Exploring political ambition in the Republic of Ireland: a survey of politically interested women

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FOREWORD

37 women currently occupy seats in the Dáil. In 1921, 6 women were elected to the Dáil, that number has only risen to 131 in the history of the State. In order to reach our goal of achieving 50/50 representation, we want to further explore reasons for why there is a lack of women's representation in Irish Politics.

In order to do so, we reached out to the thousands of women who continue to engage with Women for Election. In hearing from politically interested women, we can better understand the experience of women entering and succeeding in politics.

The picture that has been painted from this survey through the voices of women who are interested in politics is that of a positive one. It is heartening to hear that despite the negativity that some have faced, they would be keen to run again. The goal is to spread the message that every woman throughout Ireland belongs in political spaces and that these spaces are made safe and accessible.

> **In acknowledging enabling and disabling factors that women face, we can discuss and influence change.**

In order to make politics safe and accessible, we need to break down the barriers that women face when entering and succeeding in political life. We encourage the work being done to establish a taskforce to create safer politics for women and work being done to create a family friendly government. It is not enough to encourage women to run without ensuring that efforts are in place to make politics safe and accessible.

In hearing from women who have run and women who haven't, we get a better sense of what still needs to be done to show women that they belong in politics. In acknowledging enabling and disabling factors that women faced, we can discuss and influence change.

A special thank you to the women who participated in this survey. Your voice is one of invaluable experience and thank you for paving the way for others to follow. To our researchers, Dr Lisa Keenan and Dr Fiona Buckley, thank you for your tireless work in the field and for your excellent in-depth research and analysis throughout this report. We appreciate all of the support that comes from our donors, our funders, and the women interested in running for election. You belong in these spaces.

The importance of listening to the voices of women is highlighted throughout this survey as their voice is one of crucial experience. Be it a woman who is interested but hasn't yet run, or a woman who has run – we are listening to you and support and encourage you to run. The time for change is now. The time for #MoreWomen in politics is now. #WomenBelong

Caitríona Gleeson
CEO, Women for Election

INTRODUCTION

Starting in 2012, the Decade of Centenaries commemorates a period of dramatic social and political upheaval in Ireland. Between 1912 and 1923, women in Ireland won the right to vote for the first time, the first female TD, Constance Markievicz, was elected and then appointed to cabinet, and women played an important role in the struggle for Independence and the subsequent civil war.

While these commemorations have rightly highlighted women's participation in electoral politics since 1912, it is also the case that much of the last 100 years has been remarkable for women's absence from this arena, with most of the gains in women's representation happening in rapid succession over the past few decades.

Women for Election has developed a series of projects that aim not just to take stock of how far women have come in Irish politics, but to highlight how much more work there is left to do. So long as women's participation in political life continues to lag behind that of men, Ireland will remain an unfinished democracy.

2009 saw the publication of the Oireachtas' *Women's Participation in Politics Report* (also known as the Bacik Report), which identified five key gendered barriers to women's participation in Irish politics – Care, Cash, Confidence, Culture and Candidate Selection – and set out recommendations to address these *5 C's*[1]. The most notable policy change since the report's publication was the adoption and implementation of a legislative candidate gender quota, which formed a central plank of the recommendations.

However, it is fair to say that the manner in which political communications and campaigning is conducted has changed significantly since 2009. The advent of social media creates both opportunities and challenges for politicians who are seeking to interact with the public and to promote themselves. Researchers are now beginning to investigate the gendered effects of this new political reality. On the other hand, some things have remained unchanged. In 2023, for example, discussions are still ongoing with regards developing a maternity leave policy for TDs.

More than a decade on from the publication of the *5 C's* report, there is still much to learn about the factors that enable women to, as well as prevent them from, becoming active in political life[2]. To begin to bridge these gaps, and to understand the experiences of contemporary women who have expressed an interest in politics in Ireland, Women for Election, in partnership with Dr Lisa Keenan (TCD) and Dr Fiona Buckley (UCC), have carried out a survey of a sample of these women. The aim of the study was to gain insight about the continuing barriers that women encounter when they consider a run for political office. Furthermore, the study seeks to better understand the ways in which women can be supported to successfully take that first step into electoral politics.

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[1]   Women for Election has evaluated the progress that Ireland has made since the publication of the influential report in our 5 C's Scorecard (Keenan & Buckley, 2023a). While it is fair to say that important strides have been made in tackling women's political underrepresentation, many of the recommendations contained in that report have not yet been fully implemented.

[2]   Women for Election has produced a review of the existing research on this topic (Keenan & Buckley, 2023b).
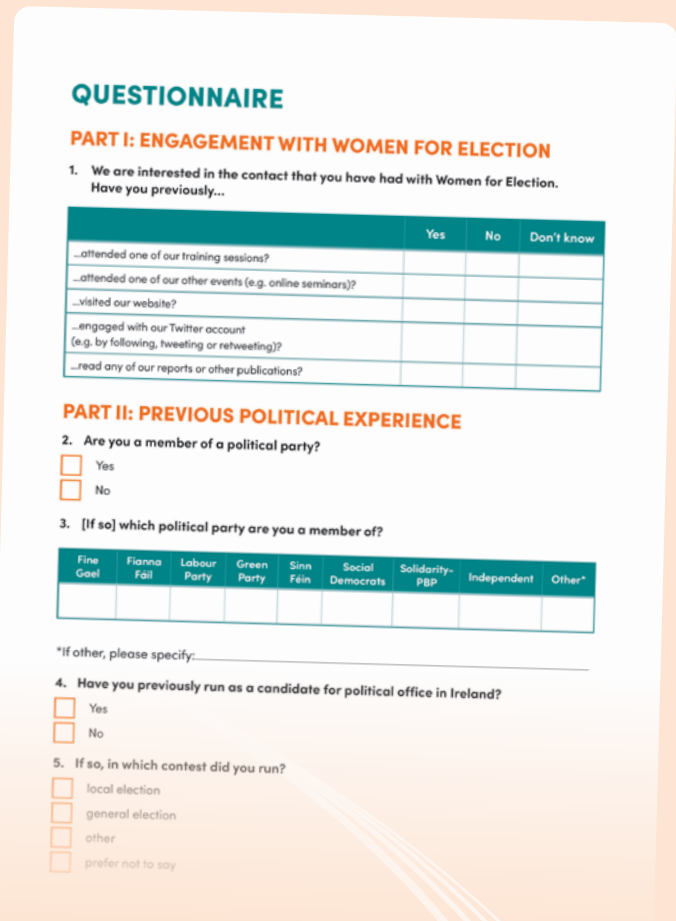
METHODOLOGY

The survey consisted of a questionnaire that was administered online using the Qualtrics platform, with the study receiving ethical approval from the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy at Trinity College Dublin. Women for Election distributed the survey to their mailing list[3].

