



#MoreWomen
WOMEN
FOR ELECTION

MORE WOMEN – CHANGING THE FACE OF POLITICS

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF RUNNING
FOR ELECTION IN IRELAND

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FOREWORD

We need to change the face of politics in Ireland – change to a political system that is reflective of society. Change that is led by and includes more women. More women, in all our diversity. We need more working-class women, migrant women, Traveller and Roma women, rural women, women with disabilities, more women from the LGBTQI community.

We need more women across all levels of politics – more women in political parties, more women (inside and outside of parties) running for election, more women in our local councils, in our Dáil and Seanad chambers and in the European Parliament.

More women is not simply about optics. As this report sets out, more women and better diversity means better politics and better decisions.

While many of us are well versed in the numbers – we know that women are more than ½ our population and less than ¼ of our elected politicians – we do not always hear the story of those women who run for election. *More Women - Changing the face of politics* follows the journey taken by some of the women with whom *Women for Election* has worked. Women who have set off on their political journey. Women who we trained, supported, advised and worked with as they took their first steps into political life. Women who were active in their local community when we first met them, women who were considering stepping into politics but were not sure if it was for them, women who were not sure if they were equipped for political life. Many of those women went on to become candidates, running for election. Women who are now in the European Parliament, the Dáil, Seanad and their local councils. Just as importantly we hear from those who did not make it (this time round). Women who got on the ticket but did not get elected – or women who put themselves forward for selection, but their party chose a different candidate.

This is their story.

Each of these women have played a significant role in changing the face of politics in Ireland. Women who looked at existing politicians and thought ‘I don’t see anyone who looks like me there’ - women who, regardless of the outcome of their own election, are encouraging other women to run.

Each of these women have played a significant role in changing the face of politics in Ireland. Women who looked at existing politicians and thought ‘*I don’t see anyone who looks like me there*’ - women who, regardless of the outcome of their own election, are encouraging other women to run.

Through all of our *Women for Election* training and events, we hear women’s stories – women from up and down the country, from all parties and none. We wanted to thread together those women’s stories into a robust report, bolstered by academic experience and analysis, and learn from it. Our report details the realities of political life and the changes needed to ensure more women are elected.

Women for Election will continue to campaign for change, and to work with women and men to achieve diversity and balanced representation in Irish politics.

Alison Cowzer
Chairperson, Women for Election

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are particularly grateful to the women who contributed and gave their time generously to this project. We hope we have done them justice.

We would like to thank the researchers, Dr Fiona Buckley UCC and Dr Lisa Keenan TCD for conducting the research and writing this report on behalf of *Women for Election*.

Special thanks also go to our former CEO Ciairín de Buis for her work in leading this research and to Claire Hayes for her support in coordinating the research interviews.

We are grateful to our supporters for their time, thoughts and consideration of ways to support more women to succeed in political life.

This work was made possible because of much appreciated financial support from both the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and our donors.

Finally, the *Women for Election* Board of directors, led by Chairperson Alison Cowzer continue to offer invaluable strategic direction, governance and commitment to achieving gender balance in Irish politics.



A CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REFLECTIONS

A 50/50 gender balance in government is key to Ireland becoming a thriving and vibrant society. The case for diversity is well made and this report further amplifies the importance of supporting more women to enter and succeed in Irish politics.

Currently, only one in every five TD's and 25% of elected councillors in Ireland are women. In 2021, women are absent from 40% of critical government decision making tables, including health and the Covid 19 national response.

Ireland is currently ranked 101st in the world for the percentage of women elected in national parliament. This is a serious concern for the wealth and well-being of the country. It is a significant tarnish on our emerging international reputation as a progressive and inclusive society.

A 50/50 gender balance in government is key to Ireland becoming a thriving and vibrant society.

What these figures tell us is that when decisions are made about our lives, our homes, our communities, our businesses – the diversity and value of women's contribution is missing.

There is hope, and the women who we hear from in this report are shining beacons of light for #MoreWomen to enter and succeed in Irish politics. However, we need to address many of the barriers that continue to disproportionately inhibit women's chances of successful election. Measures to combat abuse of women in public life both on and offline are urgently needed along with interventions to ensure that all women in political office have access to maternity leave and are supported to maintain their elected position for the duration of their leave.

The introduction of quotas has been a catalyst for increasing the numbers of female TD's in Dail Eireann, however these quotas need to be seen as a minimum standard and not an end point. It is also important that in addition to the introduction of 40% quotas in for general elections from 2024, that quotas are also introduced for local and Seanad elections.

'Be the change you want to see in the world', reflects the motivation of so many women who run for election in Irish politics. As a non-partisan organisation we have a proud record of working with women from across all parties and none. We proactively are promoting diversity and inclusion in all our work.

With strong leadership from our Board, staff and many supporters we continue to build momentum for a national movement to get #MoreWomen to enter and succeed in political office. This movement will continue to grow as we strengthen collaboration and investment with an ambition to achieve at least 30% representation in local and national government in the next 5 years.

The time for campaigning and wider collaboration starts now and this research report provides important insights to help reduce barriers, change culture and to inform, inspire and equip a lot #MoreWomen to run for election in LE2024 and beyond.

Caitríona Gleeson
CEO, Women For Election

ABOUT WOMEN FOR ELECTION

Women for Election is a non-partisan, independent, not-for-profit organisation - we inspire, equip, and support the full diversity of women to succeed in politics. Our vision is an Ireland with equal representation of women in Irish politics. We lead the work in bringing about women's full participation in Irish political life, challenging and working with the political system.

As well as highlighting the need for more women in Irish political life, we provide practical training and supports largely focused on confidence, communications and campaigns supporting women to take their next steps into political life. Founded in 2012, we work to see more women elected.

In 2020, along with the rest of the world, we had to readjust and recalibrate our work in the face of Covid-19. Within 3 weeks of the first lockdown in Ireland, *Women for Election* delivered its first online training session. Since then, we reached into homes throughout the country working with women from across the political spectrum. Despite a global pandemic, we worked with more than 600 women in 2020.

Our approach works. We have worked with more than half the women elected to their local councils in 2019, 31 of the 36 women elected to the Dáil in 2020, and 11 of the 24 women in the 2020 Seanad.

However, training and support on its own will not bring about the fundamental change that is needed to see a balanced political system. Structural change is also needed – changes at a policy level, changes within the political parties and across the political infrastructure. This report highlights some of the changes that need to happen. We have made clear recommendations which, if implemented, would move towards that fundamental change. *Women for Election* will continue to campaign for change, to achieve equal representation and diversity in Irish political life.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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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WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF RUNNING
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GENDER PERMEATES THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND PERVADES POLITICAL CULTURE

As the coronavirus pandemic charged across the globe in 2020, focus turned to the world's presidents and prime ministers and their handling of the resultant public health, social and economic crises. From early on commentators observed that places with lower case numbers of covid-19 infection and deaths were led by women, an observation confirmed by research which found that in the first six-months of the virus' existence, countries with women leaders suffered 'six times fewer Covid deaths'¹.

Early action, clear communication, compassion, and collaborative decision-making embracing evidenced-based scientific research, were notable qualities of leaders in countries with low infection rates. But as discerned by political scientists Jennifer Piscopo and Shauna Shames, it is 'no accident that these states are also strong and wealthy democracies, with capable bureaucracies and high levels of institutional trust'². Others cautioned against a sole focus on gender without considering wider factors, as to do so may result in women being held to higher standards than men³. Indeed, the freelance writer and communications expert Kristine Ziwick opined

'I just hope that, as a culture, we can move away from the belief that such qualities are the sole preserve of a single sex. Diversity simply leads to better decisions. Full stop. We'll all be better off when we value and reward these qualities in all leaders'⁴.

BETTER DIVERSITY: BETTER DECISIONS

Inclusive and gender diverse decision-making is key to better outcomes and results. Research published by Forbes finds that team decision-making outperforms 'individual decision makers 66 per cent of the time', with all-male teams making 'better business decisions 58 per cent of the time' but gender diverse teams doing so '73 per cent of the time'⁵. Yet, when it comes to the political arena, women are severely under-represented at the decision-making table. While the coronavirus pandemic has shone a spotlight on women leaders, this heightened visibility has also drawn attention to the low numbers of women in politics across the globe. According to the *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)*, in November 2020, just 21 of 193 countries worldwide have women occupying the positions of head of state or head of government and only four countries have reached gender parity in their national parliaments⁶.

¹ Luca Coscieme, Lorenzo Fioramonti and Katherine Trebeck (2020) Women in power: countries with female leaders suffer six times fewer Covid deaths and will recover sooner from recession - <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/women-power-countries-female-leaders-suffer-six-times-fewer-covid-deaths-and-will-recover-sooner-recession/> (accessed 5 June 2020).

² Jennifer M. Piscopo and Shauna L. Shames (2020) Without women there is no democracy - <http://bostonreview.net/politics-gender-sexuality/jennifer-m-piscopo-shauna-l-shames-without-women-there-no-democracy> (accessed 5 June 2020).

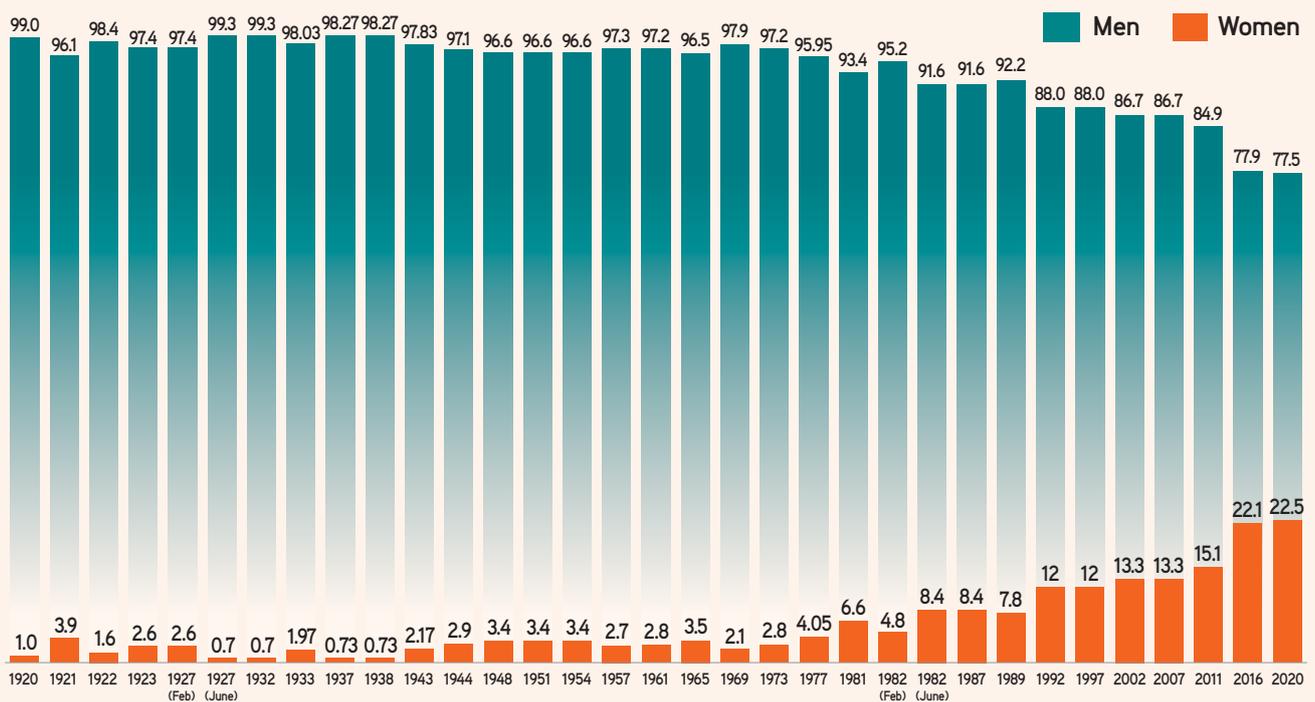
³ Political scientists Kelly Dittmar and Farida Jalalzai in conversation with Anna North (2020) Are women leaders better at fighting coronavirus? It's complicated - <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/21/21263766/coronavirus-women-leaders-germany-new-zealand-taiwan-merkel> (accessed 5 June 2020).

⁴ Kristine Ziwick (2020) Are women better leaders than men? It's really not the point - <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/are-women-better-leaders-than-men-its-really-not-the-point/> (accessed 5 June 2020).

⁵ Erik Larson (2017) New Research: Diversity + Inclusion = Better Decision Making At Work - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriklarson/2017/09/21/new-research-diversity-inclusion-better-decision-making-at-work/#7f0d3b614cbf> (accessed 6 June 2020).

⁶ Women's Power Index - Council on Foreign Relations - https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index?utm_source=academic&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=CFRAcademicBulletin2020Feb28&utm_term=AcademicBulletin (accessed 7 November 2020).

