I felt confident enough to participate actively.”

“..., some councils had no female members at all. Under those circumstances it would seem obvious that we would work together

and support each other, but that was not always the case. In fact, a comment made to me by a female colleague angered me: she wanted to know how I managed to be a councillor and a mother and whether I did not feel that I really should be at home looking after my children. I hope that those sentiments would not be expressed today, but I am not altogether sure that that is the case”.

Lessons Learned

“Fifteen years down the line, what has changed? In some instances, nothing at all; but in other areas there has been some progress. There are still no comprehensive training programmes for new councillors... However, I am pleased to say that over the past number of years there has been some progress on initiatives designed to develop and enhance the skills and confidence of women who are elected or who are considering standing.”

“More recently, I have been involved with the Women in Politics Programme. I have been appointed as one of NILGA's¹¹ champions. Involvement in the programme has awakened my awareness and interest in women's participation in politics at all levels.”

“I discovered that the 11-member executive body of the NAC¹² had no female representation. In fact, there were very few women elected to ... the association... To my surprise and delight, I managed to get agreement for an additional place on the executive for a women's representative. It was also agreed that a women's

¹¹ Northern Ireland Local Government Association

¹² National Association of Councils

committee would be set up and would be provided with a budget to look at issues around training and support. We hope that will give us the opportunity to network and to provide support, if necessary. The groups will be cross party; in fact, all women councillors will be invited to attend.”

“I have also become more vocal when it comes to nominations to outside bodies and organisations”.

Challenges Faced - Marion Smith, Councillor

“I had no experience of politics, of councils, of how they worked, or of how to get things done. There was no help or support provided, other than listening to friends and colleagues ... When I look back and think about how naive I was, it would have been invaluable to have had some training available”.

Lessons Learned

“If I could offer one single piece of advice, then this would be it: get yourself organised to deal promptly and effectively with queries. Whether you like it or not, you are on call, at the end of the phone, e-mail or answering machine – all day and every day..... However, I always make time for family and a social life. That is important, and it keeps me sane “.

“It is essential to keep a reasonably high public profile. Someone once said that you should advertise what you have got, but make sure that you have got what you advertise. Media training is a must”.

“ I am fortunate to have a very supportive family, and it is important to know that there is someone on whom I can depend who will give impartial and honest advice and who will watch my back. Believe me, that is important”.

“When I first became involved, I was fortunate to be able to devote considerable time to getting to know the ropes. However, for those with less time, some form of practical procedural training is invaluable.”

“Many of our political structures are not family friendly, and one must look at how that can be addressed. One small advantage with local politics is that outside the formal meetings, one can operate with a fair degree of flexibility. However, for a woman with family responsibilities, that flexibility needs good time management. The situation is improving, but it is important to support one another”

Challenges Faced - Bronagh Hinds, DemocraShe, Institute of Governance Queens University

“Accident and passion were the two main factors that got women involved in politics. Some women were driven by the passion of an issue. We need to build on that involvement through capacity building... capacity building occurring in three dimensions at three levels: women, political parties, and the governance system. All are equally important and are interrelated.”

“First, is the dimension that involves women - I include preparing women as candidates and enhancing their effectiveness once they

are in political office. DemocraShe has focused on the former, and we like to think that we played a part in assisting at least some delegates to get elected”. 41% of councillors and 50% of MLAs have availed of DemocraShe¹³ training..... People are asking for training and support so that they can become more professional.”

“Capacity building for political parties includes strategic planning and taking specific measures to address gender imbalances. Parties also need to be supported with advice and assistance to make the necessary structural and cultural changes. The challenge and the tasks will be different with each party, because each party will be more comfortable about the specific measures that it chooses to take on”.

“The third element is the system. We need to increase the capacity of the system — in this instance, preparations for new councils ...— to gear up to enable arrangements that are more reflective of Northern Ireland society than has been the case in the past. That entails putting codes, structures and training in place. On one level, it means council constitutions, standing orders and codes of conduct that set out the principles and parameters for the comfortable environment ... On another level, it means investing sufficient resources in training that is versatile — for example, allowing training to be targeted at different groups, including women-only groups as well as mixed groups”.

¹³ DemocraShe is a partnership between the Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research and the Northern Ireland Women’s Initiative. We started by offering training in policy, politics and media skills for current and aspiring women politicians

“ I can say that, in my meetings with parties, I see more commitment to this from party leaders than I have seen in the past, but we need to assist them to plan strategically and to implement methodically”.

“Parties also need to be supported with advice and assistance to make the necessary structural and cultural changes. The challenge and the tasks will be different with each party, because each party will be more comfortable about the specific measures that it chooses to take on”.

“My co-panellists have talked again and again about culture and practice, long hours, meeting discipline, and behaviour verging on bullying and harassment. There are matters such as balance of council posts, appointment to outside bodies and delegations, concerns about child and dependent care, and work-life balance”.

Lessons Learned

“There is much to be done by political parties to use the gender action plan ¹⁴ as a template for introducing their own tailored programmes for achieving a level playing field for women.

DemocraShe and the Women in Local Councils initiative stand ready to help.”

¹⁴ The Women in Local Councils initiative was launched by the Local Government Staff Commission in January 2006, and is a partnership of many different agencies, including all the local government organisations. The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the National Association of Councillors (NAC) are particularly active. Women in Local Councils started as a modest plan for an ambitious number of gender champions: 26 officer champions, one in each council; five party champions, one for each party; and 6 NILGA champions. The initiative has developed three gender action plans: one is for council officers; one is for elected council members; and the third is for political parties. The aim of gender action plans is to enable each body to build the necessary capacity to deliver results in relation to gender balance. The plans help to establish baselines, set goals, identify barriers and measures to overcome these, monitor results,. Councils are competing in 2007 for the first ever Opportunity Now Local Government Award, on the basis of progress on their gender action plans.