This mailing list consisted of 1,703 individual email addresses[4]. Recipients received an email outlining the purpose of the study and a link to the questionnaire. This questionnaire consisted of four distinct sections covering the respondents' engagement with Women for Election, their previous experience with politics, their views on running for office in Ireland, and, finally, a set of questions covering demographics[5].

The survey combined closed-ended as well as open-ended questions. All responses were anonymous, meaning that no individual could be identified by the research team and no identifying information was collected.

The next section describes the survey respondents, analyses their level of previous political experience and discusses their views on running for office.

QUESTIONNAIRE

PART I: ENGAGEMENT WITH WOMEN FOR ELECTION

1. We are interested in the contact that you have had with Women for Election. Have you previously...

	Yes	No	Don't know
...attended one of our training sessions?			
...attended one of our other events (e.g. online seminars)?			
...visited our website?			
...engaged with our Twitter account (e.g. by following, tweeting or retweeting)?			
...read any of our reports or other publications?			

PART II: PREVIOUS POLITICAL EXPERIENCE

2. Are you a member of a political party?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

3. [If so] which political party are you a member of?

Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil	Labour Party	Green Party	Sinn Féin	Social Democrats	Solidarity-PBP	Independent	Other*

*If other, please specify:_____

4. Have you previously run as a candidate for political office in Ireland?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

5. If so, in which contest did you run?
   ☐ local election
   ☐ general election
   ☐ other
   ☐ prefer not to say

DESCRIBING THE RESPONDENTS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Data collection took place using an online questionnaire, with 187 usable survey responses being returned[6].

The median age was 46, with the youngest and oldest respondents to the survey being 24 and 77 years old respectively. As we would expect, the average age in the sample of politically interested women is above that of the general population[7]. A better comparison would be with another group of politically interested people – candidates who have run for political office in Ireland. The results from the 2020 wave of the Irish *Comparative Candidates Survey*[8] indicate that the median age of women who ran in the general election that year was 52, making this group of candidates older than the politically interested women in our sample. In addition, the age range of the female candidates was slightly narrower, ranging between 30 and 70.

Table 1 reports the full distribution of respondents by age among our survey respondents of politically interested women. The single largest group of respondents can be found in the 40 to 49 years category, with those under 30 representing the smallest group.

Table 1: Age of survey respondents (%)	
Age category	**Percent**
<30	7
30–39	20
40–49	37
50–59	23
60+	14
Total	**100**

98 percent of the survey respondents identified themselves as White Irish or belonging to any other White background. We can compare this figure with that from the census in 2016[9], which finds that these groups make up just under 92 percent of the population in Ireland (CSO, 2017a). This sample is therefore not fully representative of the underlying population with respect to ethnicity.

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6   Not all respondents answered every question, so for each item the number of responses is less than 187. For ease of interpretation for the reader, percentages rather than raw frequencies are presented here.

7   In 2020, the average age of the population of Ireland was 37.9 (CSO, 2021a).

8   The *Comparative Candidates Survey* is a cross-national survey that explores the views, backgrounds, and political experiences of candidates to elective office across a range of democracies using a common core questionnaire to ensure comparability. The Irish *CCS* has been administered by Trinity College Dublin's Department of Political Science since 2007. Since 2014, local election candidates have been surveyed.

9   The most recent census of the population was carried out in April 2022, with some preliminary results available since June of that year. However, the full results, including data regarding ethnic or cultural background have not yet been published and are expected to be released later in 2023.

The survey asked two questions to capture the social class of respondents – highest level of education completed and household pre-tax income. We can see from Table 2 that the women who completed the survey are highly educated. 55 percent of respondents had completed a third-level degree, with a further 41 percent having progressed further. This is unrepresentative of the general population. According to the 2016 census, 42 percent of people in Ireland and 43 percent of women had received a third-level education (CSO, 2017b). However, it is more in line with the educational background of female candidates at the 2019 local elections: 82 percent of women who ran in that election had a third-level degree or a higher qualification (*LECS*, 2019).

Table 2: Educational attainment of respondents (%)

Education level	Percent
Primary level	1
Second-level	3
Third-level degree	55
Post-grad degree	10
Masters	27
PhD	4
Total	**100**

The sample is not fully representative of the general population with respect to income[10] either. Table 3 presents the pre-tax household income for respondents. 20 percent of those who responded to this question had a pre-tax income of less than €40,000 per annum, including five percent who reported earning less than €20,000. We can see that 62 percent of respondents reported that the pre-tax income of their household was above €60,000. This is higher than that of candidates who ran in the most recent local election; 49 percent of female candidates who ran in 2019 reported that they had a pre-tax household income of €50,000 or above (*LECS*, 2019).

Table 3: Pre-tax household income of respondents (%)

Income categories	Percent
<€20,000	5
€20,000–40,000	15
€40,001–60,000	18
€60,001–80,000	14
€80,001–100,000	23
€100,000+	25
Total	**100**

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[10] Mean annual earnings in the Republic of Ireland was €50,706 for 2020 (CSO, 2021b).

As we can see from Table 4, most of the women in the sample have caring responsibilities. More than half (55 percent) of those who replied to the survey indicated that they have children in their care. While this number varied between one and seven children, the average respondent indicated that she was caring for two children. When asked whether they had other caring responsibilities, for example caring for a parent, relative, or friend with additional needs, 72 percent of respondents reported that they had. In fact, just 16 percent of the women reported that they have no caring responsibilities of any kind, with 43 percent having both children and other care responsibilities.