Figure 1: Proportion of seats held by women and men in Dáil Éireann, 1918 – 2020 (%)



Across the world, the *Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)* records just 25.2 per cent of seats in lower houses of parliament are occupied by women⁷ while the average proportion of ministerial seats held by women is 22.1 per cent. In January 2021, Ireland is ranked in 101st position on the IPU’s table of the percentage of women in national parliaments [of 188 ranked positions].

Recent years have witnessed increasing gender diversity in elected office in Ireland, largely due to the legislative gender quota for Dáil elections and its spill-over effects (see figure 1). However, there is still a long road to travel before gender parity is the norm. Following the February 2020 general election, the proportion of women TDs in Dáil Éireann stands at 22.5 per cent, while women’s political representation is 25.5 per cent in local government, 40 per cent in Seanad Éireann and 38.5 per cent among the Irish MEPs⁸. At the cabinet table, four of the 15 ministers are women.

Furthermore, the Irish Immigrant Council has highlighted that less than one per cent of those elected in the 2019 local elections are from a migrant background,⁹ while it took until July 2020 before Eileen Flynn became the first woman from the Traveller community, to become a member of the Oireachtas when she was appointed to the Seanad. It is clear that achieving gender parity and diversity in Irish political decision-making is an ongoing process.

The reasons for women’s political under-representation are multitude and complex, and when women enter the domain of politics, they must navigate a gendered space where, as described by political scientist Joni Lovenduski

‘power, process and behaviour operate to favour the men who created them and were their sole occupants for so long. When women enter legislatures they enter masculine territory. They may or may not face hostile men, but they do face institutions that are constructed to exclude women’¹⁰.

⁷ Inter-parliamentary Union - <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages?month=10&year=2020> (accessed 24th January 2021).
⁸ Calculation based on time of publication. Ireland elects 13 MEPs to the European Parliament. In October 2020, former MEP Mairead McGuinness was appointed European Commissioner for Financial Services, Financial Stability and the Capital Markets Union. She was replaced by Colm Markey.
⁹ Irish Immigrant Council of Ireland (2020) The Experience of Migrant Candidates in the 2019 Local Election - <https://immigrantcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/2020-05/Strength%20in%20Diversity%20FULL%20REPORT%20FINAL%20060520.pdf> (accessed 6 June 2020).
¹⁰ Joni Lovenduski (2014) ‘The institutionalisation of sexism in politics’, *Political Insight*, September 2014, 17.

Moreover, in her work, the classicist Mary Beard¹¹ has written about the rejection, marginalisation and trivialisation of women's public voice from classical times right up to the present day. The online abuse experienced by many women politicians is a continuing attempt to silence these voices.

In this report, however, we seek to hear those voices, and *in their own words*, take stock of some women's experience in Irish politics.

Over the following pages, we present an insight into the life of the Irish politician from the perspective of women, specifically an account of women's experiences of contesting election. Primarily an account of women who contested the 2019 local and European elections¹², and predominantly a focus on first-time candidates, we track their experiences 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. What is revealed is a candid story of ambition, courage, determination, vituperation, vulnerability, resilience, vivaciousness, human-kindness, public service, optimism and a belief in the ability to engender change.

The report begins by outlining the conditions that shape women's access to and navigation within, the political arena. From there the report contextualises the research by providing a brief overview of the historic and contemporary status of women in Irish public life. This is followed by an explanation of how the research was conducted before moving on to tell the stories of the women interviewed for this project. Divided into three sections – 1) *Activist: Becoming a candidate*; 2) *Candidate: Running for election*; and 3) *Public Representative: After the campaign* – women recall what sparked their interest to run for political office; their route from aspirant to candidate selection; getting on the ballot paper; being on the campaign trail; the highs and lows of the count day; life after the election; and being a first-time public representative. The report concludes with an overview of its findings and recommendations to increase women's involvement in Irish politics.



¹¹ Mary Beard (2014) The public voice of women - <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n06/mary-beard/the-public-voice-of-women> (accessed 6 June 2020).

¹² Some of our interviewees also contested the 2020 general election.

ACCESSING AND NAVIGATING POLITICS: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

The need for, but lack of, parity of representation has long dominated feminist scholarship and democratic theory¹³. Arguments for increasing the number of women in politics are made on grounds of democracy, justice, legitimacy, representation and role-model effects¹⁴. To understand, and therefore address, the factors that lead to women's political under-representation, or, as is increasingly being described, male political over-representation¹⁵, a key analytical distinction is offered between *supply* and *demand* explanatory factors¹⁶.

The supply and demand model¹⁷ argues that two key factors – resources and motivation – condition the *supply* of candidates into the electoral marketplace. Resources include political experience, knowledge, and practicalities such as time and finance, while motivation focuses on an individual's confidence, interest and ambition to run for political office. On the *demand* side, if a political aspirant decides to run for a party, their desire for political candidacy is conditioned by the preferences and decisions of party selectorates and party leadership. Thus parties are referred to as gate-keepers, determining who gets onto the party ticket. Studies have shown a reluctance by political parties to diversify candidate lists and a preference for the male (candidate) status quo¹⁸. In recent years, the theory of supply and demand has been extended and overtaken by more feminist institutional accounts which place a greater emphasis on gender and how this shapes women's access to, and navigation of, political institutions.

The gendered barriers women face when seeking to enter political life are neatly summarised as the '5 Cs' – that is, cash, care, confidence, culture, and candidate selection¹⁹.

It is fair to say that politics continues to be male-dominated, bolstering the male image of political institutions. This may have the effect of inhibiting women's confidence and ambition to pursue a political career, lowering women's supply into politics, and curtailing role-model effects²⁰. Furthermore, the online space, which can be an integral and liberating tool for social activism, is also a platform where politicians are subjected to abuse.

Tom Felle, Eimer McAuley and Amy Blaney of NUI Galway²¹ reveal in their ongoing research study *Toxic tweets: female politicians, social media and misogyny*, that some 96 per cent of the current and former women members of the Oireachtas that they interviewed, have received social media and/or electronic messages that used foul language or made an inappropriate comment about their appearance and intelligence.

Some 73 per cent have been threatened with physical violence via social media while 38 per cent have been threatened with rape or sexual violence. Some 28 per cent said that they had been verbally abused in public.

Research shows that online abuse can be 'even more pronounced for female political leaders from racial, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups; for those who are highly visible in the media; and for those who speak out on feminist issues'²².

Speaking at a conference in February 2020, European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly described the 'prevalence of online sexual abuse, threats and comments directed against women in public life as a new barrier to achieving gender equality in politics'²³. The political scientist Mona Lena Krook warns that such incidents are designed to silence the targets, a scenario she describes as 'devastating' for the 'quality of democracy'²⁴.

¹³ Pitkin (1967); Lovenduski and Norris (1995); Mansbridge (1999)

¹⁴ Philips (1995; 1998); Mansbridge (2000)

¹⁵ Murray (2014)

¹⁶ Randall (1982); Lovenduski and Norris (1995)

¹⁷ Lovenduski and Norris (1995)

¹⁸ Galligan (1998); Galligan *et al* (1999); Bjarnegård (2013); Daherlup (2018); Fawcett Society (2018)

¹⁹ Bacik (2009)

²⁰ Buckley *et al* (2015); Buckley and Galligan (2020); Buckley (2020)

²¹ A presentation by Tom Felle at the *Women in Politics and Online Abuse Webinar*, hosted by the European Parliament Office Dublin and NWCI on 2 October 2020.

²² Lucina Di Meco and Saskia Brechenmacher (2020) Tackling Online Abuse And Disinformation Targeting Women In Politics -

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/30/tackling-online-abuse-and-disinformation-targeting-women-in-politics-pub-83331>

²³ Emily O'Reilly paraphrased in Buckley and Galligan (2020) - see <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/online-abuse-turns-female-politicians-off-politics-europeanombudsman-says-1.4185716> for a full account of this speech.

²⁴ Krook (2017)

Personalism is a hallmark of Irish political culture meaning there is an expectation that politicians are visible and active in their local communities. Linked to this is the candidate-centric nature of the electoral system, which places an emphasis on the individual. To carve out a successful and long-term career in politics, huge time demands are placed on politicians, something that not all budding politicians share in equal measure. As evidenced during the coronavirus pandemic and shown in CSO data²⁵, women are more likely than men to carry more care responsibilities. It means some women, who may be potential contenders for political office, put-off getting involved in politics until a later stage in life or decide against a political career altogether. There are concerns that this could be exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic²⁶. Women in politics speak of the sacrifices they make, missing family events and special occasions. Some women who retire from politics at a relatively early age often cite family reasons for their decision.

Finance must also be considered. During the 2016 general election campaign, the last general election for which we have a full set of data, the average personal spend by women on their campaigns was €10,127.65²⁷, a significant sum of money given the average annual earnings in Ireland in 2019 was €40,283²⁸, while the respective figure for part-time employees averaged €18,305. Women are more likely than men to work part-time hours as they balance paid employment with care responsibilities, contributing to the gender pay gap which averaged 14.4 per cent in 2017. The 2019 CSO Women and Men in Ireland Report²⁹ also shows that the employment rate ‘varied from 88.1 per cent for women in a couple and with no children, to 66.8 per cent for women whose youngest child was aged between four and five years of age, a difference of 21.3 percentage points’. The respective proportions for men were 91.5 per cent and 88.4 per cent, indicating that ‘the presence of children had a much smaller effect on the employment rate for men’ (ibid).

Therefore, care and cash are still gendered factors shaping women’s access into politics.

Formally, while electoral laws and party rules do not discriminate against women’s candidacy, informal norms of practice, such as the aforementioned expectation or political culture of 24/7 availability, as well as candidate selection processes, can disadvantage women. Candidate selection conventions have been described as ‘the secret garden’³⁰ of politics, but studies from across the globe have shown how selectors tend to opt for the ‘favoured sons’ of the party³¹. Political parties are strategic machines, and in an effort to maximise their vote, they will opt for the ‘tried and tested’ incumbent ahead of a new challenger. Given that the majority of political incumbents are men, women are less likely to benefit from this informal norm of candidate selection. Furthermore, the dominance of men among party selectors is said to advantage men’s candidate selection prospects. Research finds that male contenders benefit from *homosocial political capital*, tapping into their male networks and friendships within the party for support, while psychologically, party selectors are more likely to opt for a candidate who reflects their own image and whose behaviour they can understand, predict and trust³².

It must be recognised that not all candidates run for political parties, and no more so than in Ireland. At the 2020 general election, close to one-quarter of all candidates were independents while 15 per cent of women candidates contested election as non-partisans. However, *going alone* is no less gendered a route for women candidates³³. As feminist institutionalism studies show, within and beyond political parties, gender permeates systemic institutions such as electoral systems, and also pervades political culture³⁴.

²⁵ Central Statistics Office (2020) *Women and Men in Ireland 2019* - <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wamii/womenandmeninireland2019/work/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

²⁶ Concerns have been expressed that Covidload will stop women from entering into politics. See Jenna Price in *The Canberra Times* - <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6867720/why-the-covidload-will-stop-women-entering-politics/?cs=14246> (accessed 28 August 2020).

²⁷ Buckley and Gregory (2019): 68.

²⁸ Central Statistics Office (2020) *Earnings and Labour Costs* - <https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/earnings/earningsandlabourcosts/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

²⁹ Central Statistics Office (2020) *Women and Men in Ireland 2019* - <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wamii/womenandmeninireland2019/work/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

³⁰ Gallagher and Marsh (1988)

³¹ Kenny (2013); Bjarnegård (2013)

³² Bjarnegård (2013)

³³ Buckley (2020)

³⁴ Krook (2010): 712

OVERVIEW OF WOMEN IN IRISH POLITICS

‘Given the pervasively gendered nature of politics in many countries, only the equivalent of an exogenous shock could loosen the hold of long-time norms associating politics with men. Gender quotas provide this kind of exogenous shock’³⁵.