“Good planning requires setting of targets and monitoring of achievement. Some parties may wish to go beyond this to establish quotas, but it would not be right to suggest that that means selecting incompetent women who do not have merit..... I think that many of us can at least move to target setting if we are uncomfortable with the notion of quota setting.”

“Women’s voluntary organisations have a role to play as well, and they are the final piece of the puzzle in relation to increasing women’s access to political office. The link between women inside political arenas and those outside is important. “

“Women into Politics in particular, has been engaged in building awareness, knowledge and skill within the community and in preparing more women to take the first step towards thinking about entering politics. This provides fertile recruitment ground for all parties to replenish the numbers of women prepared to run for election.”

“Shared policy agendas for women’s priorities need to be explored. Many women engage in organisations such as the Women’s Support Network, the Women’s Resource and Development Agency, the Northern Ireland’s Women’s Rural Network etc in discussing this with women politicians and parties. Networking and building women’s collective capacity means that women’s organisations have an important contribution to make”.

“Reformed local government is now imminent. From the outset we must have parity of super councils. This conference is the first step that the

Government have taken for women under the Good Friday Agreement.
We trust that it will be followed up and not left here”.

8. Key Issues and Recommendations- Afternoon session

As in the morning session, the speakers identified a range of key issues and recommendations. Again, we have reported them below with the intention that they help point the way for future action to tackle under representation of women in public life and decision-making.

- Much of the problem is that women do not seek elected office. Overcoming that problem is most important.
- It is vital that a working environment is created that both encourages new people to enter local government and retains them once they get elected.
- While appropriate remuneration is part of the solution, making sure that the working environment is right is even more important.
- Getting work/life balance within local government, and making it attractive for people to join, will go a long way towards making local democracy more inclusive and ensuring that women achieve the proper level of representation throughout all our councils.
- There is still too much of a culture within local government that sees more meetings as the solution to every problem and substitutes activity for achievement.
- To create new working conditions within the council, there is a need to breakdown barriers rather than reinforce them.

- The key to a new system is flexibility. The working culture must be flexible enough to accommodate others who are seeking to combine their council responsibilities with a life outside local government. Unless councils can be flexible enough in their governance arrangements to allow those who have family responsibilities, carer responsibilities and employment responsibilities, for all the initiatives in the world we will not see a system of local government that reflects all of society.
- Tackle the long meetings, many meetings culture. How do women go out to council meetings every evening, and spend time with their children? If the children are at school all day, and the mothers are out all evening — no remuneration can adequately compensate for working hours like that. Meetings at 9.00 am are to be avoided when a lot of women – and men - have to leave kids to school.
- Council hours of nine to five, Monday to Friday, in line with the Assembly are more female and family friendly, because we need to ensure that mothers have a chance to be at home — and also fathers. It is not good enough just for the women to be at home in the evening. Men make better parents if they have time with their children as well.
- It is those positives of public service — helping people with particular problems and seeking to enact policy frameworks that prevent the problems in the first place — that we must stress in order to attract women into local politics. The cause of converting

more women to the idea of running for civic office is not assisted by continually concentrating on negatives, particularly when those negatives, such as conflict with work and time away from family, are the same for men as they are for women.

There is a need:

- To recognise the time commitment given to council participation.
- To consider appropriate remuneration as a solution to additional burden on employment commitments and family life.
- To recognise the four Cs as problems for women – cash, childcare, culture and confidence.
- To provide training for women to have sufficient opportunities to increase their knowledge and articulacy to meet future challenges.
- To ensure that councils take this issue of gender balance on board and central Government too where others have a part to play.
- To ensure parties recognise that they are not judged against other parties' performance. They are judged by their own current stage of development and how much more they are going to achieve beyond that.
- To ensure parties use the gender action plan ¹⁵as a template for introducing their own tailored programmes for achieving a level playing field for women - with support from e.g. DemocraShe and the Women in Local Councils initiative.
- As part of local government reorganisation in the Review of Public Administration there is a need to prioritise women in local councils and allocate sufficient capacity-building support for women; there is also a

¹⁵ The Women in Local Councils initiative was launched by the Local Government Staff Commission in January 2006, and is a partnership of many different agencies, including all the local government organisations. The initiative has developed three gender action plans; one is for council officers; one is for elected council members; and the third is for political parties.

need to ensure that the local government implementation groups are gender-balanced and that programmes are gender-proofed.

- There remain two big stumbling blocks for women: selection and election.
- Each party has its own methods of selection. Those parties that have more democratic methods of selection have fewer women in them. Women have put themselves forward and have the leadership support, but at the selection meetings, a man gets selected.
- Election is the other stumbling point. Women vote more than men do, but they do not necessarily vote for women. The Equality Commission and the women's sector must focus on encouraging women to vote for female candidates.
- If the conference is to achieve anything at all, and so that we are not sitting here in 20 years time rehearsing all the changes again, we need to have structured and tailored training.



left to right: Michelle Gildernew, Patricia Lewsley, Wendy Austin, Joan Carson, Naomi Long

9. Other Devolved Administrations - Use of Positive Action¹⁶

In this section we have included key extracts from the speeches made by Gwenda Thomas, Welsh Assembly Member and Johann Lamont Member of the Scottish Parliament. Women's representation in the National Assembly for Wales was 47% in the 2007 elections and 50% in the 2003 elections. The Scottish Parliament returned 33% women in the 2007 elections and 40% in the 2003 elections.

The Wales Experience in Positive Action - Gwenda Thomas AM

“The Welsh Assembly has taken many positive steps to encourage women to stand for elected office”

“Devolution enables us as politicians to craft and deliver the very policies that meet the specific needs of the people we serve locally..... Devolution has also encouraged women from all backgrounds and communities into political and public life....”