Table 4:	Distribution of caring responsibilities across respondents (%)		
	No other care responsibilities	**Has other care responsibilities**	**Total**
Not caring for children	16	29	45
Caring for children	12	43	55
Total	**28**	**72**	**100**

A majority of survey respondents report being married or cohabitating with a partner (66 percent), while a further ten percent advised of being previously married. Almost a quarter of respondents were single, with 89 percent of single women reporting having at least one child in their care, compared with 39 percent of married women.

POLITICAL EXPERIENCE

By opting to add their names to the Women for Election mailing list, these respondents have already indicated a level of interest in Irish politics. Thus, the survey was concerned in exploring the extent to which respondents have an interest in running for politics, as well as their own experience and background in politics.

Less than half of the women who responded to the survey (41 percent) were members of a political party. This is an interesting feature of the respondents since we know that women who run for political office in Ireland tend to be members of a political party. Only 15 percent of women who ran in the 2019 local election were running as independents (*LECS*, 2019); this figure is the same for the most recent general election (*CCS*, 2020).

Table 5 presents the breakdown of the political parties that are represented among these members. As we can see, Fianna Fáil and the Labour Party constitute the two largest party groups, with 42 percent of party members in the sample coming from these parties. The two other parties of government, Fine Gael and the Green Party, are also well-represented. It is clear from the data presented in Table 5, that respondents are drawn from across the political spectrum in Ireland.

Table 5:	Party membership of respondents (%)
Political Party	**Percent**
Fianna Fáil	21
Fine Gael	19
Green Party	13
Labour Party	21
PBP/Solidarity	6
Sinn Féin	9
Social Democrats	11
Total	**100**

While less than half of respondents were members of a political party, it's clear that engagement with politics is generally high among this group (Table 6). Two-thirds reported that they had previously worked as an unpaid volunteer for a political party or on a political campaign, including a referendum campaign. Paid work of this nature was the least common type of political experience (12 percent), but nearly three-in-ten respondents (representing 17 percent of party members) had previously held some kind of officer position within a political party.

Respondents' interest in electoral politics is also made clear by the number who undertook some form of training to prepare for a potential future run for office. 73 percent of respondents reported that they had done at least one type of training. The training supplied by Women for Election was attended by more than half of the women who completed the survey (56 percent). This is not surprising given the way that respondents were recruited for this study (i.e. from the organisation's official mailing list), but also because such training sessions constitute a core part of Women for Election's activities. 30 percent of respondents attended a training session that was supplied by a political party, with just under a quarter attending training that was supplied by another organisation.

Attending training is not the only way that respondents reported engaging with Women for Election. Almost nine-in-ten respondents reported that they had visited the organisation's website, three-quarters had read the publications it regularly produces, and just under two-thirds reported engaging with its official Twitter account by following, retweeting or liking tweets. A further 64 percent reported that they had attended other events organised by Women for Election, such as online seminars or launches of its publications.

Table 6: Political experience (%)		
	Percent	
Types of political experience	**Yes**	**No**
Previous work as unpaid party/campaign volunteer	67	33
Previous work as paid party/ campaign volunteer	12	88
Previously held internal party office	28	72
Previously attended party training	30	70
Previously attended other training (besides WFE)	24	76

Table 7:   Engagement with Women for Election (%)

Types of engagement	Percent	
	Yes	No
Attended a training session	56	44
Attended other events (e.g. online seminars)	64	36
Visited the Women for Election website	89	11
Read reports or publications	76	24
Engaged with the Twitter account	64	36

Finally, we wanted to capture whether women who responded to the survey had family members who had political experience, something which might help to explain their own interest in politics or desire to run for office. The survey asked respondents to report whether they had a parent, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle or other family member who had been active in public life or held political office. 81 percent of the respondents did not have any family member who has been active in public life or held political office. The women in the sample who had previously run at least once were not significantly more likely to have come from such political families; 78 percent of the former candidates who responded to the survey had no such connections.

POLITICAL AMBITION AMONG WOMEN WHO HAVE NEVER RUN FOR OFFICE

A core aim of the survey was to better understand the circumstances under which women will run for office. In order to capture the women's insights here, we asked them an open-ended question: "Thinking about running for office, what are some factors that you think might encourage you to do so?"

Responses varied. Some women identified a single factor that they thought would encourage them to put themselves forward, while others gave several detailed reasons. Just four women stated that under no circumstances would they be interested in running for office. Table 8 classifies the five key factors that the women who had never run for office, but were open to doing so in future, raised in their responses; we review each of these in turn.

The single most common response regarding what would motivate a run for office, given by 33 percent of the 106 women who responded to this question, was a desire to get things done.

A DESIRE TO GET THINGS DONE

The single most common response regarding what would motivate a run for office, given by 33 percent of the 106 women who responded to this question, was a desire to get things done.

Some of these respondents highlighted particular groups that they would like to promote, for example, their rural community, women, or victims of domestic violence. Others identified specific policy issues, such as health and housing.

These respondents displayed a strong sense of mission and a desire to change their communities for the better. As one respondent explained, "I would like to be able to make a difference in my community, and maybe someday nationally, and I think running for election is one of the best ways to do that. I would enjoy being able to contribute on the issues affecting people and propose positive ideas and changes. I'm interested in local issues and enjoy engaging with community groups".

Table 8: Factors that would motivate and encourage a run for office (%)

Enabling factors	Percent
A desire to get things done	33
Support networks	28
Personal resources	24
Systemic change	23
To see more women in politics	12

> "I would like to be able to make a difference in my community, and maybe someday nationally, and I think running for election is one of the best ways to do that. I would enjoy being able to contribute on the issues affecting people and propose positive ideas and changes. I'm interested in local issues and enjoy engaging with community groups".

POLITICAL, FAMILIAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The second most common factor to encourage and enable a run for office, identified by 28 percent of respondents, was receiving support. A range of sources of support was highlighted.

Political parties represent the most important source of support here. Some 40 percent of women inclined to run for office indicated that they would want to receive support from their political party. Two-thirds of these women are already party members, with the remaining third not yet affiliated. It is clear then, that even unaligned women are conscious of the importance of political parties in facilitating the entry of new candidates into the electoral arena. We should note, though, that a small minority of women in our sample were sceptical about the likelihood of being able to find a political party that would align with their personal values. Just under seven percent of women stated that being able to find a party that represented a good fit for them was an important factor to consider, with one respondent stating that she would be encouraged to run if she could find "[a] political party I could wholeheartedly stand behind".