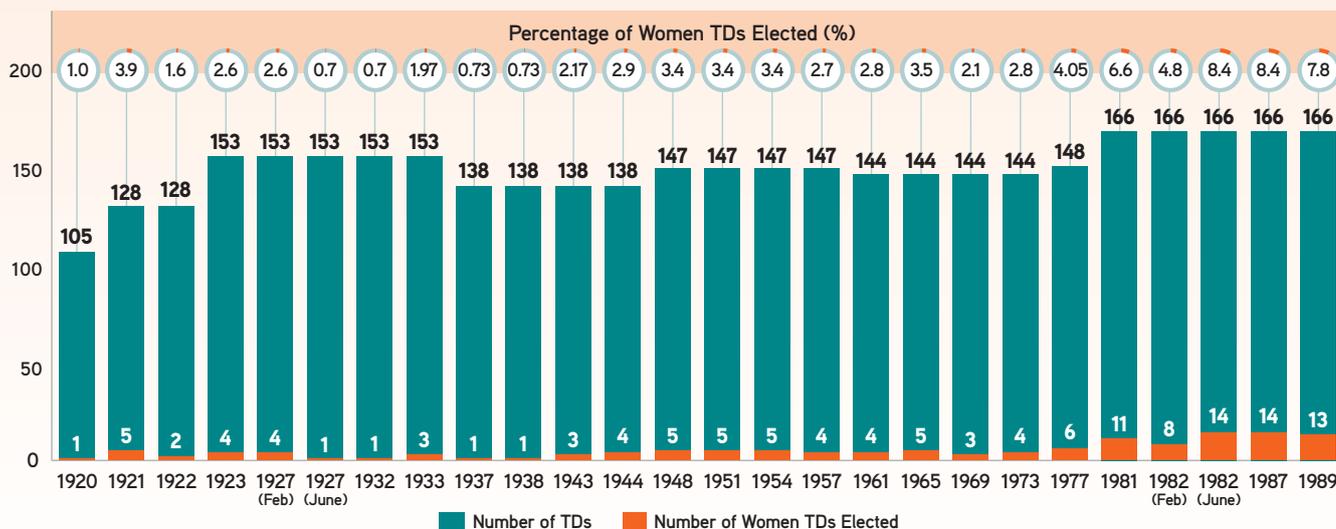
Historically, Ireland’s low levels of women’s political representation have been attributed to the intersection of social conservatism with political culture³⁶. In the early years of the State’s existence, ‘women’s domestic role was singled out as their most important contribution to the building of the new State and eventually became, via social custom and legislation, enshrined in the 1937 constitution’³⁷. Laws restricted women’s employment opportunities and social policy was directed at the fulfilment of ‘women’s ideal role’, that of ‘child bearer, carer and nurturer’³⁸. Life choices for women were severely limited, a situation that largely remained unchanged until the 1980s. While no formal or legal barriers existed during this time to prevent women’s political involvement, the practice of politics offered another reality. Patriarchal social arrangements permeated and infiltrated political institutions, marginalising women’s involvement and minimising their contribution. For the most part, up to the 1980s, access to politics was limited to those

women with familial links. As observed by Buckley and Galligan,

‘in the period between 1923 and 1975, just 18 women were elected to Dáil Éireann. All but three were related to a former male TD.... revealing political parties’ preference to limit female candidacy to those...networked into the political system through male relations, fathers or husbands who had died while serving in the Dáil, (the so-called ‘widows’ and daughters’ inheritance)’³⁹.

The under-representation of women, or over-representation of men in Ireland’s political institutions – local government, Dáil Éireann, Seanad Éireann, cabinet government, the Presidency – became the norm during this period (see figure 2 for an overview of women’s political representation in the Dáil from 1918 to 1989 and table 2 which provides an overview of women’s presence in local government and among MEPs during the 1970s and 1980s).

Figure 2: Number of women elected to Dáil Éireann at each general election, 1918 – 1989



³⁵ Baldez (2006: 104)

³⁶ Randall and Smyth (1987); Galligan and Buckley (2018)

³⁷ Gardiner (1993: 70)

³⁸ Buckley and McGing (2011: 224)

³⁹ Buckley and Galligan (2019: 285)

Table 1: Women’s political representation following Local and European Parliament elections during the 1970s and 1980s

Local Election	Women’s Political Representation	European Parliament Election	Women’s Political Representation (among Irish MEPs)
1974	6%	1979	13.3% (2/15)
1979	6%	1984	13.3% (2/15)
1985	8%	1989	6% (1/15)

Source: Authors

Beginning in the 1970s and continuing in the decades that followed, social change in Ireland heralded a new era for women. This was visibly and symbolically ascertained with the election of Mary Robinson in 1990, the first woman to occupy the Office of President in Ireland. Observing women’s involvement in Robinson’s campaign, as well as the public appetite for change, political parties began to actively seek women candidates for elections. Simultaneously, Robinson’s election had a role-model effect, inspiring women to put themselves forward for election. Between the 1989 and 1992 general elections, women’s candidacy increased by 71 per cent (see table 2 for details of

women’s candidacy and election to Dáil elections from 1992 to 2020). With more women on the ballot paper, the number of women TDs rose by 54 per cent from 13 elected in 1989 to 20 elected in 1992. The overall proportion of Dáil seats held by women increased from eight per cent to twelve per cent. Similar increases were observed in local government at this time, while in the European Parliament elections, the number of seats held by women increased from one of 15 (six per cent) in 1989 to four of 15 (27 per cent) in 1994 (see table 3 for details of women’s political representation at the local and European levels between 1992 and 2019). Mary Robinson’s election was a catalyst for change⁴⁰.

Table 2: Women candidates and TDs at general elections, 1992 – 2020

Election	Candidates			Deputies		
	Number	Percentage	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Percentage
1992	482	89	18.5	166	20	12.0
1997	484	96	19.8	166	20	12.0
2002	463	84	18.1	166	22	13.3
2007	470	82	17.4	166	22	13.3
2011	566	86	15.2	166	25	15.1
2016	551	163	29.6	158	35	22.1
2020	528	162	30.7	160	36	22.5

Sources: 1992 - 2016 figures sourced from Galligan and Buckley (2018: 221); 2020 figures authors’ own.

⁴⁰ *ibid* (2019: 286)

Table 3: Women’s political representation following Local and European Parliament elections, 1991 - 2019

Local Election	Women’s Political Representation	European Parliament Election	Women’s Political Representation (among Irish MEPs)
1991	12%	1994	27% (4/15)
1999	15%	1999	33% (5/15)
2004	19% (n=151)	2004	38.5% (5/13)
2009	17% (n=147)	2009	20% (3/12)
2014	21% (n=197)	2014	55% (6/11)
2019	24% (n=226)	2019	46.2% (6/13)

Source: Authors

However, this pace of advancement proved short-lived. Between 1992 and 2011, the number of women TDs increased by just five, with the overall proportion of women in the Dáil standing at 15 per cent. Women’s political representation was only marginally better in local government registering 17 per cent in 2009, while at the European Parliament level, the number of women MEPs was down to three (20 per cent). Research of electoral behaviour during the first decade of the new millennium concluded that ‘the actions of the electorate would not appear to be responsible’ for the under-representation of women in politics as no bias against women candidates was observed⁴¹.

If responsibility for the under-representation of women could not be assigned to voters, the spotlight turned to political parties and their candidate recruitment and selection processes. As noted previously, incumbency, personalism and localism are key attributes that political parties seek in a candidate to maximise their vote. However, given the under-representation of women across political office in Ireland, these recruitment norms advantage men’s selection prospects. To address these gendered barriers and to incentivise political parties to select more women candidates, a legislative gender quota was introduced for Dáil elections. Part Six of the *Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012* obliges political parties to select at least 30 per cent women and 30 per cent men. Non-compliant parties forfeit 50 per cent of the State funding they receive on an annual basis to run their operations⁴². The quota threshold is set to increase to 40 per cent for general elections from 2023 onwards.

In its first rollout at the 2016 general election, there was a 90 per cent increase in women’s candidacy and a 40 per cent increase in the number of TDs elected (see table 3). However, such increases were not repeated at the 2020 general election, with the overall number of women candidates reducing by one to 162, while the number of women elected registered only a marginal advance, rising by one. It would seem that 2020 was a ‘consolidation election before the gender quota threshold increases to 40 per cent’⁴³. However, there are concerns that some parties are viewing the gender quota ‘as a target rather than a minimum requirement’⁴⁴.

The legislative quota does not apply for any other election, though spill-over effects can be observed. For example, in local elections, the number of women candidates has increased from 312 in 2009 to 560 in 2019⁴⁵, a 79.5 per cent increase. Since the passage of the gender quota legislation, some political parties have sensibly used these elections to recruit and run women, with many surpassing the 30 per cent threshold. However, this is not a uniform trend. Reviewing the gender profile of party candidates at recent local elections reveals newer political parties and those of a leftist hue tend to select women candidates in higher proportions than parties on the centre-right and more long-term in existence (see tables 4a and 4b). In 2019, neither of the two traditionally larger parties, Fianna Fáil nor Fine Gael, met the 30 per cent threshold.

At this stage it should be highlighted that thresholds and quotas should be regarded as the absolute minimum, below which parties should not fall.

⁴¹ McElroy and Marsh (2010: 830)

⁴² A political party must a) be registered with the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties; b) amass at least two per cent of the first preference vote at the preceding general election; and c) at least 30 per cent of the candidates by the qualified party at the preceding general election were women and at least 30 per cent were men.

⁴³ Buckley and Galligan (2020)

⁴⁴ Buckley and Galligan (2020)

⁴⁵ The number of women candidates contesting the 2014 local elections was 440.

Table 4a: Proportion of women candidates contesting local elections disaggregated by party/grouping - 2009, 2014 and 2019

Party	2009 Women (%)	2014 Women (%)	2019 Women (%)
Fine Gael	18.1	22.6	29.9
Fianna Fáil	16.9	17.1	21.2
Sinn Féin	22.8	31.6	33.9
Labour	23.1	29.1	40.5
Greens	22.1	32.6	43.9
Independent/ non-party	10.8	18.3	19.0
Total	17.2	21.7	28.3

In actuality, many parties seem to regard thresholds and quotas as a target to scrape by.

Gender quotas should be the absolute minimum threshold to be met by parties, not a target.

Localism is an important aspect of Irish politics and the Irish National Election Study and exit polls on election day consistently find that ‘localness’ and the ability to look after the needs of one’s constituency are key considerations in voter decision-making. Furthermore, local government experience is considered vital if one is to put oneself forward for candidate selection at the national level. It provides individuals with the opportunity to develop key resources such as local support networks, campaign skills, name recognition and experience of holding elected office.

In 2020, some 81 per cent of the 36 women elected to Dáil Éireann were councillors at some stage in their political careers. Thus, local government is a significant springboard for women wishing to run for Dáil elections⁴⁶.

Following the 2019 local elections and subsequent co-options, the number of women councillors stands at 242 (25.5 per cent). This is a record high but is

Table 4b: Proportion of women candidates contesting the 2019 local elections for newer parties

Party	% of women candidates
People-Before-Profit	59.2
Social Democrats	55.2
Solidarity	47.4
Renua	32.1
Aontú	30.2

Please note: The proportion of women contesting election on behalf of the Workers’ Party was 42.9 per cent.

nowhere near gender parity, and places Ireland below the EU average of 32 per cent for women’s political representation in local politics. Although the government introduced a new funding scheme to incentivise political parties to increase their proportion of women candidates selected in the 2019 local elections⁴⁷, the continuing under-representation of women in local office, as well as the persistent urban/rural gender gap in local government representation, suggests more needs to be done. While the government moves were welcome, they were also inadequate and too late in the electoral cycle.

Indeed, research by the National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCi), investigating the experiences of councillors and unsuccessful women candidates running in the 2019 local election identified some important areas where progress needs to be made, and also presented a series of recommendations targeted at political parties, as well as local and national government⁴⁸.

Taking a different approach, this report makes recommendations that are in line with the NWCi’s. In particular, it argues that it is time to extend legislative gender quotas to the local level (as well as to the Seanad). This needs to be done in ample time, to ensure parties find viable candidates and support them in their candidacy rather than filling numbers to make a quota.

⁴⁶ Buckley *et al* (2015)

⁴⁷ A fund of €500,000 was made available to be shared among political parties where at least 30 per cent of their candidates were women and at least 30 per cent were men, or where parties showed a positive trend in that direction since the last local elections in 2014.

⁴⁸ Cullen and McGing (2019)

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the experiences of women in political life, we interviewed women who are currently or have recently been active in Irish politics. *Women for Election* reached out to women who had contested (whether successfully or unsuccessfully) the 2019 local or European elections, and the 2020 general election, as well as women who had unsuccessfully sought a nomination to run. Of the 29 women who were contacted, 15 agreed to be interviewed.

Participants were furnished with a project information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, as well as a consent form which enabled them to indicate their preferences with respect to the collection and use of their data.

As with all aspects of life and work in 2020, our data collection plans were altered as a result of lockdown restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It meant interviews were conducted by phone or using teleconferencing software across the period of late April to August. The interviews were semi-structured meaning the interviewer used an interview schedule which set out a fixed set of topics that would be discussed, but there was also flexibility to explore topics raised by participants that had not been anticipated by the research team. The interview schedule covered a range of areas including personal background, their journey into politics, engagement with the candidate selection process, and – for successful candidates – their experience of ‘life in politics’ thus far. The duration of each interview was approximately one hour.

The study involved interviewing a sample set of women, so while we can’t draw conclusions that are representative of every woman’s experience, we can identify certain patterns. To ensure as wide a variety of experiences were captured, a number of key criteria guided our research.

Firstly, it was important to include women from across the left and right of the political spectrum. Table 5 presents the party identification of the sample of interviewees. While we approached party and non-party (independent) women to participate in this research project, only those who contested election as a party candidate accepted our invitation to be interviewed.