“Perhaps even more importantly, because of devolution and positive action, women have entered new fields of policy. Women are driving forward policies on economic development and even on legislation. At the moment we have a Standing Orders Committee reforming Standing Orders for the Assembly post May 2007, when it will acquire extra powers. A year ago no one would have believed it, but every member in the Standing Orders Committee is a woman.”

¹⁶ Positive Action – Paper by Fawcett Society Annex B

“Positive steps are being taken in Wales. We heard about the all-women shortlist and hear about discrimination. However, the question that I was asking myself was, how long do we have to wait? How long should we wait? I believe that the answer is now.... The National Assembly for Wales has been all the better in that, right from the outset, there was equality”.

“I believe that there is an issue about the time element and the way in which all women shortlists have worked in Wales. They have been contentious. We know – we have even been fighting a by-election on the issue. However, when you think about the alternative, I wonder where we would be”.

“We also twinned constituencies for that as well as the all-women shortlist, wehad one constituency selecting a man and one constituency selecting a woman. I believe that, by and large, that has been successful. I cannot think of any other way where we would be able to say now that the National Assembly for Wales is the only legislature in the world where there is equal representation”.

“We operate family-friendly hours. The Assembly sits in plenary session twice a week, on Tuesday and Wednesday between 2.00 pm and 5.30 pm”.

“I have found in talking to women, including those in my own community, that role models can become intimidating. We need to respect and value the lay element that is brought into political life. I listen to women whom I know are so capable, and who could contribute so much, and then I hear them say that they do not think

they are really good enough. We need to recognise that. Just as we need men to respect women, we need to respect women as well”.

**The Scottish Experience in Positive Action. Johann Lamont MSP
Deputy Minister for Communities, Scotland**

“I really wanted to endorse the comments ... made about the importance, not just of challenging women’s inequality, but of recognising the need to take action through representation in order to do that. That has to be woven into the very heart of Government if we are going to make the kind of changes that we want to make.

“it is critical for women not to be intimidated by the political edifices, the political institutions, and the barriers that are erected in order to prevent women from coming into politics”

“it is critical for good politics that you come into politics because you have got things that you want to do, as opposed to deciding that you are a politician and then hunting around for things that might be useful to do”.

“I do understand the important role that women play at a local level..., women in our communities relate very much to what is happening at a local level. It is an important bridge between elected representatives and women within our communities”.

“Before the Scottish Parliament, there had been a long period of time when the issue of women’s representation was critical in Scotland”

“We understood that this (the Scottish Parliament) was a new institution, and that if we did not get any rights at the beginning... we engaged in a hard political argument around the need for positive action”.

“It had started in our party with quotas, and because there were quotas I went onto the Scottish executive of my own party. There were 36 people on it – two of us were women. I increased representation by 100% when I went on and we won the argument around quotas inside our party.”

“That allowed us in our actions to be the same as the Welsh Assembly by having twinning to ensure a hugely increased representation of women that changed the political culture in which we operated, so that all of the political parties... knew there was a test about bringing women into that parliamentary process. It forced, I would argue, the political forces to find women to represent their views within our party and in others’.

“...we twinned constituencies for the purposes of selecting – within the party ... So, there were two constituencies put together. There had to be two to choose from, a man and a woman, so there was a woman’s point and a man’s point, effectively – and then one got one and one got the other ... they came from within the local party. For example, in my area I was twinned with another seat in Glasgow. There were maybe four women and five men standing; we were apportioned to the two constituencies. It actually worked very well at the end: it was whoever got the most votes. All members would have

to vote for one man and one woman across the two constituencies and then whoever got most votes got to choose which constituency...”

“One thing that I emphasise as being really important in relation to positive action is that we would not be in this position if we had not made that choice in the Scottish Parliament.”

“There was of course – and it continues to exist – a long-term political argument about women’s representation, which implies that the weaknesses are all those of women; that the women will not stand, despite the fact that we know that huge numbers of women are holding our communities together, holding together community organisations, supporting fractured families and so on; or that they do not have the skills...”.

“There was a notion that, somehow, what we have in the body politic currently was merit, and if we could just get ourselves as good as that, we could get to be there..., in fact, that what we are looking to do is to liberate the merits and capacities of 50% of the population that has been denied it. It is something I think we can afford to be positive...about. ”

“Women’s representation and women’s equality demanded a new language of politics and new actions — we needed to talk about discrimination, violence, women’s educational opportunities and women’s experience of the legal system.”

“In terms of women’s representation, it seems to me critical to have an understanding of what politics is really about. I remember as a young woman not really understanding — this was in the 70s. It was because in those days politics seemed to be about free collective bargaining, about economic power and not about the kinds of things that we would now argue are absolutely central to politics and central to the inequality of women... About the fact that women had a low-paid job, and that women were far more likely to have been carers and more likely to have been impacted on by the lack of childcare; that inequality was built into our institutions so that women were not able to achieve their potential; that male violence against women existed; that sexual abuse and child abuse existed. These were things when I was a young woman, nobody thought were politics at all. Yet if you think about those things and how they impact on women’s lives and on our communities, it is necessary to understand that we need that kind of transformation in the political language that we talk in order to make the changes that we want to achieve.”

“I have a young family; my children are only 11 and nine years old.”

“In relation to how I manage, people say that the Scottish Parliament is family friendly. One family said to me that they do not know to whom it is friendly but it is not to them. There are timing issues, but we have tried and must continue the battle to keep the hours under control. The test is to be much more brutal about what matters and what does not matter. You do not need endless meetings. You can speak to people on the phone and work when you get back to the house.”