More than a quarter of women who stated that receiving support would encourage them to run explained that they would like to receive such support from a mentor, with three respondents stating explicitly that they would like to receive such mentorship from a woman[11].

For a fifth of the women who identified receiving support as an important enabling factor, having the backing of a campaign team was singled out as particularly important. These respondents viewed this support in practical terms, where the team would be local and "on the ground" rather than "online", with the team having responsibility for the "back office".

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[11] Another respondent simply stated that she would like to receive support from women. It was not clear whether this refers to women in political life or female members of the electorate.

Other sources of support were highlighted but with less frequency. One woman indicated that she would need support from her employer in order to enter politics, since it would necessitate negotiating a move from full-time to part-time work. Only two women explicitly identified family support as critical to their decision, with one respondent explaining that she would need "...[g]ood support from family and friends (I don't come from a political family and my family wouldn't like me to enter into politics because it's a rough sport)".

Finally, six percent of women who described the factors that would enable them to run indicated that being directly asked to run (by a party or by their local community) would encourage them to.

ADDRESSING THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN IRISH POLITICS

Some 12 percent of respondents highlighted that they viewed a run for office as an opportunity to address the issue of the lack of women in Irish politics. Some of these women made it clear that not only did they perceive the low numbers of women to be an issue, but that tackling the issue would bring about far-reaching changes in policy terms. One woman in her mid-50s described herself as "[f]ed up with male-dominated culture", arguing that equal representation would have advantages across society.

We should note that marginalisation from political life affects many different groups. One respondent noted that in running for elected office, she would be aiming to increase the share of people of colour in government, while another described how mounting a campaign would involve "[t]aking courage from People of Colour, especially women of colour who live with systemic racism AND patriarchy [sic]".

PERSONAL RESOURCES: POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE, WORK–LIFE BALANCE, AND PREPAREDNESS

24 percent of women who had never run for office reported that they would be more inclined to put themselves forward if their access to a range of personal resources was improved. We classified a range of items as constituting these personal resources.

It was clear that for a sizeable minority of these respondents, there was a desire for more information and knowledge about public life. Some respondents noted that they would like to know more about the role of the politician (i.e. with respect to how the system works and how they "get things done"), while a handful of women identified a need to develop stronger connections to their local community before running for office. One married woman in her mid-30s explained: "I believe being embedded in my local community is important. I'm currently renting in Dublin. If I ever do run for election it will be after I have settled in an area and bought a house and my children are in the local primary school".

40 percent of the women raising the issue of personal resources identified further training as something that would help to close this political knowledge gap and would encourage them to run in future.

Others were more focused on the practicalities involved in running for office, such as the costs that are involved, the nomination process, and how to solicit donations. A third of women who raised personal resources as an important factor[12], pointed to the concerns around the financial investment that a run for office requires, and the pay that councillors receive, compared with the volume of work that they carry out.

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12   Representing seven percent of all women who have not yet run for office.

It is also clear that some respondents are concerned about the impact of running for office on loved ones. Nine percent of all women who had not previously run for political office highlighted childcare impacts and the poor-work-life balance as key considerations in their decision to run.

Finally, the identification of a perceived political knowledge gap among respondents, along with the clear desire to bridge this gap with further training, points to a lack of confidence among some of the women who answered this question. Two of the women explicitly stated that having greater self-confidence was something that would encourage them to run.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Some 23 percent of women who had not yet run for office indicated a desire to see systemic change to enable more newcomers to enter political life. Some of these respondents were arguing in favour of what we might term a "positive change" with a vision of a politics that is more diverse and inclusive. Two women pointed to the electoral system and the prevalence of political family names as aspects of the political system that they would like to see change. Others argued in favour of a more progressive politics that would be more inclusive of "new faces and voices", in particular, women, who would serve as role models for others.

However, very often respondents highlighted what they perceived to be the negative aspects of political life. This is worth noting since the question was phrased in a way that might be expected to elicit more positive responses[13], and the survey subsequently asked respondents to identify the types of factors that might discourage them from running for office, meaning that respondents were provided with an opportunity to express negative sentiments about the topic.

A third of the women who identified systemic change as a necessary condition for them to run for office, explicitly pointed to the harassment that public representatives – particularly women – encounter on social media[14]. Furthermore, a minority pointed to the adversarial nature of the job as something that respondents would like to see change, with reform of internal party culture particularly singled out. One woman summed up this view by stating:

> *"I think political culture within parties needs to change...women are hitting ceilings in political parties where internal clique alliances and party structures discriminate against them. ... internally 'troublesome' or 'vocal' women are replaced by new 'purple-washed' female candidates when they call for action on sexist structures or bullying... [w]omen are used by men against each other to quieten or replace feminist candidates".*

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13   The item was the following: "Thinking about running for office, what are some factors that you think might encourage you to do so?" (The full questionnaire can be found in the appendix).

