

Joanna McMinn

Women's participation at the National level and institutional capacity of the State and civil society to support women's empowerment: a perspective from the Republic of Ireland

Introduction

My paper will explore what equality and empowerment mean for women in the Republic of Ireland, with a particular emphasis on identifying achievements and impediments to women's participation at the national level. I will present an equality framework that informs current debates about women's empowerment in Ireland, before offering a brief overview of the current trends in the presence of women in the work force and in government in the Republic of Ireland. I will reflect on the critical issue of women's political participation at the national level, and from an international perspective, as well as consider the impediments for women and the current debate around quotas as a solution. I will also describe other examples of women's participation in policy fora at a national level: through the Irish model of Social Partnership that has provided opportunities for engagement between the state and civil society; the National Women's Strategy and the National Committee on Violence Against Women. It is from this specific context and my own experience that I draw my reflections and analysis to contribute to the debate at this colloquium regarding policies to empower women in the political, economic, and social fields.

Equality Framework

The development of an equality framework has been highly influential in discussions of what equality means for women in Ireland, and their empowerment. The Equality Studies Centre in the National University of Ireland initially developed this framework. The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC) underpinned its Strategic Plan with the four strategic pillars of equality, allowing the organization to address a wide platform of issues in a coherent way:

- Redistribution and equality in access to, and enjoyment of, resources - wealth, income, employment, and of public goods such as education, health and accommodation (Economic equality)
- Representation and equality in access to, and enjoyment of, influence and power - influence and of having a say in decisions that affect one (Political equality).
- Recognition and equality in access to, and enjoyment of, status and standing for diversity - accommodation of one's particular identity, experience and situation (Social and Cultural equality).
- Respect/Care and equality in access to, and enjoyment of, sustaining relationships of love care and solidarity (Affective equality).

Affective equality resonates particularly with women's experience of inequality. Since women carry the responsibility of care work in most societies, work that is unpaid and under-valued, it is clear that this impacts on women's status, and their participation in all areas of social, political and economic life. Furthermore, equality can be understood as pursuing different objectives along a continuum: equality of opportunity, equal access, equal participation, and equal outcomes.

The full realization of equality requires movement beyond the limited goal of equality of opportunity, which is limited to change of individual behaviours and attitudes. The pursuit of equality of opportunity, however, can and does co-exist with significant and persistent inequality. The goal for equality needs to be set out in terms of eliminating the disparities and inequalities that exist between groups in society; this is a goal that emphasizes the need to change societal structures and institutional systems. However, it is the case in Ireland that government policies aspire only to most basic equality of opportunity and work within that understanding. What this means is that little progress has been made towards equality of outcomes for women, particularly in terms of participation at the national level.

Presence of women in the work force and in government in the Republic of Ireland

The 1937 Constitution of Ireland places women firmly in the home. Article 41 states: 'In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.' Despite a number of official reviews of the Constitution, this part has remained unchanged.

The late 1990s and the early 2000s witnessed a significant development in the promotion of equality and human rights in Ireland. New institutions were established including the Equality Authority, the Equality Tribunal and the Irish Human Rights Commission. New legislation was enacted including the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2008, the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2008 and the European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003. A new equality and human rights infrastructure emerged. Despite this progress, however, Ireland is a society that is characterized by persistent and significant inequalities, and that remains host to a range of human rights abuses. The Republic of Ireland has undergone enormous developments in the last 30 years economically, moving from being one of the poorest to one of the richest countries in the world. The Celtic Tiger economy was greatly enabled by women's participation in the workforce (which in 2009 stood at 60%) and it also brought immigration to Ireland for the first time in its history. This past decade has witnessed both economic boom and economic crisis.

The position of women while much improved in terms of economic independence, has in many ways remained subordinate particularly in terms of their position in the work-

force and in their participation at the national level in political life.