“A lot of women who chose a political career were not able also to have a family, and it was seen that you either had to choose one or the other. How liberating it is that not only do we have more women in Parliament in critical positions but we have mothers there too”.

“It is true, however, that women, both in the Parliament and far beyond the women’s organisations of civic Scotland, have shaped that Parliament with its Standing Orders, its openness and its commitment to transparency”.

“There are still huge challenges, not only in relation to the positive action that gives us the opportunity, but also in what you actually do with that.” “Representation on our local authorities is still a problem. Only 19% of local authority council leaders, and 13% of local authority chief executives, are women. Women make up only 10% of senior police officers and 13% of the judiciary in Scotland. Only 18% of head teachers in Scotland’s secondary schools are women, and only 14% of university vice-chancellors are women.”

“When I get a list of names for a body that has been set up as a working group or whatever, I count the names — even if it has nothing to do with me. If a minute relating to agriculture and fisheries lands on my desk, I count the names to find out how many women are on it. That message eventually gets through, so that all the groups and bodies speaking to us are far more representative.”

“There is a huge way to go, but there is a capacity at Scottish level, with increasing women’s representation, to normalise what women in politics looks like...”

10. Key Issues Identified by Participants

“We need the money for training, and we need positive action.”

“It is important for the political parties and the colleges and schools to be encouraging people, through the curriculum, to take part in the political process..”

“Change in the culture is one of the things that ...quite a number of people mentioned both in the morning and afternoon. Changing the culture right from the start, building it into the start-up process, so that it is the government who are writing it into the legislation that sets up the councils in the RPA.”

“Mentoring has been mentioned a lot today, and it would be a really positive step if, within parties and organisations, older female members were to take young women under their wing and say, ‘This is how it is done. We have the experience and are going to pass it on.’ This is invaluable.”

“One of the things that really needs to change is within the structure of the parties themselves. I know that within our own party our youth movement has been gathering more and more momentum, but within the movements themselves, that is a great training basis. We should be working to bring young women in and to place women within youth movements to get them used to politics so that they are not being thrown in at the deep end of internal politics.”

“I just wanted to raise a point regarding the apathy out there within the general public and the problem of how to get women and young people — both male and female — to come out and vote. It is mostly older people that participate in the political process. Maybe if we could get some more young people to stand, they might be more willing and think that that person might have more in common with them than maybe someone who is 40 or 50 years older”.

“The one thing that we did not mention, but which is always the elephant in the room, is of course, childcare.”

11. Closing Remarks

Brid Rodgers Former deputy leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Member of the Legislative Assembly for Upper Bann.

First, the purpose of the meeting today was to focus on why we have so few women in politics; the need for more women in politics; the problems, the barriers, and what can we do about them. To a large extent, we are now focused on the problem and what are we going to do about it. Of course, we cannot do it on our own, although we can do a certain amount.

I came into politics in the mid 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement – that is how old I am. In those days it was taken for granted that men were better politicians than women, and that women did not really have the capacity for politics. But that is gone now thanks to the high profile women at local and national level who have shown that women can do as good a job, and very often a better job than men.... I am not saying women are better than men but certainly they are as good as men.

The reason it is important for women to get into politics and deal with the democratic deficit in the political system is because we can change things and bring our priorities into the political arena. People referred to violence against women and the lack of childcare facilities, both of which affect women and prevent them moving into politics. It brings women's priorities into the mix. If 50%, or in Northern Ireland over 50%, of the population are women then it is totally undemocratic to have only 16% of women reflected in the Assembly and eventually in the decision making process — hopefully

we will have a decision-making process when we get back up and running in Northern Ireland, which I hope will be sooner rather than later. It is undemocratic, unjust and unfair to have the decision-making process so wanting as regards women's input.

Unless you involve all of the people in government in the area, you rob society of the benefit of the real potential and leadership qualities of half of the human race, if you keep women out. So in reality, it is good for everybody.

It was great to hear so many articulate women speaking and not as much as one minute of waffle. That is a record for a full day conference in Northern Ireland. Everyone was listening to everybody else.

I hope that the leadership of the political parties will take on board what was said here today by the Scottish and Welsh representatives about how they did it and how it is possible... We need to change now, because justice delayed is justice denied. Women being excluded from having a say in events that shape and affect their lives is unjust.

I would like to thank the Secretary of State for hosting the event. I would like to thank all of the women politicians who gave their time to speak and to contribute – the MPs, MLAs, local councillors, the Members of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly Member and of course Wendy (Austin) for her excellent chairing of the meeting.”–



See above: Brid Rogers and Cllr Helen Quigley

Annex A

Speech by Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Rt Hon Peter Hain MP.

In the century since women won the vote, roles in society have changed enormously, despite the best endeavours of so-called 'New Men', continuing to be the mainstay in most homes, and making great strides in other areas which would have seemed fanciful to the suffragettes.

In most workplaces, in many boardrooms, even in the armed forces, women have rightfully established their place, though remain lamentably under-represented in most of them, especially at the highest levels. Women have made significant advances in the trade unions too – though, again, not enough.

Yet there is one area in which politicians could do more and should do more and that, of course, is in politics itself.

A newspaper ran a cartoon just after Margaret Thatcher was deposed as Prime Minister. A little boy was asking his mother: “Mum - can a man be Prime Minister?” Of course what made it amusing was that it was turning the real world on its head. Despite Mrs Thatcher’s 11 years in power, she remained – and remains – an isolated example of a woman reaching the very top of British politics.

Since her time, no woman has led a major political party in the UK or in Northern Ireland. And despite the surge in the number of women MPs elected in 1997 that figure, far from continuing to grow, has slipped back slightly.