Table 5: Party affiliation of interviewees

Political Parties	Number of interviewees
Fine Gael	2
Fianna Fáil	3
Labour	3
Greens	2
Sinn Féin	2
Social Democrats	2
Aontú	1

Secondly, we wanted to hear from women who had differing levels of experience with electoral politics. Of those who accepted our invitation to be interviewed, two had unsuccessfully contested a nomination to run for a political party. Of those who contested at least one election (at local, national, or European level), nine had experienced a loss at least once in their political careers, while eight had been successfully elected at least once. Four had been elected for the first time prior to 2019, while the remaining eight (who had run for office either successfully or unsuccessfully) were relative new entrants into party politics.

Table 6: Age of interviewees

Age	Frequency
Less than 30 years	2
30-39 years	9
40-49 years	2
50-59 years	1
60+ years	1

Thirdly, diversity with respect to demographic characteristics was an important consideration. Furthermore, the conditions that shape women’s access into politics are gendered, but this is further mediated, by socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability and migrant status. Therefore, the intersectional nature of experiences was important to capture. Two interviewees were from a migrant background, and another directly tied her political activism to her experience of living with a disability. While two women described themselves primarily as homemakers, all had a range of employment experiences. Interviewees ranged in age from their mid-to-late 20s to early 60s (see table 7), though the majority (nine) were aged between 30 and 38 at the time of their interview.

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Table 7: Number of children per interviewee

Number of Children	Frequency
0 children	5
1 children	2
2 children	5
3 children	1
4 children	2

Politics and parenting is a reality for many politicians. However, the lack of basic supports, such as the provision of maternity leave, and the continuing bias towards traditional gender roles in relation to care, act as gendered barriers to political access. In this study, five of the women did not have children and of the ten who have children, eight had more than one child (see table 7). Eight of the ten mothers have children aged under-18 and as the age profile of the respondents indicates, most were either in primary school or were not yet old enough to attend school.

Ten of the interviewees were either married or cohabitating with a partner, while five women were neither partnered nor cohabitating.



ACTIVIST: BECOMING A CANDIDATE

FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND PERSONAL INFLUENCES

FAMILY TIES TO POLITICAL PARTIES

For the women who share their experiences in this study, their route into electoral politics is best described as varied. Only three of the 15 described their families as being involved in party politics to any real extent and in only two of these cases, did the women contest an election for the family's affiliated party.

One woman who contested the 2019 local elections describes having an interest in politics *'forever'*, something which stemmed from both her family's involvement with Fianna Fáil, and as a result of growing up near to the border with Northern Ireland. She describes how her heightened awareness of 'The Troubles' was something that made her *'[a]cutely aware of the importance of politics'*, though, it was not until the 1990 presidential election that she became interested in party politics. Though Mary Robinson's victory was historic, she recalled having no awareness of this as a very young child, instead, she felt intense disappointment at Brian Lenihan Snr's loss in that election. Still, the experience of closely following the campaign spurred her interest in both politics and the Fianna Fáil party.

SMALL 'P' POLITICS AND FAMILIAL COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

More often when the women spoke about their family backgrounds, they noted that their families weren't necessarily party-people or party-affiliated, yet they often recounted that one or both of their parents had been active in the local community or active in a particular political campaign. These women were socialised with a strong sense of civic duty and political awareness.

The women were particularly keen to make a distinction between *politics*, as in party politics, or – more negatively – *politicking* (which was something in which they were broadly uninterested) and what they saw as 'small-p politics', the type of activism that their parents, and later they themselves, engaged in.

One woman who contested the European Parliament election in 2019 recalled a childhood filled with helping her parents with church gate collections and sweeping the floor of the local community centre in preparation for events.

Another described how her large family was very interested in politics and current affairs:

'There was always plenty of discussion around our dinner table [about] social issues [and] being aware that other people were maybe not as well off or had access to the education which we were all lucky enough to be able to access.'

This family interest in politics, combined with a strong involvement in the local area and to community activism, were key influences for this woman when deciding to run for office.

GLOBAL AND SOCIETAL ISSUES

For many women, their individual experiences and engagement with broader issues in Irish society, as well as globally, represented a turning point in their political awakening. One woman recalled her mother being a feminist activist, as well as being engaged with the anti-apartheid movement, influences which spurred her own interest in social justice from a young age.

Another woman described the impact of being directly confronted with stark inequalities:

'I was always ambitious to travel...I went off to Africa. And that really was my political awakening. My question was: why were they so poor? Why were we the way we were?'

Her experiences pushed her to study economics in order to engage with these issues.

For some of the women we spoke to, it was their experience growing up in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s that fostered a sense that Ireland could be a difficult place to be a woman. One woman recalled:

'I...came of age in the 1980s, which was a really tough time in Ireland. 1983 saw the Eighth Amendment inserted into the Constitution and it was quite a cold place for women...[But] I suppose the 1990s were quite positive. Mary Robinson got elected. Then Mary McAleese. We had fairly progressive governments: from the Rainbow Coalition, and the Progressive Democrats then too. So it seemed as if the two-an-a-half party system was changing.'

Highlighting the referendums on citizens' rights (2004), the Lisbon Treaty (2008, 2009), and on marriage equality (2015) in particular⁴⁹, another woman noted that these provided important opportunities for political engagement.

But it was the legal cases and referendums around women's rights that the women most frequently raised as their earliest or most extensive engagement with politics writ large. As one woman recalled:

'[t]he X Case was really something that politicised me. I was very young at the time but so was X. And I remember going on a march for that and getting involved.'

For most of the women interviewed for this study, the 2018 campaign to repeal the eighth amendment of the constitution⁵⁰ was particularly evident in the history of their political activism. One woman campaigned to preserve the amendment, while other women recounted their experiences and activism to repeal.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Direct personal experiences were the spur that set many women on the path towards becoming politically active.

After reaching out to her local representatives to seek their assistance in securing accessible housing to accommodate her disability, one woman was left feeling disillusioned, describing the apparent indifference of the local councillors. She spoke of this being *'the final straw'* and decided to run for political office herself.

⁴⁹ The referendum on citizens' rights passed, removing the automatic right to citizenship of children born on the island of Ireland. Two referendums were held in Ireland over whether to ratify the Lisbon treaty which replaced the 1992 Maastricht Treaty to provide the constitutional basis of the European Union. The treaty was rejected in 2008 but passed in 2009. The 2015 marriage equality referendum in 2015 extended the right to marriage to same-sex couples in the Republic of Ireland.

⁵⁰ The eight amendment granted the unborn child the right to life equal to that of the mother and restricted the grounds under which a woman could procure an abortion (i.e. only when the life of the mother was at risk). In 2018 this amendment was repealed and replaced with an amendment that enabled government to legislate for the termination of a pregnancy.

Another described how her experience as a migrant in Ireland played a key role in her personal activism. She had always been interested in human rights and equality issues in her country of origin, but never connected these to party politics. However:

'It was when I came here to Ireland, and I was getting to know my new identity as a migrant, it was then that activism was kind of growing and growing inside of me...It was when I came to Ireland that the activism connected to politics, because at the end of the day, everything is really connected to politics. The work that we do in human rights and gender equality, it has to be all the time connected to politics.'

One interviewee who ran for the first time in 2019 relayed that getting involved in politics, was an extension of her intense involvement in all aspects of her community, from her church, to her children's sports groups, to local committees. Being a migrant woman as well as being a mother, were central to her desire to bring about change:

'Usually, the reason I get involved is not for me...It is for my children. It is for immigrants. It's for women. It's for my family and my community. So, I always look at the bigger picture and the benefits for people as a whole, as opposed to the benefits for me as an individual.'

Another woman, with no political background and no family ties to politics, recalled how a medical issue affecting a member of her family, was her impetus to run for political office. She described how she begun a campaign to raise awareness about this issue. Her campaign put her into contact with various politicians from across the political spectrum, and while some of them genuinely seemed to care about the issue, she felt others displayed a lack of empathy, seeming to regard it as 'a photo op'. This experience spurred her interest in politics as a means of achieving positive change.

ROLE-MODEL EFFECT

The children's rights activist Marian Wright Edelman is attributed as saying 'you can't be what you can't see'. The impact of role-models cannot be underestimated in encouraging girls and young women into politics. One woman recalled meeting Mary O'Rourke at a young age. She recounted travelling to Dublin on the bus, alone, in her early teens to attend a Fianna Fáil Árd Fheis and the excitement of meeting Mary O'Rourke:

'I don't know how my mother allowed me! ... I went on my own into the RDS51 and Mary O'Rourke happened to be at the table with me and she sat with me and chatted with me. She gave me time...[T]his woman was an important lady in Irish politics – and she took time out and sat with me. I am always grateful for that.'

This experience, as well as running campaigns while at school, and attending party meetings and events while barely in her teens, were early political socialisation milestones which inspired this woman to run for political office.



⁵¹ The RDS – Royal Dublin Society - is a venue in Ballsbridge, Dublin that can be rented for events, such as party conferences.

DECIDING TO RUN: THE CONSIDERATIONS

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

While previous interactions with political campaigns, both national and single-issue, contribute to increasing their sense of self-efficacy,

the majority of women interviewed for this study point to *being asked* by a party to run as the key prompt in their decision to contest election. In fact, of the fifteen women, only six approached political parties in the first instance, indicating that they wanted to run. The others were approached by a party, and were asked to run. And of these six, three were already heavily active in their parties.

Those who were involved in party politics at the time of their decision to run, felt that putting oneself forward for election was as a natural extension of their party activism. It was something that they had expected to do at some stage. As one woman with strong ties to her party put it:

'I always had aspirations to run for politics. If you had asked me when I was twelve what I wanted to be, I always said I wanted to be the first female Taoiseach of the country.'

Another woman who was a first-time candidate in the 2019 local elections reported that it had not been a case of the party needing to approach her, but rather it was simply the fact that in her ward, there was no one else available to run for her party.

Where women approached political parties about running for office, all remember how they first needed to find a party that represented a natural fit with their own ethos and beliefs. One woman, who had direct contact with various party representatives due to her involvement in a single-issue campaign, was able to whittle down the choices available to her. She then mounted her own campaign to get noticed by turning up at meetings and appearing keen or – as she put it – *'appearing interested but not stalking them!'*



As a migrant, another woman recalled, that finding the right fit with a party, was more challenging. Friends and colleagues were pushing her to run for office as an extension of her personal activism around migrant and women's rights. However, her lack of familiarity with the Irish political system meant choosing and deciding which party to join was *'tough'* to navigate initially. In the end, she had several meetings with a colleague active in Irish politics – *'he knew about myself and about my background and my views'* – and together, they talked through the available parties before settling on the best fit for her.

To assist her in deciding which party to approach, one woman initially sought out a *Women for Election* training session, both to narrow down what role she wanted to run for and to gain a better idea about the *'nuts and bolts'* of campaigning. Still wanting to learn more about the parties before making a final decision, she found herself participating in another *Women for Election* event.

She describes the event as a *'speed-dating exercise'* where political parties set-up stalls and women who were interested in running, but wanted to find the right political party for them, could circulate the room and learn more about each party. At the event, she fell into chatting with the team at one party stand and was there so long, that people started to approach her to ask about that party!

An encounter with a woman TD, whom she had previously met at a National Women's Council's (NWC) event, persuaded a woman that their organisation was the right party for her. The NWC event was held to highlight newly elected women TDs:

'I went over to her and I thought 'If she hasn't changed. If she hasn't been watered down. If she hasn't been chiselled away in the few years [since] I had seen her, then maybe someone like Fine Gael celebrates the woman, the feistiness that [she] is – that we desperately need – maybe that's a space that I could move in to'.

In the case of women who were approached by a party to run, they recalled receiving encouragement to do so from different levels within the party. Some spoke about being contacted by party grassroots activists, while others were approached by party officials or leaders. However, receiving encouragement did not necessarily make the decision to run an easy one for all.

In particular, some women reported that they refused to make the decision to run until they were satisfied that they would have the support of the local party branch, and that they were being asked to stand for a seat that they had the potential to win. For example, one of the women who contributed to this study reported that she turned down an initial request by her party to contest a particular seat because she did not believe that she could win it due to her lack of ties to the local area. It was only when they approached her to stand in an area where she had strong ties, that she allowed herself to be persuaded to run.

FAMILY AND CAREER CONSIDERATIONS

When making the decision to put themselves forward to run, serious consideration was given to how to manage and balance the time-demands of campaigning with their life, care and work responsibilities. Women who did not have caring responsibilities at the time they first decided to run, readily agreed that it was the absence of such ties that, in many ways, gave them the opportunity to put themselves forward. Interviewees with children and other care responsibilities gave very careful and due consideration to how to balance these concerns with a life in politics.

One woman with grown-up children noted that these responsibilities were not something that she needed to consider, while another stated that she felt that she was in a position to contest an election since her child was almost of college-age. Women with younger children, however, recalled discussions with their partners about whether or not to run, given the likely impact a campaign would have on childcare arrangements and the accommodations that they would have to make as a couple. These women were keen to stress the importance of having partners who were supportive of their ambitions. One woman with four young children described how her husband encouraged her to go forward for election by reminding her of when they first met each other at university. Of everyone he knew back then, he told her, she was the one person he expected to go into politics. She recalled:

'He said, "They can only say no to you. So what if they say no to you?...So what if you lose?"'