Women in Ireland now have higher levels of formal education than at any time in the past. In fact, within the 25–34 age group, 51% of women hold a third-level qualification, compared to just 39% of men. In 2009 men accounted for around 84% of graduates in Engineering, manufacturing and construction and 60% of graduates in Science, while women accounted for 79% of graduates in Health and welfare, 76% in Education and 65% in Arts and humanities. Despite the increase in levels of participation in the workforce, and excellent educational achievements of women, gender remains a central structural inequality in the economic life of the country. This is reflected in women's earnings and the gender segregation in the workforce. Women's income in 2007 was around two-thirds of men's income. After adjusting for the longer hours worked by men, women's hourly earnings were around 87% of men's, despite equal pay legislation. There are also significant inequalities in caring work. Men spend considerably more time on paid employment than women, while women spend substantially more time on caring and household work. Women's share of unpaid work is greater among parents than in couples without children. The number of women in managerial positions is only 30 per cent. Just 4% of chief executive positions in Irish business are women.

Women in Decision-making

An examination of national and regional decision-making structures in Ireland reveals that despite women's increased labour market activity and educational attainments, the balance of power remains with men. Despite the commitment to achieving gender equality, gender inequalities persist at many levels and in many arenas across society. Women are seriously under-represented in decision-making structures at both national and regional levels in Ireland. Only 13% of representatives (TDs) in the national parliament are women. Currently, there are only 23 women out of 266 TDs and Senators, and two of these women have recently announced that they are retiring for family reasons, bringing the percentage even lower.

The world average proportion of women members of single or lower chamber legislatures is just 18% with major regional differences. Less than 10% of cabinet members and just 20% of lower ranking government ministers are female, and only 39 nation states have ever selected a woman as prime minister or president. Ireland currently lies in 82nd position in a world classification table of women's representation in parliament compiled by the inter-parliamentary union. Furthermore, women account for 17 per cent of the members of local authorities and just 12 per cent of the members of regional authorities, despite a long standing government policy commitment to a 40% gender equality representation on public boards. Disappointingly, and despite calls for change, the percentage of women in Ireland's national parliament has remained static at 13% since 1995. In Ireland, with the present rate of change, it has been estimated that it will take another 370 years for women to achieve equality in political representation!

What is more concerning as a trend is that although women's participation and membership levels in party politics has increased over the last two decades this is not reflected in the number of women holding decision making positions in Irish political parties. Only 82 women out of a total of 470 candidates contested the last General Election in 2007 representing the lowest number since 1989. Many reasons have been put forward for the low levels of women's representation in Irish politics. The five Cs of childcare, cash, confidence, culture and candidate selection have been identified as key explanations for the exclusion of women from Irish politics.

Ireland's commitment to gender equality in decision-making can be found in its adoption of several UN agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) among others. Membership of the European Union (EU) has also influenced Irish legislation and policy aimed at achieving gender equality in all spheres, including women's access to power and decision-making structures. The CEDAW Committee has called on the Irish government "to take sustained measures to increase the representation of women, including temporary special measures; and to form a parliamentary committee to research the root causes of delay in this area".

A number of key pieces of domestic legislation and policy documents ground these aims in reality. The National Women's Strategy names the engagement of women as 'equal and active citizens' as a key theme to be addressed over the period 2007 – 2016. It aims to increase the number of women in decision-making, women in politics and women on State and private sector boards. The Irish government's strategy to increase the number of women in decision making positions in Ireland, places responsibility on the political parties to develop action plans aimed at increasing the number of female candidates in General Elections, so that in the future there will be a significant increase in representation of women in all future elections for local authorities, Dáil, Seanad and European Parliament.

Political parties in Ireland are key in bringing about change because they determine who gets on the candidate list. Political parties have been pro-active in other countries in creating a list system that ensures gender balance among lists of political candidates; Irish political parties can do, and some have done, the same. However, the entry level into political parties is often at local level; participation in decision making here also reflects a low representation of women, even while women's participation in community and voluntary activities and in seeking to influence policies and voice their concerns, is significantly at a high level. If Irish political parties wish to promote the role of women in politics, they have to push female candidates through constituency election conventions, or intervene to add their names to those selected at those meetings. This would often have to be done in the face of strenuous local resistance.