Labour can be proud that our policy of selecting candidates from all-women shortlists for half of our winnable seats in 1997 resulted in the number of women at Westminster shooting up to 121. But we were building on a pathetically small base – before then, there were more MPs called John than there were women MPs.

Throughout the history of Northern Ireland women have played a significant role in social and economic development. But it is vital that this is true of politics too.

Women comprise more than 50 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland. Yet at the last Assembly elections only 17 per cent of MLAs were women: that is 18 out of 108. Compare that to the 50 per cent of women elected to the National Assembly of Wales and 42 per cent in the Scottish Parliament.

In local councils the situation is no better. Just 21 per cent of council seats in Northern Ireland are held by women. That is slightly less than the figures for Wales and Scotland and considerably less than England at nearly 30 per cent.

Those statistics disguise an even worse situation in some areas. The highest representation of women in councils is, in the greater Belfast area, 35 per cent, while the lowest is in rural areas such as Strabane, a mere 6 per cent.

So apart from the general problem of encouraging women generally to get involved in representative politics, there is a particular problem in rural areas.

A few more worrying statistics. From 1999-2005 the average figure for public appointments held by women was 33 per cent – a fall since 1998.

It isn't as if women are not wanted in politics. A recent Life and Times Survey in Northern Ireland showed that 75 per cent of both men and women agreed that women need to get involved in politics if problems that concern them are going to be solved.

The same survey reported that 55 per cent of men and women believe parties should be encouraged to put forward a proportion of women candidates. Perhaps not surprisingly, 57 per cent agreed that women MPs better represent women's issues than do male MPs.

The same proportion also agree that, in general, things would improve if there were more women in politics.

Yet this under-representation in politics continues at a time when issues affecting women, children and families, are more important, not just to this Government, but to all political parties – and, of course, to voters.

Achieving a better balance between work and family life, support for parents and carers, and pension reform, are rightly moving from being private family struggles to becoming central issues in public policy. Opinion polls reveal a significant difference in the way women and men feel about many of these issues.

A generation or two ago it was still possible for some politicians to talk disdainfully of “the women’s vote” as being no more than following what their husbands were doing. Today it is accepted to be something very separate and very important to every political party and candidate. In blunt terms parties cannot win without the backing of women voters who no longer follow men’s traditional voting patterns.

This means that politicians need to engage with women voters to ensure that our political priorities more closely reflect their concerns – the concerns after over half of the voting population of Northern Ireland.

Today’s conference must be a springboard for action, encouraging women to increase their participation in political and public life in NI.

Evidence from across Europe shows that increases in the number of women elected only occurred after changes within political parties themselves.

Having more women within party structures, reaching a gender balance, is critical to raising the number of women nominated and later elected.

After our success in 1997, Labour once again used all-women shortlists for winnable seats at last year's general election and this continued policy has resulted in the party having a significantly higher proportion of women MPs compared to the other parties - 27 per cent of Labour's MPs are women.

And they know there are good opportunities for promotion within Government, too – 35 per cent of the Cabinet is female.

Having more women standing for office can increase the number of women who vote, so having more women standing for office in your party can increase the number who vote for your party. Women candidates in Great Britain have tended to outperform men.

But even when a party actively promotes female candidates, we know that many women are still reluctant to get involved in politics, and the reasons will be debated today.

What are the barriers? How do we remove them? And how do we encourage more women into political and public life? This is your challenge as political parties and as women and men who live in Northern Ireland.

We need to look at how women are recruited into public life, and how the problem of breaking into a male-dominated world can be overcome not just by a few exceptional and determined women but by many more.

We also need to look at what actions can be taken to encourage women to come into public life. The reforms to the working hours of the House of Commons, initiated by Robin Cook when he was Leader of the House, have made a difference.

It might have suited the old-fashioned male-dominated Commons to work every evening and often late into the early hours of the morning, but it wasn't family-friendly. The new hours have made a difference to any MP who wants to spend more time with their family – particularly benefiting women.

But has that message trickled down to the grassroots level of political parties? I suspect that it hasn't for many women. So we need to do more to explain it as well as working on other changes to the system which would benefit those who don't want politics to become an all-consuming passion. There is a world outside politics (or so I'm reliably told!).

So this conference is a rallying call for equality. In the coming weeks I will launch Northern Ireland's first ever gender equality strategy. It will establish a policy framework of high level objectives, one of which will ensure the active and equal participation of women and men at all levels of public and political life.

As we know, international evidence has shown that the only way to significantly increase the number of women in parliament is to use positive action measures, such as all-women shortlists and quotas.

The devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales are leading the way in ensuring that women are at the very heart of decision making.

In the first elections to those bodies, Labour used positive measures to ensure that women were well represented. As a result, women made up 37 per cent of Members of the Scottish Parliament and 41 per cent of Welsh Assembly Members.

Positive measures went on to increase the number of women in Scotland and Wales in the 2003 elections. I'm especially proud as a Welsh MP that Wales has the only legislature in the world with equal numbers of women

and men. And there are more women than men in the Welsh Assembly Government Cabinet, which also makes it unique.

I have invited speakers from Wales and Scotland to share their experiences with us – to show what worked for them

The restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland and the implementation of the Review of Public Administration represent a huge and unique opportunity to bring about gender balance in the new structures and to have inclusive representation from the seven new councils to Stormont.

I hope that sharing experience today will encourage and enable action, both individually and as political parties, to increase the numbers of women who stand as candidates.

In the past Northern Ireland became a watchword for religious bigotry, prejudice and discrimination. Gradually, painfully, the battle against such sectarianism is being won. Let Northern Ireland now push forward the frontiers for equal opportunities on gender so that women become the political leaders rather than the politically led.

