



#MoreWomen
WOMEN
FOR ELECTION

MORE WOMEN – CHANGING THE FACE OF POLITICS

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF RUNNING
FOR ELECTION IN IRELAND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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BACKGROUND

While a vast section of the population is eligible to run for political office, very few do. And of those who do run, few are women. There are a variety of barriers that make it more difficult for women to access the necessary resources (time, money, self-confidence, ambition, candidate selection) to enable a run for office.

However, increasing numbers of women are contesting elections in Ireland, in large part as an outcome of the adoption of legal gender quotas for Dáil elections. There's also greater awareness of the need for more women in political life, and organisations such as *Women for Election* are doing much to inspire, equip and support women to run.

With this in mind, the study considers what enables those women who do run, to run, and what can we learn from their experiences. Predominantly a focus on first-time candidates, we set out to understand what motivates someone to run for office and track the electoral experience, from the entrails of the party selection convention to the exhilaration of the election campaign, and from the excitement, hope and anguish of count day, to life as a public representative. Throughout this report, we gain an insight into the lives of women who put themselves forward for election in Ireland.

METHODOLOGY

Women for Election reached out to women who contested (whether successfully or unsuccessfully) the 2019 local elections, 2019 European parliament elections, and the 2020 general election, as well as women who had unsuccessfully sought a nomination to run. While party and non-party women were invited to contribute to this study, only those who were party candidates agreed to participate. Semi-structured interviews took place with those who consented to be involved, and interview topics covered areas such as participants' background, their journey into politics, their reasons for running, engagement with the candidate selection process, experiences of the election campaign, and – for successful candidates – life as a public representative. In total, 15 women were interviewed.



FINDINGS

Go for it and run, is the main message from the women who were interviewed for this study. Rarely will someone regret running for political office, they advise. However, the **4 rs** of recruitment, resources, resistance and resilience, summarise the experiences of these women.

Political parties play a central role at each stage of candidacy. From asking women to run (*recruitment*) and providing *resources* to support their candidacies, through to undermining women's electoral chances by selection to unwinnable seats and internal tribal politics (*resistance*), these are all factors influencing a woman's decision to seek election and shape her chances of electoral success. Besides political parties, encouragement and support from family and friends are also key recruitment factors, as are the resources that loved ones provide, whether this be on the campaign trail or in the provision of practical supports. However, being *resilient* is a shared characteristic of all the women interviewed for this study, and their determination, 'can-do' spirit, positivity and encouragement of other women, is evident throughout their stories.

Across the various stages of candidacy – from being an activist to becoming a candidate to getting elected and becoming a *public representative* – it is clear that there are opportunities that enhance, but also obstacles that encumber, a run for office.

Encouragement from family and friends is a key influence on the decision to run but encouragement by a political party is vital.

ACTIVIST: BECOMING A CANDIDATE

The study uncovers a number of motivations guiding the decision to run, notably a desire to engender change on matters of a personal nature, a community issue and/or a wider societal or global issue.

Encouragement from family and friends is a key influence on the decision to run but encouragement by a political party is vital. While some women approached a party in the first instance, the majority of women we spoke to were directly asked by a party to run.

However, the campaign to *get on the ticket* can be fraught with obstacles. Internal tribal party politics, and rivalries are noted. Informal criteria such as *who you know*, party friendships and networks, can often be key assets to getting over the line in a candidate selection convention. Candidate recruitment and selection processes are not always clear and transparent.

Women often express self-doubt or a lack of self-confidence about putting themselves forward for (s)election. Oftentimes this sentiment stems from a political culture where women have been marginalised. Women spoke highly and supportively of the mentoring, skills, and training acquired through courses run by *Women for Election*. These encounters helped to boost confidence and develop a network of supportive allies.

CANDIDATE: RUNNING FOR ELECTION

Getting on the ticket is a very proud moment. Women speak of the supports and resources that their parties provide to their campaigns. However, it is abundantly clear that if you cannot self-fund or assemble your own campaign team and group of canvassers, the election campaign will struggle to be effective. The encouragement of family and friends is vital in enabling a run for office and the practical supports they provide are crucial.