One woman with four young children still at school reported that the decision to run in the local elections required a lot of 'weighing-up', and she had to balance the needs of her family with an awareness that the opportunity to run only comes up every five years. Ultimately, it was the fact that her children were a little older that tipped the scales in favour of running. She explained her thinking:

'If I had four [children] in primary school, I probably would have made a different decision...If all my children were further along in secondary school, I would have jumped at it a lot quicker. So that was the only little thing holding me back'.

Another agreed that she was able to run only because the opportunity emerged at the right time, in particular, because her children were now at school and more independent:

'Definitely the age of my children was a huge factor in making the decision. When they were a lot younger my life was literally: drop the kids off to the creche, go to work, come back, get them from creche, take them to their after-school activities, come home, and prepare for the next day. And that was it then... The only thing that I was doing for myself was working'.

But it wasn't only a loss of quality time with their children that concerned the women. Two participants also explicitly expressed concerns around the transition from being a private citizen to a public person, and the exposure that this might lead to for their families. As one interviewee explained, it was the consequences for her family of running for election, that worried her the most:

'My biggest fear was about my family...I didn't want to expose my family to the public and them to experience abuse...So I was really concerned about that. But I talked to my husband and he was really 100 per cent supportive and it was him that would say "Just do it!"'

Interestingly, the question of timing related not just to women's parental status, but also to their professional status. For one woman, her impending retirement represented a natural interruption of her career, making space for her to pursue one in politics. She noted that she was fortunate not to have to make a 'trade-off' decision, trading-off her career to fulfil her political ambitions. Other women indicated that the election fell at a time when they were between job contracts, thus affording them the time to run.

For others, in more permanent jobs or positions with long-term contracts, the decision to run was different. One woman who worked in policy for her political party was able to rely on her employers for flexibility and support over the course of the campaign, something that she might not have been able to do if she had been working elsewhere. Another reported that her private sector job meant that she was able to use up a few weeks of her annual leave allocation in order to campaign full-time. However, another woman described how she was not able to use her leave allocation since she worked in an organisation that required its employees to be non-political. Instead, she had to weigh-up the risks of quitting her job in order to pursue a political career.

CONFIDENCE, CULTURE AND CAPACITY TRAINING

It is fair to say that considerations around disruption to family lives and careers represented the biggest concern that needed to be overcome before women could make a decision to stand for election. However, many of the women interviewed for this study also expressed a lack of self-confidence about being a public representative. One first-time candidate observed that:

'[f]or women, it always comes back to confidence... They feel they have to know how to do it before they ever do it. Whereas a man will say, "I'll figure it out along the way".'

One woman with a policy background and previous experience of working in a parliament exemplified this issue when describing her struggles with self-doubt. She recalled thinking:

'I'm only a Mam, sitting at home ... I don't talk to people. I see my neighbours and friends at the school gate [but]...how could I ever get an opportunity to run?...You kind of think maybe you are past it in a way'.

Despite all of her experience in policy work, working in parliament and having close ties to her political party, she still felt that she was not a contender, even though she had been contacted by her party's head office to ask her to run. Ultimately, she decided to run and recounted her young son's reaction when she explained that she was going for a job, and that she would be busier and out of the house more often:

'He just turns around to me and says "Mammy, what do you want a job for? Sure you have plenty of jobs to do here!"...And I [thought] if there was ever a reason for a mammy to [run]...this is it!'

Many women express self-doubt or a lack of self-confidence about putting themselves forward for candidate selection and/or election. Oftentimes this sentiment stems from a political culture where women have been marginalised from politics.

Role-model effects (such as seeing other women in politics), mentoring (from women and men who are either currently serving-in politics or previously served-in office) and capacity training from organisations such as Women for Election, have enabled women to overcome, or, at the very least, manage these feelings.

MOTIVATION

While a lack of confidence and concerns about managing family and career commitments had the potential to discourage women from running, interviewees were very clear about what was motivating them to stand in the first place. They listed a range of issues (some local or constituency-focused; others national) that they were passionate about and on which they hoped to be able to make a difference. It was this desire to make improvements in their communities, and a belief that they could do so, that ultimately motivated many of the women to run.

As well as focusing on the core issues that mattered to them, some of the women we interviewed directly linked their decision to step forward to what they felt was a lack of representation for them and for people like them. One woman explained how her identity as a migrant made her feel alienated from politics in Ireland, but it was this feeling of alienation that ultimately pushed her towards running:

'I didn't know anything about politics in Ireland...One of the feelings that a lot of migrant people have is that they are living physically here but...their soul and their brain, they are in the country where they are from. And that kind of state of limbo is kind of where I was before. I wasn't following politics. I didn't know that I had the right to vote, I didn't know that I had the right to run for the election, so I felt that my voice was useless...And some point, I felt responsible for my voice. I felt that if I was pushing for something, if I was complaining about something, I must do something about it'.

One candidate who ran for the European Parliament explained succinctly:

'I didn't see a voice in Irish politics that reflected me'.

Other women explicitly linked their belief in the need to see more women in politics to their decision to run. As one respondent put it:

'I have always said that we should have more young, diverse women in politics. And then if the opportunity was there and I said "no", it's not really living my values'.

FROM ACTIVIST TO CANDIDATE: PREPARING TO RUN

The route to becoming a candidate varied among the women interviewed for this study, both with respect to the process that they had to engage in and with respect to the degree to which they had to face competition.

In some cases, the process was very informal. For example, two women reported that they had been approached by their parties to step-in when someone else who had already been selected had dropped-out.

Others were seen as a clear choice to run due to their position within the party at the local level, but also because there was no one else who was willing to put themselves forward. The process of *'getting on the ballot'* for these women was relatively straightforward and tended to consist of endorsement by the party at a constituency meeting.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Others had to contend with an interview process but here again, the experience of the women varied. One woman who received a *Women for Election* scholarship to complete a day course, recalled that the training gave her the confidence to go forward to her party interview armed with a detailed campaign plan. In fact, she was relieved to discover that the interview was much more relaxed than anticipated, reporting that the selection was the easiest part of the process for her.

However, not everyone had such a positive experience of the interview process. One woman was surprised at the mix of formality and informality. A woman with a long history of activism in her party and strong ties to her local community, put her name forward to run and was called for interview. Her party had paid for her to complete training with *Women for Election* in advance of the interview, but despite her extensive preparation and a strong performance before the interview panel, she missed out on being selected. None of the candidates who were unsuccessful at the interview received any form of feedback about their performance, something which she argued, would have been useful to enable her to engage with future candidate selection processes. Furthermore, she felt the decision-making around the selection was *'opaque'*.

One woman who received a *Women for Election* scholarship to complete a day course, recalled that the training gave her the confidence to go forward to her party interview armed with a detailed campaign plan.

SELECTION CONVENTIONS

Contesting a selection convention can represent a similar challenge but for different reasons. While the party voting rules for selection conventions are generally accessible and transparent, in practice, the majority of those who vote at the selection conventions tend to be male and older, making them unrepresentative of the electorate. Moreover, in order to win support from the membership, it is necessary to canvass them, and when the constituency is very large, it can be very expensive to get access to party members. Since the contest is internal, it is not funded by the party, and this can be a significant burden for women, particularly when (as is discussed below) they will normally need to put some of their own finances into the campaign after they receive the nomination. Furthermore, since the convention represents a contest that is within the party, it constitutes an opportunity for internal tensions to emerge between factions who are supporting one candidate or another. When selection conventions are completed, these tensions can still remain, spilling over into the electoral campaign itself.

None of the candidates who were unsuccessful at the interview received any form of feedback about their performance

CANDIDATE: RUNNING FOR ELECTION

Among the cohort of our interviewees who were selected to run for election, their campaign experiences varied. In particular, candidates reported important differences with respect to the length of time they had to *actually* campaign.

Candidates who were selected late, either because the selection process was completed a short time before election day or because they had been brought in to replace someone who decided against running, had to contend with very short campaigns. This was also the case for some candidates running in the 2020 general election, the date for which was set less than a month before it was held, had to contend with very short campaigns. For some women, the condensed campaigns represented a particular challenge, but for others, the sprint-type of campaign was deemed preferable to the 'marathon' type, which can be spread out over months, and is typical of local elections which are held every five years.



FINDING YOUR TRIBE AND BUILDING A CAMPAIGN TEAM

The first and most important resource that candidates need is access to a team of people. Even if a person has experience of running other political campaigns, all interviewees agreed that it is not feasible for the candidate to do all of the campaign planning. Having a strong campaign team and in particular, a good campaign manager, are crucial to support the candidate through what can be an exhausting experience. One woman who contested election for the first time in 2014 recalled how vital it was to have someone to do the planning for her campaign, despite her many years of experience within her party:

'I will never forget going on my first canvass and thinking a) that I didn't need a campaign manager because I had been a campaign manager myself and b) that "I have totally got this. I absolutely know what I am doing". I stood on the street, froze completely, and went: "I actually don't know what I am doing". And only for one of our members who was with me...he just kind of stepped-in and helped me out and he sort of became my self-appointed campaign manager for the final six weeks'.



While candidates from smaller political parties particularly report challenges in assembling their campaign team, it is fair to say that even candidates from larger parties may have to confront this challenge. With respect to smaller political parties, it may be the case that they simply have not built up the membership base in the local area and as a result, are unable to provide personnel.

Regardless of whether one is a member of a large or small party, it is commonplace for candidates to draw upon their own personal networks to supplement the resources made available to them by the party.

Interviewees recalled looking to their network of contacts, built-up during their careers, as well as through their activism, to assemble campaign team. One woman running in the local elections for a small party reported that the maximum number she could turn out for a canvass was eight people, though, in reality, it most often consisted of herself, her father (who acted as her campaign manager), and another friend, who also took on some of the campaign management role. Another woman reported that she felt uncomfortable calling upon her connections in the wider community:

'When it comes to politics, you don't know who is with your party. And I suppose that is a challenge of being with a party because obviously if you are an independent, you can chance your arm with everybody'.

As a result, she, and many other candidates, relied very heavily on their immediate family and friends.

For some women, however, they did not have the contacts available to them that could easily be called upon. One woman noted her team was, essentially, herself! Members of her party branch were all running as candidates, and since she was new to the party and to electoral politics, she did not have her own people that she could call upon. Furthermore, as a migrant, she did not have access to the kinds of networks that some of the other women were able to call upon by virtue of their familial links or social ties to the community. She managed to assemble a handful of people through her personal contacts to help out with the campaign but despite this support, she estimates that 70 to 80 per cent of the canvasses she did alone; but she often found herself wishing that she had at least one other person with her.

Canvassing in country areas, particularly during winter months, means a lot of driving along dark roads and bothríns. One woman mentioned, almost as an aside, that she would not canvass in her rural constituency without at least one other person with her *'for security'*. She explained, *'it's country, so you are going up long avenues to houses'*.



FINDING THE CASH – RESOURCING A CAMPAIGN

No matter whether the campaign represents a marathon or a sprint, for candidates the fundamentals remain the same – they *have to* find a way of getting themselves in front of as many voters as they possibly can. The extent to which they are able to do this is in large part dictated by the resources that a candidate has access to.

After personnel, financing was considered the second most important resource to successfully run a campaign.

The financial outlay varies depending on the type of election, but also among candidates contesting the same election⁵². A first-time local election candidate reported that she spent €4,000 on her campaign while a woman who ran for Dáil Éireann recalled: *‘it can cost €20,000 to run an effective campaign’*.

Minister Catherine Martin, speaking at a *Women for Election* webinar in November 2020 recalled that her first Dáil election was funded from three fundraising events attended by friends and supporters.

Parties will try to provide their candidates with financial support, but this can be difficult, particularly for smaller parties, newer parties, and for parties whose support is falling. Even for larger parties that are comparatively better off, decisions about where to target financial resources must be made.

Most of the women interviewed for this study advised that their parties contributed towards posters, canvass cards, and trifold leaflets. However, they also recalled that at least part of their campaign had to be self-funded, either through the use of their own savings or from loans that they took out from banks and credit unions. One first-time candidate noted that the party printed posters and canvass cards for her campaign but *‘the party can’t fund every part of every campaign’*. She self-funded much of her campaign, including paying for supplementary posters (at a cost of just

‘the party can’t fund every part of every campaign’

under €1,000), Facebook adverts, and refreshments at her campaign events.

Spending €4,000 on her campaign, another first-time local election candidate recalled that these funds had been gathered from a variety of sources:

‘It [was] largely GoFundMe that a lot of the contributions came from. The rest of the money I had was from savings and from loans’.