Annex B

The Need for Positive Action

Provided by Fawcett Society - www.fawcettsociety.org.uk

At the last election the number of women MPs fell for the first time since 1979. Britain currently has one of the lowest levels of political representation of women in Europe. Fawcett believes that the best way to counter this trend is for the parties to use positive action mechanisms such as all-women shortlists. Where positive action has been used in the UK and in Europe it has dramatically increased women's representation.

WHAT IS POSITIVE ACTION?

Positive Action is essentially quotas that are used by political parties to boost the representation of women. Positive action mechanisms are used widely by political parties in Europe and have been tentatively used by most political parties in Britain. The following are types of positive action that have been used in Britain and elsewhere:

All-women shortlists

This mechanism is used in single member constituency elections (e.g. The House of Commons and the majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly) where local parties select one candidate. All-women shortlists require that a proportion of local parties only shortlist women candidates to ensure a woman is selected in that seat. This was the mechanism the Labour Party used from 1993-96.

Twinning

This system is an adaptation of all-women shortlists intended to avoid the legal obstacles. It applies in single member constituencies. Under the

twinning system two local parties select their candidates jointly, with a requirement that one man and one woman be selected. This ensures equal representation of men and women. This system was used by the Labour Party in the 1999 elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly and in the 2000 election to the London Assembly.

Clustering

This system is similar to twinning and again is used in single member constituencies. It involves several constituencies 'clustering' together with a requirement to select a certain amount of women between them. This system has been proposed but never actually used, by the Liberal Democrats.

Zippering

This system is used for proportional list elections. Here the members selecting candidates on a list are required to alternate men and women on the list. This system is widely used in Europe and was used by the Liberal Democrats in the 1999 European election and by Plaid Cymru in the 1999 Welsh Assembly election.

Under proportional electoral systems, positive mechanisms such as zippering make a significant difference. However, under the First-Past-the-Post electoral system, only twinning, clustering and all-women shortlists are variable mechanisms. In elections for Westminster, twinning and clustering cannot be used due to the large number of sitting MPs. This leaves all-women shortlists as the only variable means of making a significant impact on the numbers of women in Parliament.

WHY IS POSITIVE ACTION NEEDED?

Positive Action is not needed because women are not able to succeed on merit, but because discrimination in the selection process means that they are rarely given the opportunity to try. Experience from across Europe has demonstrated that use of Positive Action is the key factor in determining whether or not a country has high levels of women's representation. Whilst other measures, such as better training and support for potential women candidates are, of course, desirable, when used on their own, without positive action mechanisms, they do not make a significant difference. As far as we are aware, no country has ever significantly increased its level of women's representation without the use of Positive Action mechanisms by some of the parties.

WHY DOES THE LAW NEED TO CHANGE?

The law needs to change because in 1996, the Labour Party's use of all-women shortlists in the run-up to the 1997 general election was challenged by two male Labour Party members in an industrial tribunal. The tribunal found in favour of the plaintiffs and ruled all-women shortlists illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act. Since then, there has been confusion over whether other forms of Positive Action are legal or not. Political parties have tentatively used mechanisms such as 'zipping' and 'twinning', but have been extremely hesitant about doing so for fear of legal challenge.

WINNING THE ARGUMENT FOR POSITIVE ACTION

Positive action mechanisms have been the subject of attacks by sections of the media, certain politicians and some political activists. Here we outline some of the more common arguments against change and the counter-arguments that make clear why Positive Action works and is the only way forward.

Q – Candidates should be selected on merit. The best candidate for the job should be selected regardless of gender.

A – In an ideal world, of course candidates should be selected on merit. However, at the moment this does not happen. There is a tremendous amount of discrimination inherent in the selection processes of the political parties. If a constituency party is determined to choose a male candidate then no matter how good a woman candidate is, she will not be selected. Positive Action is not needed because women cannot succeed on the basis of merit, but because discrimination means that too often; women are not given the opportunity to try.

Q – You shouldn't counter discrimination with more discrimination against men. Two wrongs don't make a right.

A – Under all-women shortlists, men will still be able to compete for selection in half of all seats. Positive Action is not designed to discriminate against men as revenge for the discrimination suffered by women, but to level the playing field to allow women to compete for parliamentary selection on the same basis as men.

Q - It is patronising to women to suggest that they need special treatment.

A – Women are discriminated against during party selection processes. If they were not prevented from succeeding on merit, then Positive Action would not be needed. It is not patronizing to use mechanisms to correct this discrimination and allow women to compete on the same basis as men. Until recently the vast majority of parliamentary selections operated under 'all-male' shortlists by virtue of the fact that no women were ever included

on the lists – no one has ever suggested that it was patronising to men for constituency parties to exclude women from consideration.

Q – The problem is not that women are being discriminated against, but that not enough women are putting themselves forward for selection.

A – There are less women coming forward for selection than there are men and this is a problem. However, this is not the only problem. Even taking into account the numbers coming forward, proportionally less women are getting selected than men. Every political party has talented women who have been trying for years to get selected to fight safe/marginal parliamentary seats. For example, half the aspiring candidates shortlisted in every safe Labour Party seat were women and yet only 10.3% of these seats went to women¹⁷. The key problem is the discrimination these women encounter in the selection process. It is also likely that if this problem were addressed, then more women would come forward.

Q – Women may be coming forward, but they are not good women. With Positive Action we will end up with low-quality MPs. The women elected under all-women shortlists in 1997 are a prime example of this.

A – There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that women selected under all-women shortlists are any better or worse than the rest of their parliamentary colleagues, whether male or female. Some of the key members of the government team were elected under all-women shortlists. They would not have received this promotion were they not capable politicians. It is patronising to suggest otherwise.

¹⁷ *Women in Parliament (2001) ‘; Equal Opportunities Commission’*

Q – The women who are elected with Positive Action will feel different and will be treated differently because they are ‘token women’.