14   We revisit this theme below.

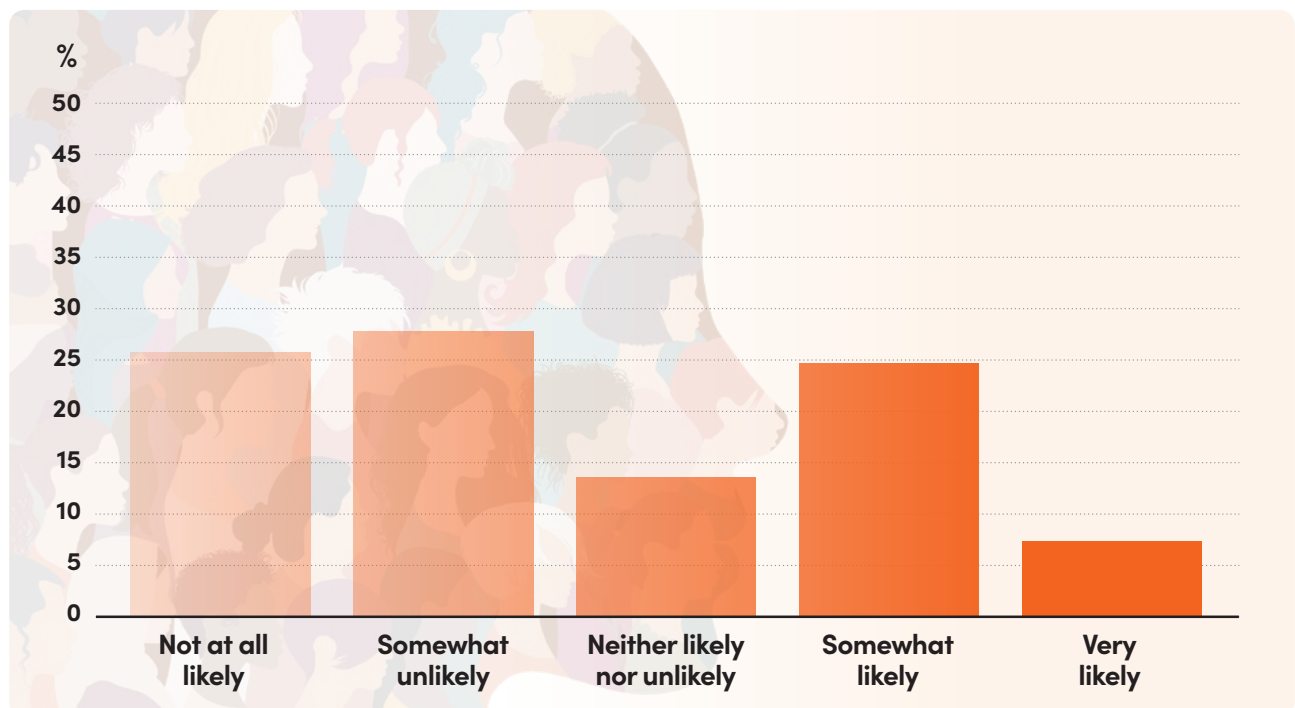# LIKELIHOOD OF RUNNING FOR POLITICAL OFFICE AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE YET TO DO SO

Asked about the likelihood of them running for office in the future (Figure. 1), women who had never run for office before revealed that they felt ambivalent about doing so. 54 percent of women indicated that it was not at all likely or somewhat unlikely, that they would choose to run.

Overall, probing these women's responses to the question: "thinking about running for office, what appear to be some factors that you think might discourage you from doing so?" reveals that the negative aspects of political life appear to be dampening political ambition, despite the strong desire – revealed in the previous section – to achieve change in their communities and see more women in politics.

The survey shows that 46 percent of women who have never run for office previously reported that a loss of privacy and the attendant negative attention from a range of sources (online, offline, and from the media) would discourage them from running for office.

The survey shows that 46 percent of women who have never run for office previously reported that a loss of privacy and the attendant negative attention from a range of sources (online, offline, and from the media) would discourage them from running for office. Furthermore, 44 percent of women who have not run for political office previously indicated that they would not run due to practical concerns, especially the time commitment involved and the financial resources required to mount an election campaign.

Figure 1: Likelihood of running for office in future

NEGATIVE ATTENTION: SOCIAL MEDIA, TRADITIONAL MEDIA, AND PUBLIC OPINION

44 percent of women who have not run for political office previously indicated that they would not run due to practical concerns, especially the time commitment involved and the financial resources required to mount an election campaign.

Of the 125 respondents who answered this question, 46 percent pointed to the negative attention that they anticipated that they would receive in the event of running for office.

28 percent of all respondents who had never run for office explicitly mentioned that they were concerned about experiencing abuse on social media. This was true for women across all age categories. Having an online presence is perceived to be a crucial part of the job (with one respondent calling it an "obligation" of the job), but it is clear that respondents can see that women in politics encounter online trolls and are subjected to "upsetting commentary" and "vitriolic" abuse.

Table 9: Factors that would discourage a run for office (%)

Disabling factors	Percent
Negative attention	46
Resource concerns	44
Unappealing job	22
Demographic characteristics	16

Others pointed to negative attention that they might encounter offline. 27 percent of respondents who had not yet stood for office, pointed to their concerns over the scrutiny they might receive from the public, which might result in "hostile criticism", harassment, abuse or even violence. Some of these women also anticipated that such treatment would extend to their family by "putting them in the spotlight", placing loved ones, as well as themselves, "at risk of abuse". One respondent described how the focus on candidates' personal lives would deter her from running for office, where she would be "[l]iving life in the public eye with little tolerance for mistakes". Another woman in her mid-40s stated: "I think the online trolling and abuse is probably the main thing that prohibits me from thinking about running for public office".

Finally, a woman in her late 30s puts into stark terms the negative impact that social media can have:

> *"I think the abuse online aimed at politicians is so bad, I would actively discourage people I know (both male and female) from running for office. This makes me sad, as I really want more female participation in Irish politics".*

A small minority of women (four) identified the traditional media as another source of negative attention. One respondent in her 60s argued that "your whole life would be picked over by mainstream and social media". Another respondent stated that she felt women in politics were particularly subject to attacks by the media.

RESOURCE CONCERNS: FINANCES, TIME AND FAMILY COMMITMENTS

The survey also reveals that resources, or their lack, is another important factor that limits women's ability to run for office. 44 percent of women who have not run for office previously indicated that they had concerns around access to finances, the time commitment involved, and the level of support they could expect to receive. Women were concerned not just about the cost of a political campaign but also about the level of pay that they could expect as a local councillor. In addition, some women highlighted what they would have to give up in order to run for office; for example, quitting their salaried jobs with long-term prospects in exchange for a potentially short-term and precarious role in public life.

Concern about whether they would be able to mobilise support for an election campaign was raised by 15 percent of respondents who highlighted a lack of resources as a deterrent to running for office. One respondent explained that it was her lack of a network that was a concern for her: "I don't have family or a wide political network that could help me run a campaign".

Being a member of a political party usually helps women to tap into a ready-made base of support, although political parties will still expect candidates to mobilise their own teams. But one woman who categorised herself as non-party noted that the effort required to build a campaign was off-putting, in particular because she was "not a member of a political party and would have to build [her] own support structure".

It is also clear from survey responses that women are concerned about the amount of time involved in mounting a campaign and then doing the job of an elected representative. 64 percent of women who raised concerns about their access to resources pointed to a lack of time availability and the necessity to devote a large amount of time in order to succeed in politics.