While she conceded that fundraising events might have been a useful way to raise additional money, being under-resourced with respect to her team had a knock-on effect when it came to fundraising. She explained, perhaps ironically, with the use of the word ‘manpower’....

‘we didn’t have the manpower to be organising fundraising events...We just didn’t have the manpower to be organising anything outside of getting out and knocking on doors’.

Another woman described how she supplemented party HQ funds with contributions from the party’s young candidates’ fund and the party’s women’s branch.

Overall, interviewees felt public fundraising events were not a significant source of funding for their campaigns and they tended to self-finance to supplement party funds. One first-time candidate who ran for a large party explained that the decision not to fundraise had been a conscious one, though she did admit that at events she *‘got a few tenners, here and there, from people’*. However, she did recall that her male colleagues fundraised, remarking:

‘I just felt that I didn’t want to fundraise because I was an unknown entity...I just felt that I needed to prove myself – the classic female thing!’.

However, with her subsequent election, she feels she now has an opportunity to demonstrate her abilities, stating she hopes to fundraise for future campaigns.

⁵² For Dáil elections, the spending limits are €30,150 in a 3-seat constituency, €37,650 in a 4-seat constituency and €45,200 in a 5-seat constituency. Depending on the population of the local electoral area in a city, county or city and county council, the spending limit for each candidate is either €9,750, €11,500 or €13,000. The spending limit for a candidate contesting an European Parliament election is €230,000.

INTRA-PARTY COMPETITION FOR RESOURCES

Beyond personnel and finances, political parties have the potential to act as an important source of advice and support. However, it is important to note that many interviewees did not feel that party support was distributed evenly across candidates. One woman pointed to perceived favouritism with respect to the way party finances were allocated, while others pointed to a lack of support from party members in their local areas. While parties might be expected to immediately rally around their chosen candidates in the wake of the selection process, in practice, tribalism within parties can be observed throughout the campaign.

One woman, a migrant, who did not have the family ties that others could count on, relied heavily on her party to supply her with personnel. However, even with this support, she did not have enough people on her canvass team. Furthermore, the people directed to her campaign were not experienced and were looking to her – a first-time candidate – to lead them. As she explained:

'My team was very green as well because they had to shadow me for a while to build up their confidence to go off on their own'.

Despite these challenges, she frames this experience positively, noting that she has taken steps to involve her circle of friends now, and expects to have a very strong team by the next election. She also suggests that there should be more intra-party co-operation among party candidates and where parties run more than one candidate in a constituency or local electoral area (LEA), then parties should engage in synchronised canvassing for party candidates in that constituency/LEA, enabling each party candidate to access one another's constituency base and resources.

Such a clubbing-together of personnel and resources, would, she feels, help to secure votes and high preferences.

However, the campaign experience of another woman would seem to pour cold water on the idea that intra-party collaboration among candidates is achievable. Explaining why she had to rely on her own personal networks during her campaign, the woman advised that some prominent party members in her constituency had wanted someone else to be selected. When she was selected to run instead, she found herself without support from sections of the party.

Another woman summed up the tensions that can emerge within parties – particularly large ones – over the course of a campaign:

'Politics is a hard game at best. You're not only competing with other parties; the biggest competition is within a party. Two candidates on a ballot sheet will kill each other'.

Some of this competition is expected and easy to move on from, but some of it can be more insidious. For example, one woman described how she only became aware of rumours that had been started about her and her family, by another faction within the party, after the campaign had ended.

Another interviewee described how she found the experience of running for office a positive one overall, but recalled being advised by party colleagues during the 2019 local election campaign, to end her evening canvasses at eight o'clock, as no one would open the door after that time. Later, however, when canvassing for her party colleagues in the general election campaign, she noticed that their evening canvasses continued well after eight o'clock! She laughed as she recounted the story and admitted, she may have fallen victim to a trick. *'I suppose it is up to you what advice you take,'* she smiled.

The lack of support from certain factions of their parties cannot simply be attributed to male party members who see women as a threat. One member of a large political party points out, a perception that there is limited space for women means that tensions may arise between experienced women and new entrants to the party:

'Sometimes it is not the men that stop you. Sometimes it is the other females because they fear with these gender quotas, when push comes to shove [selectors may] want the experienced one or the shiny new one'.

ON THE DOORSTEPS – CANVASSING AND CAMPAIGNING

The canvass was consistently identified by participants as the core activity of their campaign. Many of the women who had previously canvassed in referendums or on behalf of other candidates noted how different the experience is when ‘you’ are the candidate on the ballot. Some women recalled that there can be a level of awkwardness when putting oneself forward as the candidate. As one interviewee put it: ‘I love canvassing – except for myself!’ Another woman remembered:

‘I’ve been canvassing since I was sixteen, canvassing for different people. [It’s] very different canvassing for yourself because obviously we’re very self-deprecating in Ireland and to have to boost yourself at the door and put on the show, that is exhausting. And it was a little bit hard at the start but then you just get into a rhythm.’

One participant running in the local elections, who has lived in Ireland for more than a decade, remarked that although canvassing was a ‘great experience’, it was initially a strange one:

‘The cultural difference really came to the fore. Because the Irish canvassing system is not something that [I was used to]. It was a bit daunting at first...I felt it was invading people’s personal space. You know, knocking on people’s doors [and] it’s not like I was invited. But I discovered that it was expected...I would see on social media people commenting: “Nobody has come knocking on my door. I don’t think anybody values my vote”....So that helped me to build me confidence.’



...And it was a little bit hard at the start but then you just get into a rhythm.

A woman who had been strongly active on the repeal side in the May 2018 referendum campaign, prior to entering into electoral politics, contrasted the experience of canvassing during the referendum with her experience of running in the local elections:

‘It is one thing knocking on doors when you’re fighting for a cause that so many people also believe in, and it was this massive national, and in some cases, international campaign, where there was huge money and a lot of media attention...[For the local elections]...I wasn’t selling this human rights issue, I had to sell myself and package myself as something that people would want.’

The canvass is an important way to attract votes, but it can be particularly crucial for less-experienced candidates. One first-time candidate explained:

‘As a first-timer, I needed to be the person at the door. I needed to go and shake the hand, and meet the person, and to say: “Here I am”, instead of sending out teams’.

Asked about how much time they devoted to canvassing, most interviewees, regardless of which election they were running in, reported that they canvassed as often as they could. One woman who contested the European Parliament election recalled that most weeks, she spent five out of the seven days going door-to-door with as many councillors as possible, something that she said enabled her to meet voters, grassroots members, and link-in with the issues.

In most cases, the frequency and intensity of the canvass ramped up towards the end of the campaign. One first-time candidate with young children recalled:

'[p]retty much every single day – bar Sundays, until the end – I canvassed'.

Another woman who ran successfully in the 2019 local elections explained that she spent months canvassing, something that enabled her to get to many doors three and four times over the course of the campaign. She started canvassing twice or three times a week between January and March and increased this to four to five nights a week until election day in May. For some, the canvasses could last as long as three to four hours.

Still, despite how much time canvassing occupied and, for some, the strangeness of presenting themselves as a proposition to the voters, the candidates we spoke to were broadly positive about the experience.

Engaging with voters on a one-to-one basis and hearing about their concerns was a key feature of the campaign trail. Respondents reported that a wide range of issues came up at the doors, and these issues varied according to the electoral campaign. Unsurprisingly, the big issues in 2019 and 2020 were health and housing, for both the local and general election campaigns, though local issues (e.g. parking, cycling paths, childcare, public transport) were also raised.

It should be noted that candidates had to confront distinct challenges according to the size of the constituency in which they were running. Candidates contesting large and rural constituencies struggled to cover the entire constituency and found themselves debating with their campaign team about the relative merits of focussing their attention on their local area (where they would be best known and would derive the most support) and building their campaign out from there to try to reach areas where they were not as well known. Furthermore, candidates who contested the European Parliament elections reported that they spent long periods on the road trying to cover the vast constituencies, time that they would have preferred to spend canvassing.

Urban constituencies represent a separate set of challenges. While voters are less spread out than they are in more rural constituencies, candidates campaigning in areas with large numbers of apartment complexes struggled to gain access to these voters. Two women who are veterans of multiple elections in urban areas noted that increasingly, people seem to be reluctant to open the doors to canvassers.

GETTING NOTICED: ADVERTISING, MEDIA, AND POSTERS

Given the difficulties engaging with voters on a one-to-one basis, candidates cannot simply rely on canvassing to get elected. Where possible, candidates engaged with the media in order to raise their profile. However, most women reported feeling somewhat uncomfortable doing so or turning down media opportunities when they arose, pointing explicitly to a lack of confidence as their reason for doing so. But all did participate where possible. They also found writing press releases for the local paper, commenting on current events, another strategy to connect with local media and the public. One local election candidate admitted that her lack of experience with the media, prior to her campaign, made her nervous. However, she tried to adopt a positive approach:

'If you're not pushing yourself and you're not feeling uncomfortable, you're not learning. And that's the way I look at it. If I'm not feeling a little bit uncomfortable about new experiences, then I need to keep on pushing'.

Placing campaign advertisements in local papers was another method employed by women to raise awareness about their candidacies. It is costly but is seen by some as a way to demonstrate credibility. As one interviewee explained, if her opponents were doing it, then she had to do it too.

Candidates find themselves in a similar bind with respect to posters. Most candidates expressed ambivalence about the use of posters during the campaign, in particular candidates for whom environmental concerns represent an important component of their platform. However, since their opponents were using them, they felt they had to use them too. One woman recalled that she had tried to get all the candidates in her area to agree not to use posters and, having failed to do so, was forced to print and use some of her own.



SOCIAL MEDIA

Taking out advertisements and putting-up posters are important aspects of the election campaign for many candidates, but these activities are only possible for those who are able to raise sufficient funding to enable this. Social media represents an alternative and more cost-effective way of reaching voters, which is particularly appealing to candidates who find themselves with little access to funding. Interviewees who had contested multiple campaigns noted that social media has become increasingly important in Irish political campaigns, even when compared to five years ago. Candidates reported using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to engage with voters on issues and to update them on their activities. Some candidates also reported using some of the money they had set aside for advertising, to pay for targeted Facebook ads in lieu of ads in traditional media.

So, I had really good friends and they said that they could stay with [the children]

CAMPAIGN HIGHS AND LOWS

Interviewees agreed that campaigning can be exhausting. Many candidates spent months canvassing four or five times a week, and as the election approached, this increased to six or seven times a week. One candidate recalled the 'big push' towards the end of the campaign:

'[The] last week, I went harder... Because you had more light in the evening, and the kids were out playing you felt you could stretch yourself more to go longer. There was one evening in the last week that I had been out so much and [saying], you know, "We'll do this house. We'll do one more before we stop. Or we'll have a cuppa or we'll try to get a sandwich somewhere". I literally had to sit down on the footpath. I felt like I was going to pass out and I literally had to sit down on the footpath and say "I can't. I do have to stop now".'

Candidates going door-to-door receive representations from voters on a variety of issues, from medical cards to potholes. Interviewees reported spending hours after each canvass logging queries and following up to get information for those they met on the canvass. In addition, they had to attend hustings, engage with the media, and plan meetings and other campaign events.

Many women reported having to do this while working or while caring for their young children. In relation to childcare, many interviewees highlighted the supportive role of partners, who took over much of the parenting role during the course of election campaigns. They also emphasised the role played by other family members and friends who provided childcare, so that they were able to go out and canvass. One woman described how her friends showed their support for her campaign by 'freeing her up' to fit in canvasses when she could:

'The vast majority, [of the team] ... wanted to just be behind the scenes. So, I had really good friends and they said that they could stay with [the children] and as soon as they were coming, I was taking my bag or I was taking whatever I had and I was going...some days I was doing fifty houses, and another day I was doing twenty'.

The abuse that I got underneath [the article] for the way I looked was disgusting

Managing these responsibilities with the arduous task of campaigning for political office is a significant challenge and is typical of the experience of many women who run for election in Ireland.

One woman highlighted the challenges of running for office as a candidate with a disability. While her own experience represented an important impetus for her campaign, and she was keen to raise issues around accessibility, she found that she had to confront these issues as she went canvassing, finding that the campaign was not only physically exhausting but that on occasion, she was not able to gain access to some of the doors because of her mobility difficulties.

Another interviewee's status as a migrant negatively impacted her experience during the campaign.

Running for a party that had a limited ability to supply her with financial resources, she also found herself unable to tap into her own family networks for financial support since they were located outside of Ireland. Similarly, she was not able to draw on the forms of personal familial ties that other candidates were able to rely on or to garner support in the wider community. While the party had been keen for her to run, she found that they were not prepared to support a candidate that was, in any way, non-traditional. Speaking with other migrants who were running for other political parties, she found that this was consistent across the board; parties were not prepared to target resources to their migrant candidates, resources they needed to run a successful campaign.

Despite how intensive and exhausting the campaign can be, the women interviewed for this study were broadly upbeat about their experiences. Asked to describe the best moment of the campaign, they largely focused on moments, both big and small, that were shared with voters or with members of their team.