A – The women MPs selected under all-women shortlists in 1997 have not been treated differently due to this fact. Indeed, very few people are aware of which women were and which women were not selected using this mechanism.

Q – The law should not interfere with how political parties operate.

A – The proposed legislation is permissive – it is there for political parties to take advantage of if they wish. It will not force political party to adopt Positive Action mechanisms as is the case in some other countries.

Q – Even if we change the law in this country, it will still be declared illegal under European law.

A – An excellent piece of research by the Constitution Unit has conclusively demonstrated that this is extremely unlikely to happen¹⁸. The majority of European countries use Positive Action mechanisms themselves and there would be immense pressure on the European Court of Justice to uphold their right to do so. Recent judgements on similar cases suggest this would be the case. Although a challenge under the Human Rights Act is possible, it would hold little danger if the legislation was permissive as is proposed by the government.

Q – What about all-ethnic minority/gay/disable/working-class lists?

A – Fawcett believes Parliament should be truly representative of all people it serves. That means not only more women, but more black, Asian, gay, disabled, working-class MPs. Parties must also take action to address this

¹⁸ Women's representation in UK Politics: What can be done within the Law?' (June 2000) The Constitution Unit School of Public Policy, University College London, 29/30 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9EZ, Tel: 020 7679 4977

under-representation. At present, the government/s commitment is to introduce legislation to allow Positive Action for women.

Q – OK, so women need more help in getting selected. We should provide women with more training and mentoring, even quotas on shortlists but all-women shortlists is a step too far. Other measures can and will make a difference.

A – Political parties have tried other measures in the past and they have failed to make any significant impact on the levels of political representation. If a constituency party is determined to select a man then no amount of training in the world is going to make a difference. The problem is not that women are not good enough to be selected, but that they are being discriminated against. In 1997 the Labour Party ensured that all the shortlists for their safe seats contained 50% women, yet only 1 in 10 selected a woman. Training and confidence building are important but they will only work when used in conjunction with Positive Action. As far as we know, not a country in the world has significantly increased its level of women's representation without the use of positive action. Positive Action works and it is the only solution to the under-representation of women in British politics.

To get a copy of this briefing or for more information, please contact Laura Shepherd-Robinson on Tel: 020 7628 4441 or laurar@fawcettsociety.org.uk

Annex C

Useful Contacts and Websites

Centre for the Advancement of Women into Politics (CAWP)

CAWP was formed in October 2000. Based in the School of Politics and International Studies in Queen's University Belfast, the Centre's aim is to foster an appreciation of women's contribution to politics, government and public decision making in the UK and Ireland. The Centre consider women's political participation as having two important dimensions - the proportion of women in decision making and the inclusion of women's perspectives in government policies and programmes.

Contact address: 19-21 University Square, Queen's University BT7 1PA
<http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/observatory.html>

DemocraShe

DemocraShe was launched in 2000 and is a programme in politics, policy and the media for women in each political party; it is a six week intensive programme which includes modules on communication, profile-building, policy development, media and IT skills, speech writing and strategies for selection and election.

For further information contact: 077 6727 1520

Women in Local Councils – Making a Difference

Women in Local Councils – Making a Difference, has been designed to attract women into local government at all levels and to encourage those already employed to apply for higher graded posts. Partners are Business in the Community, Equality Commission Northern Ireland, Local Government Staff Commission, Local Government Training Group, NIC ICTU, Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), Queens

University Belfast, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE)

Contact Address: Commission House, 18-22 Gordon Street, BT1 2LG

<http://www.womeninlocalcouncils.org.uk/>

Women into Politics (WiP)

WiP was first conceived in 1993 and took the initiative during the first ceasefire period to encourage discussion and dialogue between women about how they felt about entering the male dominated arena of politics and public life and continues to bring women together to talk about issues of concern and have created a space to explore our political difference and similarities.

Contact address: 109-113 Royal Avenue, Belfast BT1 1FF

<http://www.womenintopolitics.org/Contact%20Us.htm>

Other Useful contacts

Equality Commission Northern Ireland

<http://www.equalityni.org/>

Fawcett Society

<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/>

Gender Equality Unit – Office of the First and Deputy First Minister

Castle Buildings, Stormont, Belfast BT4 3SR Tel (028)9052 3497

Email ; admin.gender@ofmdfmni.gov.uk

<http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/index/equality/gender-equality.htm>

Life & Times Survey - political attitudes – women into politics

<http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/polatt.html#women>

<http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/wompolres.html>

Annex D

Encouraging Women into Political and Public Life

Speakers

Wendy Austin - Presenter of Radio Ulster's flagship current affairs programme, Good Morning Ulster. She began her journalistic career with the Belfast Telegraph, leaving to join Downtown Radio in 1971 and then moving to the BBC in 1976. She is a regular presenter of Children In Need, Breakfast News and a variety of television specials and is also a regular contributor to Woman's Hour and other national radio programmes.

Cllr Lynn Fraser - sending tomorrow, Chris 19/10/06

Michelle Gildernew MP, Fermanagh/South Tyrone - After leaving university Michelle travelled extensively in Europe, the United States and Australia where she worked for a year. On her return in 1996 she stood for Sinn Féin in the Forum elections for Fermanagh/South Tyrone. In 1997 she was appointed Sinn Féin representative to London, a position which she held until her election to the Assembly in 1998. While in London she was part of the first Sinn Féin delegation to Downing Street in December 1997. She was elected MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone in June 2001. She has been a member of the party's Ard Chomhairle (National Executive) for five years and has served on the Equality sub-committee and the Women's Forum.