Practical supports and resources are required to enable a run for office. Having time, money, party support, personal networks, job flexibility, family support and assistance with care responsibilities, are required at every step on the pathway to political office. Access to these resources, as well as the reason why particular resources are necessary, is gendered, and other identities, such as being a migrant, LGBTQI, having a disability, socio-economic status and/or being from an ethnic minority background, can further mediate access to these resources.

The election campaign itself is rigorous and hectic, marked with highs and lows, and requires a lot of resilience. Resistance and hostility from within the party, among the public and on social media is recalled, which can be sexist and personal in nature. Again, the support of family, friends and party mentors is essential when such incidences arise. While all candidates are prepared for the vagaries of a campaign, we must be careful not to minimise these as the mere 'cut and thrust' of politics, as to do so will compound the problem, particularly in relation to sexist and threatening behaviour.

If political parties are serious about women's candidacy and seeing more women elected, a clear finding is that those candidacies must be supported, not alone through the provision of resources, but also by selecting women to contest seats where the party has a reasonable chance of election.

Encouragingly, all the women interviewed for this study, would run again and encourage other women to do so.

PUBLIC REPRESENTATIVE: AFTER THE CAMPAIGN

The pride, honour, elation, privilege, excitement and exhaustion of *being elected* is recounted. However, there is little time to adjust to the reality of being an elected public representative, as it is straight to the chamber to decide upon committee memberships and chairpersons. It quickly becomes clear that getting elected is just one part of the process of accessing political power. Sitting on committees and putting oneself forward for positions, such as committee chair, is crucial if one is to engender policy change.

Unlike most other professions, there is very little, mostly none at all, protected time and space, to induct into these roles. Much of the training takes place 'on the job' or informally, by reaching out to party colleagues, present and former, who offer tips and advice or through organisations such as *Women for Election* who provide training for newly elected women councillors.

Much needs to be done to bring about cultural change to the political arena – within political parties, our local authorities, our Oireachtas and European parliament.

This report sets out a number of key recommendations – changes that need to happen at a policy level as well as recommendations for local authorities and political parties. If implemented, we would take significant steps towards seeing more women elected.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The women we work with through our training courses and spoke to during the course of this study highlight structural and cultural barriers to their participation in political life. Here we outline some of the changes that need to happen, to enable more women run for election.

GOVERNMENT

Better fund Women for Election, and other organisations, to inspire, equip and support women to run for election

Government should move to address the structural barriers that block women from running for election and:

- Introduce paid maternity leave for elected politicians
- Legislate for gender quotas at local and Seanad elections
- Renumerate Councillors in accordance to the recommendations set out in the Moorhead report
- Hold a referendum to amend the constitution to facilitate remote voting
- Reform campaign financing rules to facilitate use of campaign funding for additional childcare costs incurred during the course of a campaign
- Ensure that criminal legislation is robust enough to enable prosecutions for online or other forms of abuse including sexism, racism and misogyny against women who are running for election or who hold public office

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Local authorities need to work to demystify the role of the councillor and:

- Run campaigns highlighting and explaining the role and impact of local councillors
- Provide post-election training on council structures and their functions

To help change bring about cultural change local authorities should:

- Provide equality, diversity and inclusion training for staff and elected representatives

POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties, particularly the longer established parties, need 'change within' to become more welcoming to women.

- Provide equality, diversity and inclusion training for all party members
- Ensure gender balance in all party positions
 - To monitor progress, enable SIPO (or the planned Electoral Commission) to regularly conduct gender audits of all political parties
 - SIPO should also report on the party funding of candidates with a breakdown by gender

Many of the women we work with, describe that political parties can be resistant, particularly to women candidates. Changes are needed at a structural level and, more challengingly, at a cultural level. Some of the cultural barriers, can be addressed with basic changes being made around the selection process and during the election campaign.

At a fundamental level, parties need to encourage more women to seek election. In doing so, political parties should:

- Review and expand candidate recruitment processes to engage women from outside the party and women from under-represented and marginalised communities
- Provide feedback to interviewees in the candidate selection process

Women we work with describe being left to 'sink-or-swim' during a campaign. All parties should ensure a check-in system is in place during the campaign and basic campaign supports are in place for candidates, particularly first-time candidates and those from under-represented and marginalised communities.

After election campaigns, political parties should

- Provide post-election debriefs for all candidates, particularly unsuccessful candidates



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