I thought I would be quite resilient to that but those were the things [that were said] for no reason other than for being horrible

One woman recalled the excitement of launching her campaign with the party leader in attendance, while another described the excitement of a school event in her constituency that she attended with a prominent member of her party:

“There was this hype. And everyone knew who I was. People [said] “Oh we’ve seen you on the posters” or “You were out [at] our house” or “Oh, hi, we saw you in the paper”. And in that moment I was like “I can bloody well do this. If I keep going, I am going to get elected”. I felt the positivity that day’.

Another interviewee remembered being sent a picture by one of the party activists of the member's young daughter wearing a t-shirt with a feminist slogan and standing underneath the candidate's poster. Others spoke about interactions that they had with voters who thanked them for raising the issues that affected them.

While many interactions between candidates and voters were positive, difficult interactions and low points are also recalled. One woman was accused of using her sexuality to get votes and another remembered how an online poll asked respondents to vote for the best-looking candidate. For one woman, an article appearing online, accompanied by her photo, generated a host of online abuse that focused on her appearance.

‘The abuse that I got underneath [the article] for the way I looked was disgusting. And then around the same time when I started calling [at the] doors, I had a couple of people say to me, “Oh, you should have photoshopped your poster” or, you know, “You look completely different”. I thought I would be quite resilient to that but those were the things [that were said] for no reason other than for being horrible’.

Online abuse come from men and women. A candidate running for the European Parliament recalled a woman contacted her to advise that she had no business running to be a MEP and should instead start local and build from there:

'I remember that woman telling me "you should learn your place".

Other women noted that, at times, members of the public would simply react negatively to the party label and would direct hostility towards them as a result of it. One woman reported receiving polite remarks such as *'If only you weren't in this party'* but others found the discourse more hostile. In such cases one interviewee felt it was impossible to have a civil debate, and it was best to disengage. Another described being approached by an irate member of the public as she canvassed alone on the street. The man proceeded to shout at her for several minutes, but while people passed them by, no one intervened.

A number of women spoke about their negative interactions with social media. While all recognised the positive potential of social media to reach out to voters, it was clear that some women were ambivalent about using it. One woman who ran for the local elections recalled that a tweet she sent, praising a more prominent member of her party, set off a barrage of obscene gendered abuse from opponents' supporters. *'It really affects people,'* she said, though she acknowledged that as a local candidate, she did not attract nearly as much vitriol as some of the senior women in her party.

Another woman described how many of the negative comments are people's *'inner dialogue'* consisting of things that no one would ever say to someone in person. One woman described how her social media posts were being *'spammed'*, causing her to turn off recommendations on her social media page. The nasty comments affected her:

'I remember sitting in bed going, "why am I doing this?"'

One woman who ran for the local elections recalled that a tweet she sent, praising a more prominent member of her party, set off a barrage of obscene gendered abuse from opponents' supporters. *'It really affects people'*

Another interviewee brushed off her experiences with *'trolls'* that she sometimes encountered on her social media pages. Her party had provided communications training and she followed their advice to not engage with them in any way as it would only make it worse. In the end, she only had a few encounters and advised that she worried that when women in politics are talked about by the media, there is a tendency to focus on the negatives:

'Women are going to be walking away from getting involved because all they hear is 'Women get online abuse'. Women do get online abuse. But men do as well...But it's like, "women do but men don't"'



For those women who did experience difficult interactions, these encounters did not just consist of overt hostility. Some endured prying questions about who was minding their children? As one woman explained *'I would have been one of the first women who would have ran in my area'* so some voters were surprised to see a woman contest election. She described how these voters would react to her by saying things like *"oh you're a great woman!"* but also add *"who's going to look after the children?"*. It was a question asked of her and her relatives so frequently, that one family member responded jokingly: *"Ah, they're free range...they don't need looking after!"* after being asked the question for the umpteenth time.

Another woman explained that she felt the media had a tendency to overlook candidates who weren't male and Irish when seeking people to comment on the issues of the day. Migrants, in particular, were ignored until they were approached to comment on something negative, such as *'a racially induced incident'*. Migrants and women, she argued, *'need to be profiled in terms of their capacity'*, and not just pigeonholed or indulged.

For other women, the hard moments of the campaign arose not from external sources but from the conflict between their roles as mother and candidate. The time commitment required for campaigning meant that they were not able to be as present for their children as they normally would be. One woman reported struggling with feelings of guilt, while another recalled one of her young children remarking:

■ *"Oh, you're never here...you're never around much"*.

One woman who was a first-time candidate in the local elections summed up the attitude of most of the interviewees when she said:

'By and large, it is a very positive experience. Except you are whacked, and you have no life. And I remember watching two people having a cup of coffee in a coffee shop one day and I was going "Oh my God, I would love to do that for an hour and not feel guilty about the wasted hour"'.



PUBLIC REPRESENTATIVE: AFTER THE CAMPAIGN

ELECTION DAY

After the rigors of the campaign, many of the interviewees reported using the evening after the last campaign event to take a well-deserved break. One of the candidates describes that evening before the vote as:

'a bit like Christmas Eve, where you can't really sleep and you're kind of excited to get up and go vote'.

For some, election day represented something of a break, but for others, the campaign continued as they and their team put in calls and sent out social media and text messages, encouraging their supporters to turn out the vote, before then turning their attention to organising volunteers for tallying.

All of the women recalled making their way to their polling centres on election day to cast their ballot, and many did so with their families. For some first-time candidates, voting for themselves was an emotional moment. One interviewee remembers how she felt being a small part of Irish history:

'It was overwhelming; it really was, to go in and see myself on that ballot paper'.

Another woman joked that she thinks she voted for herself, but she couldn't be sure as she was so nervous about seeing herself on the ballot! One of the interviewees explained that she never felt strange about seeing her face on posters or on the ballot paper. Instead of seeing that image as herself, she viewed it as a public persona, that was made up of a team of people that she had worked with over the course of the campaign.

COUNT DAY

While election day was a day for family, the next day – count day – was much more about the party and the campaign team. Some women recounted calling into the count centre in person throughout the day, while others maintained that it was tradition for the candidate to stay away, receiving updates until it was clear that they knew what the result was likely to be. While early tallies might give a clear indication of whether the candidate was likely to take a seat, in practice, the counts often go on for so long that it can be days before the result is declared. One woman remembered awaiting the final results to be declared before accepting that she had won a seat, even when party members kept assuring her that she had been elected.

It is clear from the women interviewed for this study that while they were the candidate on the ballot paper, their loss or victory was very much a collective one. As one woman recalled: 'it's not just me, there's a team...[I'm the]...campaign front'.

One woman relayed that the 2019 count day coincided with a family event. Given that passes to the count centre were limited, she gave her passes to someone who was needed for the tally and went to brunch with her family, switching her phone off. When she turned her phone back on, she saw that she had received a message from her Communications Officer with a graphic saying: *'I think we are going to call it'*. Discovering that she had topped the poll, she burst into tears.

It is clear from the women interviewed for this study that while they were the candidate on the ballot paper, their loss or victory was very much a collective one. As one woman recalled: *'it's not just me, there's a team...[I'm the]...campaign front'*.

One woman's 2019 election victory came as part of the 'Green surge', so the party's jubilation was felt, not just in the RDS count centre where she was located, but across the Twitter feeds of candidates and supporters, and in the party members' WhatsApp groups.

One candidate who was successfully elected but whose party experienced losses didn't celebrate her victory, both because she was exhausted from the rigors of the campaign, but also because it did not feel right when her colleagues were losing their seats. Another woman spoke about how disappointed she and her running-mates felt when one of their team did not get elected.

One candidate summed up her loss as one felt not just by herself, but by her team:

'I think people underestimate just how gutting it is to lose an election'.

ELECTED

For those who were successful in their election attempts, there is very little respite before they take up their new role. For those who were elected to their local council, for example, discussions around the allocation of chairpersonships of committees begins almost immediately.

'What happens after the election, nobody tells you that. There's this negotiation .. amongst the parties that have gotten majorities as to the SPCs⁵³...a chair of a committee carries with it an allowance; these are sought after positions. So, depending on the numbers for each individual party, they then start negotiating who's going to get the SPCs and, ultimately, who is going to be elected Lord Mayor. So, all of that kicks off almost immediately after the tallies are in...So there was all this kind of intrigue around who was getting what...That was an eye-opener, that element of it'.

Even women who had extensive experience in politics reported being surprised by aspects of the job once they begun their lives as an elected public representative. For example, while the workload of the role didn't surprise her, one new local councillor described having to get used to being noticed and approached by members of the public:

'It's funny because I literally went from not really knowing that many local people [and] many local people not really knowing me...to my husband constantly giving out that we couldn't really go through town without a tonne of people stopping to talk to me!'

For other women elected to local office, the job was demanding in ways that they had not expected.

As well as working on council business, and dealing with representations from constituents, councillors are also expected to take on a number of additional roles, for example, on boards of management and various committees. In addition, some aspects of the role are much more formalised than they had anticipated – newly elected councillors recalled having to spend time learning about the existing culture in order to understand how they could work with the executive and their colleagues in order to get things done.

One woman summed up the challenges of the role:

'[The job] is a lot more [that I expected]. I remember that there was a councillor who said to me, "This job is very intense, you have no life. You have to be on call all the time, at all hours of the day". And, you know, I would just nod politely and say "Oh, really?"... But when I started, I started to understand where they were coming from. Because it is a challenging job and once someone hands you the book of issues that they have, they are expecting for you to get it done. They are expecting you to bring it back ASAP and to say, "It's done". And you have to then try to get someone to prioritise your rep on behalf of that person who is waiting patiently. And the longer it takes, you have to go back to that person and say, "Look, I'm still working on it". There are no guarantees that you will get the job done...Having to communicate bad news it is a tough aspect of the job. And then having to be on call 24 hours...'

⁵³ Strategic Policy Committees.

Those elected councillors were nearly unanimous in their disappointment with the limited powers of local government and wished that it were possible to make more rapid progress on key areas:

'The council has so little powers. It's like being in school and the executives are like the teachers and the principal; they tell you what you can't do and it's very frustrating. It's all theatrics a lot of it, you know, people shouting and screaming for no reason about issues that aren't all that relevant'.

Although councillors acknowledge that in Irish politics, local government is seen as a stepping-stone to national politics, some view it as an important opportunity to achieve tangible results that directly impact their communities. One woman observed:

'Local authorities sweep the road. They open parks, they provide parks. They provide traffic and cycle infrastructure. They do loads of things. On a national level, I think that unless you are in government, you don't get the same impact'.

Another councillor revealed:

'What I love about local politics is that you are literally trying to help people to improve their lives, their day-to-day lives. What they see when they walk out their door, on their streets, in their immediate environment. And from a planning perspective and from an environmental perspective as well'.

One woman noted that the council represented 'a unique opportunity to influence policies', in particular, around an area that is close to her heart:

'This is where the concerns and the needs of the migrants and immigrants in the community can be addressed. This is the powerhouse for coming up with strategies to increase integration and increase the relationships in the community to form a better community and take advantage of the diversity that we have'.

Having been elected to a very different institution, the European Parliament, one interviewee describes some of the same feelings about her role. While she is excited to make progress on some of the issues that matter to her, she acknowledges that she has not achieved everything that she wanted to do in her first year. She sometimes feels frustrated by the slow pace of change, particularly when the response by member states to the coronavirus pandemic indicates that rapid change in systems is possible, when there is a perceived need for it.



REFLECTIONS: GO FOR IT!

The women interviewed for this study were asked what advice they would offer women who were considering a run for political office but may be hesitant to put themselves forward. Mostly, the advice was: *Go for it!* While they acknowledge the challenges that are unique to women in political life, they contend that there are ways to manage these and that rarely will someone regret running for office.

As one woman summarised:

'It is tough, it is hard, it is really emotional', ... 'but if you really believe in something, it will happen. And I know some great women who have been elected through the process'.

Most women stressed the positive experiences that they had. *'I can't think of any experience that has been negative to the extent that I regret going down this road. I absolutely am so happy for the opportunity to do all of this,'* one woman remarked.

One interviewee, who, as part of her election campaign, set about informing, encouraging and mobilising migrants to register to vote noted that she was able to achieve this, even though she was not elected:

'I think that's just brilliant to be able to influence these actions, to be able to influence these changes in my local community'.

Furthermore, she added:

'My children have been very happy that I have such a profile to help people in the town. I know a lot of immigrants have reached out to me to express their pleasure to have an immigrant there to push their needs to the fore and to make sure that the policies will include them... There's a lot of positives from my getting involved'.

Another interviewee describes campaigning for political office as a great way to connect with the area where you live, arguing that *'[k]nocking on doors and meeting people that you would never have the opportunity to meet otherwise'* is a rewarding experience, whether the candidate wins or not.