Bronagh Hinds - is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Governance, School of Law, Queen's University Belfast with an interest in equality, democracy and governance. She previously held posts in the voluntary sector and as Deputy Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, where she led the introduction of the statutory duties on equality

and good relations. A participant in the 1996-98 multi-party talks, she runs programmes dedicated to increasing women's access to politics and public life (DemocraShe) and is a partner in the Women in Local Council's initiative. She has written on Checks, Balances and Safeguards in local government (with Loughlin) and on Women and the Review of Public Administration (with Gray), both in 2005 and available on <http://www.archive.rpani.gov.uk>; as well as on equality and problem-solving negotiation. She is a Member of the Local Government Staff Commission

Johann Lamont MSP, Glasgow Pollok – Deputy Minister for

Communities - Born in Glasgow in 1957, Johann Lamont attended Woodside Secondary School. She obtained MA (Hons) at University of Glasgow and a Post Grad teaching qualification at Jordanhill College of Education. She also gained a Certificate of Guidance at Strathclyde University. Johann Lamont worked as a teacher when she left University. She is a member of EIS. In October 2004, Johann was appointed Deputy Minister for Communities

Patricia Lewsley MLA, Lagan Valley - is the SDLP Spokesperson on Equality Issues. Her special interests are Gender Equality, Special Needs in Education; Child Protection; Domestic Violence, childcare and is the Chair of the All Party Working Group on Disability and former Chair of the All Party Working Group for Children which she has recently reconstituted. She has incorporated childcare into a wide range of issues under the Equality banner. Up until suspension of the Assembly, she was Vice Chair of the Assembly's Environment Committee and an active member of the Finance & Personnel Committee and the Committee of the Centre. She was elected Chair of the SDLP in February 2004.

Naomi Long MLA, East Belfast - is an Alliance Assembly Member for East Belfast. She has been the Alliance Party's Education Spokesperson since 1999, promoting Alliance policy on integrated schools and nursery education. She is a Belfast City Councillor for Victoria in East Belfast, and a member of the Council's Town Planning and Client Services Committees and the Arts, Community and Leisure Sub-committee. She is also a member of the East Belfast Partnership Board Member, the Eastern Health and Social Services Council and the Belfast District Policing Partnership Board.

Cllr. Angela Nelson, Lisburn Borough Council – Angela is a long standing republican activist from West Belfast. Angela has held a variety of positions within Sinn Féin over a long period. Angela was first elected to Lisburn City Council for the Dunmurry Cross area in 2004, which includes the Twinbrook and Poleglass estates. Since her election she has been to the fore in promoting equality issues and fighting discrimination on the unionist dominated council. Angela is married with four children and one grandchild.

Cllr. Michelle McIlveen, Ards Borough Council - A graduate of Queen's University with a Masters in Irish Politics and a Certificate in Education Former teacher of history and politics to A level at Grosvenor Grammar School for 3 years she currently works as the business manager in the family business in Newtownards town centre. Michelle is a Member of the Standing Committee of the Convocation of Queen's University.

Cllr Helen Quigley - Was co-opted to Derry City Council in 2000 was subsequently elected to Council in 2001 and 2005 and has served on the Council's Audit and Environmental Services Committees. Cllr Quigley was

elected Mayor in 2006. As Mayor, she is an ex officio member of the Council's Standing Committees and chairs the Civic Regeneration Forum, Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau and is a member of the Honourable The Irish Society Advisory Committee. Helen has a keen interest in community and has also been a member of the Management Committee of Derry Children's Commission and INGAGE, an inter-agency body established by Derry City Council to address gender equality. In her capacity as Vice President of NILGA.

Arlene Foster MLA Enniskillen/Fermanagh district - Arlene, a lawyer by profession, is married to Brian and has two children, Sarah and George. Arlene Foster has been involved in politics all her adult life. Since student days at Queens University Arlene has continued to work as an effective advocate for unionism in the west of Northern Ireland. Arlene has been the MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone since November 2003 and is currently the DUP spokesperson on Human Rights, Children and Young people. Fermanagh as a county has much to be proud of. There is however much work to be done generally for all the people who live here and more particularly for the unionist community. Since being elected as one of the MLAs for this area Arlene has worked closely with communities in the Enniskillen area. The constituency advice centre in Belmore Street deals with many issues such as housing difficulties, social security issues and planning. Arlene believes that if elected as a councillor for Fermanagh on May 5th, she would be able to enhance the job she does as an MLA locally for the people of the Enniskillen area. Arlene believes that it is important to bring a sense of ownership of local politics to the people on the ground and it is therefore vital to enhance the representation of the DUP at this Local Government council election. As a party the DUP firmly believe that your representatives should work full time, all of the time.

Cllr Marion Smith – North Down Borough Council elected March 1995, fought and won local elections in 1997, 2001 and 2005. Appointed Deputy Mayor 1997/98, Mayor 1999/2000, chaired the Arts Advisory Panel, Education Committee, Health Committee and the Disability Concerns Committee. Other Public Appointments include District Policing Partnership, NI Museums Council, INTERREG IIIB & IIIC Monitoring Committees, Chair NI Housing Executive Councillor Liaison Panel, Non-Executive Director Ulster Community & Hospital Trust

Brid Rogers – Formerly deputy leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and a Member of the Legislative Assembly for Upper Bann. She was a founder member of the SDLP, becoming Chairman in 1978 and General Secretary in 1981. In 1983 she was appointed to the Irish Senate by Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald and served until 1987. Rodgers was to the NI Assembly for the constituency of Upper Bann in June 1998. She was elected to the first NI Executive in November 1999 as Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, and remained in that position until the suspension of the Executive in October 2002. She became deputy leader of the SDLP in November 2001. She stood down as MLA at the Assembly elections of November 2003, and as deputy leader of SDLP in February 2004.