A single woman in her 40s noted that she would be deterred by "[t]he sheer time involved in political activity," saying, "I see from people I know who are candidates, Cllrs, Senators etc. how much time is involved, how they have to sacrifice so many other areas of their lives to it – late night phone calls, evening meetings etc.".

For some other women, family commitments might prevent them from running. Ten percent of respondents who had never previously run for office, pointed to these responsibilities as reasons not to run. One woman in her 30s linked her reluctance to run to considerations around motherhood: "I am at an age where if I want to have children it will need to be in the next few years," she explained.

Others with existing childcare commitments were also reluctant due to the time investment that would be involved. A mother of four anticipated a "feeling of guilt about missing so much" if she were to choose to run, while two others pointed to the lack of childcare available to women in politics to support them in their job once they are elected.

UNAPPEALING JOB AND THE CULTURE OF POLITICS

Some 22 percent of respondents who have not previously run for political office highlighted that the job of public representatives is fairly unappealing to them, noting the heavy workload and poor work-life balance. But these were not the only negative characteristics that they identified. A minority of women felt that by running, they would be entering a highly adversarial environment with a lack of collegiality, even among party colleagues. One respondent sums this up when she says: "[c]ompetition can be managed in a respectful way, yet, it seems that the competition in politics is often dismissive, undermining and actively aggressive, not just to opposition but often internally also".

Others expressed concern about whether they would actually be able to achieve any political change when in office. This is significant, given that we have previously discussed that a substantial cohort of respondents identified a desire to achieve change, as a motivation to run. Finally, one respondent pointed to a lack of available career opportunities in the long-term (the lack of opportunities for upward progression), while another stated that she found the overwhelming presence of men in senior government roles discouraging.

A comment from one respondent in her 50s typifies the negative view of political life: "[t]he prospect of getting into the muck of political life, interactions with unscrupulous people, the possible requirement of dealing with even more communication technology which is so draining and unproductive".

Unsurprisingly, given the negativity expressed by some towards the political career in general, some respondents revealed themselves to be equally sceptical about political parties. 13 percent of women who had never run for office pointed to them as one of the reasons that they would be hesitant to run. For most of these women, they were concerned that none of the existing political parties are currently aligned to their interests and values, but implicitly accepted that running as a party candidate is an easier route to elective office. For others, they were concerned about the internal dynamics within political parties, as well as the likelihood of ever being selected to run, given that they felt they did not possess the 'right' background. One woman summed up this scepticism around parties in the following way:

> "Internal bullying and nepotism within political parties. Party structures overwhelmingly favour wealthy private-school educated white men. There can be a lack of solidarity between women against these structures as roles are reserved and handpicked for certain women who behave in a certain manner".

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS: AGE, SEXISM AND MINORITY STATUS

Other reasons proffered for not running for office relate to demographic characteristics: Age, minority status, lack of confidence and a lack of political knowledge. Such factors were identified by 16 percent of these respondents.

Six percent of respondents who had not yet run for office believed that they were the wrong age to run for office, either feeling that they were too young or too old. There appears to be a perception that there is a desirable age to mount a campaign, although what age this is, is not clear.

Some four percent of women who had never run before stated that they had a lack of confidence in their ability to run and be elected, with a further four percent stating that they did not think that they had enough knowledge or experience. A small number (two percent) of respondents pointed to their minority status, as migrants or women living with a disability, as factors that would prevent them from running for office.

Finally, it is worth noting that while many of the factors highlighted as deterrents to seeking political office are gendered (e.g. caring responsibilities and the level and type of online abuse women in politics receive), few of the respondents (six percent) explicitly mentioned sexism and misogyny as a reason not to run for political office. However, when it was raised, respondents identified specific areas where they expect sexism to operate, including gender bias by voters, gender bias within political parties, and gender bias within the broader political system itself.

One woman, aged in her 40s stated that entering into politics would mean "working within a patriarchal system, working within a system that actively oppresses women" and dealing with "casual sexism, casual misogyny". Another respondent described the way that women candidates are treated differently, how they are subject to "[g]endered public discourse and the double standards ... [and] how they have to prove themselves to a bar, way above that of their male counterparts".

For others, they feel that Irish politics still lacks real support for women, expressing a belief that the system tolerates and includes some women simply to "make up the numbers". Finally, one woman in her 30s expressed a feeling that women in politics are subject to having their "credibility and integrity unpicked by men" who are keen to maintain their own political power.

POLITICAL AMBITION AMONG WOMEN WHO HAVE PREVIOUSLY RUN FOR OFFICE

FACTORS THAT ENABLED A RUN FOR POLITICAL OFFICE

In addition to gaining a picture of the views of women who have not yet mounted a political campaign, this survey was keen to know how women who have already run for office felt about the experience, and, in particular, whether they would run again. The survey first asked them to describe the factors that enabled them to run for office. Results indicated that support from family, party and local networks were key factors in determining a run for political office. Some 17 percent of respondents[15] had previously run for office in Ireland. Their responses are summarised below.

Family was the single most important factor mentioned by these politically experienced women. Half of them highlighted that having the support of their family, not just with respect to encouraging them to run, but also in terms of providing practical support (for example, helping with childcare while they were campaigning) was crucial. Other women singled out how a lack of – or reduced – famililial responsibilities enabled them to run. As one respondent explained "I had no children at the time I ran. I am very worried how I [will] manage it now I have a child".

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Other women agreed that their life stage was an important consideration in the decision to run for office, feeling that a run only became a possibility when their work and family commitments lessened, thus freeing up time to devote to politics. As one respondent explained, she ran when it was "the right time for her and [her] family, as [her] family commitments were not as restrictive...". Another respondent advised that she postponed her political ambitions until she could devote more time to the role saying: "[a]s a single mum I waited until my son went to college to have the time to be a committed politician".

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15   This represents 32 of the total number of respondents to the questionnaire.

The second most important factor identified by these politically experienced women as facilitating their run for office, was support from a political party or incumbent politicians. 88 percent of the women who had previously run for office reported that they were members of a political party, and just over 40 percent of them noted that these parties had been an important source of support. Parties provided these women with encouragement, guidance, and training, but also financial contributions towards their campaign expenses. Given that this group of politically experienced women reports that this is the second-most important factor that enabled their run for office, we might be concerned at the contrast between this group and the group of respondents who are politically interested but inexperienced. Only 30 percent of respondents who had not previously run for office reported being a member of a political party. It may be that party membership would help to alleviate some of the lack of resources (discussed in the previous section) that might be deterring some of this group from running for office.