I know a lot of immigrants have reached out to me to express their pleasure to have an immigrant there to push their needs to the fore and to make sure that the policies will include them

Others acknowledge that self-confidence can be an issue for women, and that they tend to hold themselves to very high standards and agonise about their own performance. As one participant put it:

'women feel they have to know how to do it before they ever do it. Whereas a man will say "I'll figure it out along the way"'.

Since you may never feel confident enough, another interviewee argues that it is important to *'just do it'*.

'knocking on doors and meeting people that you would never have the opportunity to meet otherwise' is a rewarding experience, whether the candidate wins or not.

The advice from the women interviewed for this study is that feeling a lack of self-confidence can be managed, in part, by focusing on the areas where an individual feels less capable (for example, by doing media training to combat anxiety about engaging with this aspect of the campaign) but mainly, by surrounding oneself with a strong support network. One woman advised that the importance of a good team cannot be overestimated:

'you can't rely on your own self-confidence; you really need a tight group of people and to seek that sort of help'.

This team should provide not only moral support but practical support. As one candidate said:

'you can be as confident as you like, but unless you have four or five people who are willing to volunteer their time, and stuff envelopes, and champion you, it doesn't matter'.

Several respondents stressed the importance of 'trusting your gut', 'being yourself' and avoiding a cookie-cutter approach. While there were disagreements between the party and campaign teams about campaign events and messaging, in some instances, political parties were happy to allow candidates to make decisions that felt right for them, such as incorporating their individuality into campaign materials or taking ownership over what their campaign events looked like. Indeed, on reflection, some women regretted accepting advice too easily without pushing back.

While these offerings of practical advice are mechanisms that may be adopted by individual women considering a run for political office, many of the interviewees were keen to point out that the issue of women's political under-representation cannot be solved by women alone. As one woman succinctly asserted:

'There is still too much emphasis on what the individual woman has to do and not enough emphasis on what the structural supports need to be within political parties'.

Another addressed the myth of merit, arguing that there is a need to break down the attitude that:

'People in the political system are there on merit. I mean, it is a myth. The system is rigged so that certain kinds of people come to the fore. And that is a problem for democracy'.

Other participants agree that structural level changes are required, and that in order to get there, it will be important to make demands and ask difficult questions:

'We are not going to shift the needle by being polite and carrying on as usual about this'.

But the change envisioned by these women is not focused solely on achieving increased women's political representation, rather it is to see our legislative chambers reflect the diversified face of society and to represent all. One woman explained:

'We need more women at the table. We definitely do. We are 51 per cent of the population and our representation politically needs to represent that. Our councils and our national government need to be more diverse. [They] need to represent ... society...we need more migrants, we need travellers, we need people with disabilities, we need refugees, and the LGBTQI community. We need everybody there so that nobody is left behind'.

FINDINGS

While a vast section of the population is eligible to run for political office, only a very small cohort do. Of those who do run, men outnumber women. As outlined in the opening pages of this report, there are a variety of gendered 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. These are harder for women to acquire due to the gendered nature of both politics and society.

However, increasing numbers of women are contesting election in Ireland, largely as an outcome of the adoption of legal gender quotas for Dáil elections. Its impact on party candidate selections is being felt across elections at multiple levels of the political system. With this in mind, the study considered what enables those women who *do* run, *to* run, and what can we learn from their experiences. Through their words, we gain an intimate insight into the lives of women who put themselves forward for election in Ireland.

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.

The **4 rs** of recruitment, resources, resistance and resilience summarise the experiences of the women who participated in this study.

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. But *resilience* is a shared characteristic of the women interviewed for this study, and their determination, 'can-do' spirit, positivity and encouragement of other women, is evident from the experiences shared in this study.

ACTIVIST: BECOMING A CANDIDATE

The study uncovers a number of motivations, influences and considerations guiding the decision to run.

A desire to engender change on matters of a personal nature, community related and wider societal and global issues, was the motivation prompting many into political activism. All shared a belief or perception that being in political office was a key conduit to enable change.

For some that trust in the political system was oftentimes fostered in childhood. While few of the women we interviewed described their families as party-people, many were socialised in families with a strong spirit of community involvement or volunteerism in the local areas. This exposure to community activism from a young age fostered and nurtured an interest in local affairs, but also a political awareness that the power to address and redress issues often lay within legislative assemblies, whether that be at the local, national or European level.

Referenda on issues of social policy such as marriage equality and abortion, were also referenced as the spur into political action. Seeing and learning how a campaign is organised, meeting like-minded people, gaining experience of canvassing and developing networks, were all skills and resources that were acquired during these referendum campaigns, skills and resources that proved integral to a decision to run.

Working in certain careers, such as in policy development, within a political party, or as a journalist, presented opportunities to acquire political knowledge and learn about the political system and political decision-making.

However, key to making the decision to run was encouragement by a political party.

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. Some women also spoke of the influence of role-models, women within the party who inspired them to put themselves forward for election on behalf of that particular party.

Resources are vital and pertinent to each stage.

The decision to run, however, is just one part of the process, and practical supports and resources are required to enable that run. Resources are vital and pertinent to each stage. 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, while other identities, such as being a migrant, LGBTQI, having a disability, socio-economic status and/or being from an ethnic minority background, can further impede access to these resources.

The campaign to get selected and elected can be a full-time job in itself, leading many to query its compatibility with care and paid employment responsibilities. The women who participated in this study revealed their concerns and worries about the effects of political life on their families and spoke warmly of their partners', parents' and children's encouragement of their political activism. Without that support and encouragement, many women would not have put themselves forward. Having a supportive employer and flexible job arrangements was also referenced as integral to the practicalities of running for election.

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The campaign to *get on the ticket* can be fraught with obstacles. Internal tribal party politics, and suspicions 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. Where interviews take place to decide on candidate selection, it is not always clear what the interviewers are looking for, and post-interview feedback is not always forthcoming. More transparency surrounding the process of candidate selection is needed. Also, selecting women to contest winnable seats and selecting people in a timely fashion, giving people enough time to campaign, were also recommendations made (though, with reference to the latter, there was a difference in opinion about whether a *marathon* or *sprint* campaign is desirable). Overall, there was a call to address gendered barriers through structural change.

Many women 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. As many women may feel they don't 'fit' the image of a public representative, capacity training is vital.

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.

Media training is highlighted as a key skill to acquire to address apprehension about media outings.

CANDIDATE: RUNNING FOR ELECTION

Getting on the ticket and representing a political party is a very proud moment and 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. However, access to finance and networks is oftentimes gendered, but further mediated, as highlighted in literature and evidenced in this study, by socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability and migrant status. To enable one to campaign, the encouragement of family and friends is vital and the practical supports they provide are crucial, in particular in relation to care responsibilities. In Ireland, childcare costs are not allowable as an election expense but there are moves afoot elsewhere to change this. In the USA, for example, test cases have taken place to enquire whether campaign funds can be used to cover childcare expenses. There, the Federal Elections Commission (FEC) has deemed this a legitimate expense, while US Representative Katie Porter has introduced a 'Help America Run Act' to Congress to codify this decision⁵⁴.

The election campaign itself is rigorous and hectic, marked with highs and lows, and requires resilience, but encouragingly, the women interviewed for this study, would do it again and encourage other women to run. Resistance and hostility from within the party, among the public and on social media is recalled, which can be sexist and personal in nature. Examples include querying 'who is minding the children' to online abuse about appearance and personal relationships, and from negative stereotypes to whispering campaigns. 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. In 2012, Bolivia became the first country in the world to adopt legislation criminalising political violence and harassment against women in politics and several other countries are considering similar legislative reform⁵⁵.

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In the UK, the Centenary Action Group is calling on the government to pledge a proportion of tax revenues raised from tech companies to 'fund vital work in establishing online standards such as digital citizenship and online safety training, to combat online abuse and violence against women and girls'⁵⁶.

Internal tribal politics has always been a feature of party politics, and these can be heightened when new candidates are selected to run for a political party. Examples of resistance include some party members refusing to campaign for a new candidate, and internal whispering campaigns.

If political parties are serious about women's candidacy and seeing more women elected, a clear finding and message from research conducted in Ireland and elsewhere, is that those candidacies must be supported through the provision of resources. Furthermore, to enable a reasonable chance of election, newer women must be selected to contest in constituencies, where the party has a reasonable chance of winning a seat.

However, incumbency, poses a challenge to this. An incumbent is someone who already holds a seat and is seeking re-election. At election time, political parties seek to maximise their vote, and in Ireland, where personalism is such a strong feature of the political culture, political parties will rely on the 'tried and tested' incumbent, whose name recognition and past record in office, the party hopes, will boost its vote. In some constituencies, however, a political party may run only one candidate, and if this is the incumbent, then it's very difficult for new candidates to emerge. Of the 138 incumbent TDs who sought re-election in February's general election, 107 (77.5%) were men, posing a particular issue for the emergence of new women candidates.

⁵⁴ For more on this, see <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/use-campaign-funds-childcare-expenses> (accessed 31 August 2020).

⁵⁵ Restrepo Sanín (2020)

⁵⁶ For more on this, see <https://www.centenaryaction.org.uk/our-campaigns/end-online-abuse> (accessed 17 February 2021).

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 influence 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. Induction courses for newly elected public representatives must become mainstream to outline the workings of the chamber, the political system and the legislative process. Codes of conduct should also be developed to structure chamber deliberations and EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) training should be an annual mainstay for all elected public representatives.

While national and European politicians are well paid, local politics is still viewed as a part-time activity to be combined with full-time paid employment. The reality, however, is that many local councillors, work full-time on their representative duties and hope that their employers are flexible by offering part-time arrangements. Some take leave of absences from jobs or leave them entirely. Indeed, the workload of councillors has increased substantially since the 2014 Local Government Reform Act which restructured local government, reducing the number of councillors while simultaneously increasing the geographical area over which they have responsibility, as well as strengthening its powers. Indeed, a workforce survey by the Association of Irish Local Government, carried out in 2015, found that forty percent of elected representatives classified themselves as working full-time, with the mean number of hours spent on local government activities totalling 32.25 weekly⁵⁷.

who can afford to run for and maintain a career in local politics?

In 2019, many young people opted out of local politics and did not seek re-election. One wonders if financial concerns precipitated this decision. If so, it leads to the question, who can afford to run for and maintain a career in local politics⁵⁸?

The lack of maternity leave entitlement for women in politics is a barrier to women's political participation. Legislative chambers worldwide are aware of this and have begun to enact change. However, there is no 'one fits all' policy and even where maternity leave is available, this can be mediated by political culture. In 2011, a worldwide survey of parliaments undertaken by the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) found that in 62 per cent of cases, maternity leave provisions for women members were the same as those as prescribed by national law. Some 12 per cent of assemblies had adopted their own formal policies, while in 26 per cent of cases, no special provisions were in place⁵⁹. Ireland falls into this latter category.

While no maternity leave entitlement exists for women parliamentarians in Ireland, at either the national or local level, there have been numerous calls for reforms to ensure that women have access to maternity leave, regardless of the political representative role that they perform. Ideally, the provision of maternity leave should be accompanied by a formal substitute or replacement system to temporarily take over the mandate of the parliamentarian on maternity leave. In relation to local government, a legal review of Article 18 of the Local Government Act, 2001 is required to assess if there are grounds to legislate for maternity leave.

⁵⁷ Moorhead (2018).

⁵⁸ City and county councillors are paid €17,060 a year, and may also receive unvouched expenses of between €2,286 and €2,667. There are also vouched expenses up to €5,000. Data sourced from The Irish Examiner - <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-30966872.html> (accessed 31 August 2020).

⁵⁹ For information on maternity/paternity/parental leave arrangements in parliaments worldwide, please see chapter nine of report from the IPU - <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/gender-sensitive-parliaments> (accessed 6 November 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Go for it is the key take-away message from this study as participants encourage other women to run for political office but as one woman advised *'there is still too much emphasis on what the individual woman has to do and not enough emphasis on what the structural supports need to be'*.

'there is still too much emphasis on what the individual woman has to do and not enough emphasis on what the structural supports need to be'

Indeed, as political scientists Meryl Kenny and Jennifer Piscopo remind us, there is a need to understand and recognise the gendered dynamics shaping women's candidate emergence, their experiences of the campaign trail and their experiences of political office⁶⁰. To not do so will see a continuation of the over-representation of men and a politics that lacks a diversity of experiences. And that doesn't serve anyone well.

To facilitate, encourage and support women's candidacies, we are recommending key changes to be made at a policy and national level, within our local authorities and – perhaps most critical of all – within political parties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The women we have worked with through our training courses and spoke to as part 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.

⁶⁰ Piscopo, Jennifer M. and Kenny, Meryl (2020) 'Rethinking the ambition gap: gender and candidate emergence in comparative perspective', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, Volume 3, Number 1, pp. 3-10: <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510819X15755447629661> (accessed 6 November 2020).

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

And to help 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.

- 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
- Provide equality, diversity and inclusion training for all party members

Many of the women we work with, describe that political parties can be resistant to new candidates, particularly 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 and 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
 - 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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