Returning to the group of former candidates, respondents also pointed to other sources of support that enabled them to run, such as the support from their local communities and their circle of friends. Finally, others singled out access to resources such as local connections, prior campaign experience, personal finances, and a family background in politics, as facilitating a run for elected office.

CHALLENGES FACED WHEN RUNNING FOR POLITICAL OFFICE

We also asked those who had previously run for office to describe the factors that made it more challenging to do so. The most common challenges highlighted by respondents was financing of the campaign (45 percent); a lack of support from political parties (24 percent); managing family responsibilities (17 percent); characteristics of the district (17 percent); lack of confidence (ten percent), and negativity and sexism (28 percent). However, despite these challenges, some 72 percent of those who ran for political office previously, would do so again. We review these challenges in more detail below.

> **The next most significant challenge that the women encountered was a lack of support from their political party.**

45 percent of the women identified finances as an issue when running for political office. One former candidate compared her situation unfavourably with the wealth of her opponents, while another described her financial situation when she ran in the following way: "[I] [h]ad no savings whatsoever, had just left college and was in part time employment on the minimum wage".

The next most significant challenge that the women encountered was a lack of support from their political party. There were various reasons provided as to why this support was lacking. One respondent explained that her party was generally under-resourced and lacked the ability to adequately support its candidates: "[t]he party I ran for was only established...from that point of view the timing was not the best". However, in other cases, it was clear that the women felt that the lack of support by their party was a deliberate choice. For example, one respondent who ran for the first time in a local election reported that amongst the party there was "[a] view that I was not expected to win a seat", and as a result she received little support from the national party. Three other respondents described a contentious candidate selection process, with one woman experiencing "[v]ery strong opposition from within the party to a woman being added to a ticket for gender balance". Divisions within a party can impact access to resources in a tangible way, with three women explaining that they had more difficulty assembling their campaign team and attracting canvassers than their male counterparts.

Candidates identified additional challenges that can be similarly classified as related to their personal characteristics. 17 percent of women who had run previously indicated that they experienced challenges managing their family responsibilities during the campaign, in particular in relation to childcare. Furthermore, some respondents expressed that a lack of confidence and a lack of experience was a challenge they experienced throughout the campaign, with one respondent explaining that her lack of confidence mainly stemmed from the fact that she was not Irish and was uncertain with respect to how she would be perceived by the electorate.

Two others highlighted the fact that they were running in contests that they were sure they could not win, since they were up against male incumbents who had occupied their seats for years.

Finally, we can identify a further two factors that are related to the characteristics of the campaign. The size of the constituency or Local Electoral Areas (LEAs), was highlighted as a challenge that some of these women (17 percent) had to grapple with. Large, rural constituencies were singled out as representing a particular challenge to successfully cover during the campaign, particularly without a car, as one respondent explained.

Additionally, the intense and adversarial nature of campaigning was highlighted by many respondents as a key challenge they encountered. Two women stated that they found the campaign physically challenging for their health, while others focused on its adversarial and sometimes unpleasant nature. One woman reported that she received comments about her age and gender, while another experienced commentary about being a mother with members of the electorate "putting [me] down, either consciously or subconsciously, for leaving [my] children" to campaign.

Another respondent reported that she had experienced bullying by other candidates, while another found her home address repeatedly shared online, something which made her concerned for her personal safety. Finally, a local election candidate who was running for a government party, stated that not only had she received abuse on social media, but she was also threatened with violence while erecting posters at night, something which made her fearful to go out canvassing.

STRONG LIKELIHOOD OF RUNNING IN FUTURE CAMPAIGNS

Figure 2:   Likelihood of running for office again
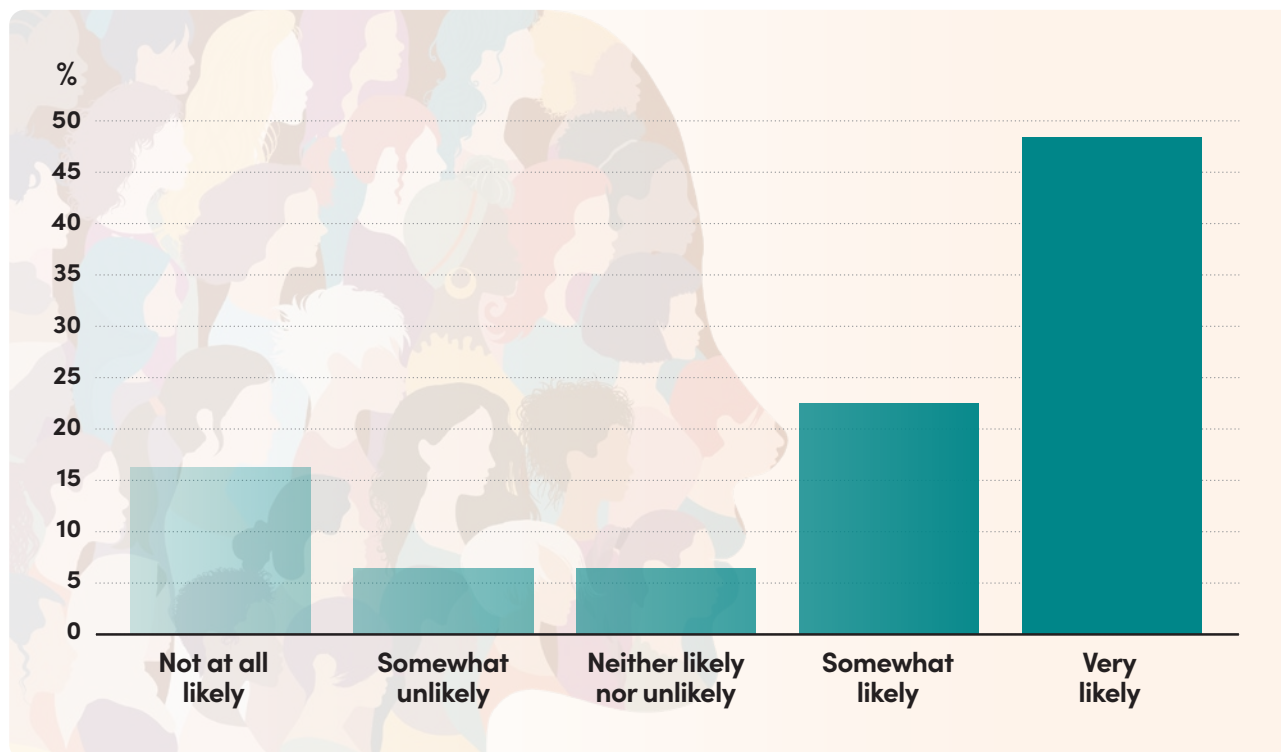
It is clear from the discussion above that the experience of women who ran for office was mixed. Strong support from family, political parties and local communities, are factors that enable a run for office. However, when they do run, women are limited by financial constraints and may not receive adequate support from their party. Furthermore, trying to cover a large district during an election campaign can be challenging, and this is more likely to affect candidates running in rural areas. Finally, bullying, harassment and threats are real concerns for candidates on the campaign trail.

Nevertheless, when asked about the likelihood of running for office in future, 71 percent of women who had previously run indicated that they were somewhat likely or very likely to run again (Figure. 2). What is perhaps most interesting to note when it comes to discussing the political ambition of this group of former candidates, is the extent to which negative experiences have not put them off engaging in politics. As we noted above, 28 percent of these politically experienced women reported having encountered sexism and negativity (including abuse) on the campaign. While it is true that the women who reported some of the most negative experiences (bullying, doxing) reported they were not at all likely to run again, this was not the case for the rest of this group. Two-thirds of the women who had experienced sexism, bullying and harassment still reported that they were somewhat likely or very likely to run for office again in the future.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note the contrast between the two groups of women included in the survey, those who had previously run and those who had never put themselves forward as a candidate.

Women who had run shared some of the same concerns that were raised by those who had not done so, but their view of politics appears to be more positive in general. And when we compare the likelihood of running for office in the future, it is clear that despite the negative issues that they encountered, the majority were keen to run again. This is not the case for the group of politically inexperienced women.

For women who have never run for office, they want to improve their communities, but they have important reservations about doing so via electoral politics. In addition to practical issues (resources, access to childcare, etc.), these responses reveal deep apprehensions about abuse and intimidation, online and offline. These answers suggest that there is much more that needs to be done to make politics a more attractive and safe profession, and to persuade women to put themselves forward.

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APPENDIX: ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

PART I: ENGAGEMENT WITH WOMEN FOR ELECTION

1. **We are interested in the contact that you have had with Women for Election. Have you previously...**

	Yes	No	Don't know
...attended one of our training sessions?			
...attended one of our other events (e.g. online seminars)?			
...visited our website?			
...engaged with our Twitter account (e.g. by following, tweeting or retweeting)?			
...read any of our reports or other publications?			

PART II: PREVIOUS POLITICAL EXPERIENCE

2. **Are you a member of a political party?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. **[If so] which political party are you a member of?**

Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil	Labour Party	Green Party	Sinn Féin	Social Democrats	Solidarity-PBP	Independent	Other*

*If other, please specify: _____

4. **Have you previously run as a candidate for political office in Ireland?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

5. **If so, in which contest did you run?**

☐ local election

☐ general election

☐ other

☐ prefer not to say

6. **We are interested in whether you have previously had experience of campaigning or working in politics. Have you previously...**

	Yes	No	Prefer not to say
...worked as an unpaid party/campaign volunteer (e.g. by canvassing, fundraising)?			
...worked as a paid party/campaign worker?			
...held an office within a political party?			

7. **We are interested in whether you have experience of other training supports designed to encourage women to run. Have you previously attended training that was...**

	Yes	No	Prefer not to say
...organised by a political party?			
...organised by a women's organisation other than Women for Election (e.g. See Her Elected [SHE], local women's network etc.)?			

8. **Thinking about running as a candidate for elected office in Ireland, how likely is it that you would choose to do so in future?**

Not at all likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely

PART III: FACTORS DIS/ENCOURAGING RUNNING FOR OFFICE

For respondents who have not yet run

9. **Thinking about running for office, what are some factors that you think might encourage you to do so?**

10. Thinking about running for office, what are some factors that you think might discourage you from doing so?

For respondents who have previously run for office

11. Thinking about when you last ran for office, what were some factors that made it possible for you to do so?

12. Thinking about when you last ran for office, what are some factors that made it more challenging for you to do so?

13. Having previously run as a candidate, how likely is it that you would choose to do so again in the future?

Not at all likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely

PART IV: DEMOGRAPHICS

14. Please enter your year of birth: _____

15. What was your pre-tax household income last year?

- [ ] < €20,0000
- [ ] €20,000–40,000
- [ ] €40,001–60,000
- [ ] €60,001–80,000
- [ ] €80,001–100,000
- [ ] €100,001–125,000
- [ ] €125,001–149,999
- [ ] €150,000+

16. What is your ethnic or cultural background?

☐ White Irish
☐ Black or Black Irish
☐ Prefer not to say

☐ Irish Traveller
☐ Asian or Asian Irish

☐ Any other White background
☐ Other, including mixed background

17. Which category best describes you?

☐ married or cohabiting
☐ previously married (widowed/divorced)
☐ prefer not to say

☐ single
☐ other

18. Do you have any children in your care?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

20. If you have children in your care, please indicate the number of children you have:

_____

21. Do you have any other caring responsibilities? (e.g. caring for a parent, relative, friend with additional needs)

☐ Yes   ☐ No

24. What is the highest level of education that you have completed? (e.g. primary, secondary, third level?)

[ ]

23. Has anyone in your family ever been active in public life or held political office (as a TD, a Senator, or a councillor)? Please tick all that apply.

☐ Parent
☐ Aunt/Uncle
☐ No one in my family has been active in public life/held political office

☐ Sibling
☐ Other

☐ Grandparent

FURTHER THOUGHTS

If there are any final thoughts that you would like to share with us, please feel free to do so in the box below:

[ ]

#MoreWomen

WOMEN FOR **ELECTION**