Positive Action Measures: current debate around quotas

International evidence has shown that the only way to significantly increase the number

of women in parliament is to use positive action measures. These can take the form of reserved seats, setting aside positions that men are not eligible to contest; party quotas, adopted voluntarily by individual political parties; and legislative quotas, passed by legislatures requiring that all parties nominate a certain proportion of women. Quotas of one type or another now exist in more than 100 countries around the globe, the overwhelming majority having appeared in just the last 15 years. The question is what kind of positive action measures are most effective in different electoral systems?

Most of the countries that have achieved the critical mass have an electoral system based on proportional representation and some form of quota system to proactively reduce the obstacles to women entering politics at national level. The Irish parliament is directly elected under the system of proportional representation by means of the single transferable vote (STV), and has proved a hostile environment for any form of quotas. In many of the Nordic countries, which have among the highest political representation in the world, political parties have explicitly adopted quotas guaranteeing that 40 – 50% of a party's candidates list is women. While the Nordic experience provides evidence that legislative gender quotas can help to bring about real and rapid change, though the use of quotas remains controversial. In Scandinavia, where there is no legislative demand for high representation of women, progress is attributed to the sustained pressure from women's groups within political parties and the women's movement in general to increase the number of women candidates and those with a chance of actually winning. The Scandinavian experience demonstrates that the promotion of equality in general can lead to the emergence of a political culture that allows women, once elected to operate effectively and promote further increases in the numbers of women parliamentarians.⁸⁰

In Ireland there is considerable controversy about the nature of quotas, the various methods and strategies including quotas that might be introduced to increase the number of women in politics. Most objections are of the view that they are unfair to men and undermine 'merit' as a criterion for candidate selection; while supporters argue that they redress inequality and that the meritocracy argument can be discredited by the evidence of how political dynasties, old boys networks, wealth and cultural capital all contribute hugely to the acquisition of positions of power. Supporters suggest that such measures will increase diversity among the types of women elected, raise attention to women's issues in policy-making, change the gendered nature of the public sphere, and inspire female voters to become more politically involved. At the same time, opponents express concerns that quotas will facilitate access for 'unqualified' women, bring individuals to office with little interest in promoting women's concerns, reinforce stereotypes about women's inferiority as political actors, and deter ordinary women's political participation. These contrasting expectations indicate that quotas may have a host of positive and negative effects, above and beyond their impact on the numbers of women elected. Despite the controversies, evidence from around the world indicates

⁸⁰ As an example of the effectiveness in government in addressing inequality, the Swedish government has led the way in tackling trafficking for sexual exploitation and the prostitution of women by introducing legislation that makes the buying of sexual services illegal. This has dramatically reduced the levels of prostitution in Sweden, and been a decisive chill factor on trafficking of women and girls into the country.

that there is a need for gender quotas.

Women's participation in government and public services matters. Currently we have a democratic deficit in Ireland, where the serious under-representation of women in decision making perpetuates gender inequality and diminishes the human rights of women. Feminists have long argued for a more balanced group of representatives, which would lead to better decision making and political priorities that more closely reflect the concerns of the full range of voters. On a broader level, there is evidence that

- More equal societies do better; societies characterized by income equality demonstrate higher levels of life expectancy, educational attainment and social mobility and lower levels of mental health issues, violence and rates of imprisonment ⁸¹.
- Gender equal labour markets would contribute an increase in GDP of between 15% and 45% in EU Member States ⁸²
- Organisations that invest in equality and diversity systems achieve higher productivity, greater innovation and improved employee retention ⁸³

Social Partnership

Having looked at women in political representation, I will briefly describe arenas of national representation in governance, policy formation and implementation. The Irish government has followed a Social Partnership model of governance that has been credited with enabling to a large extent the economic growth of the past 15 years. It has involved the business, trade union, farming, and civil society 'pillars'. The NWCI, an independent and feminist nongovernmental organisation, recognised and funded by the government, is the voice of women in Ireland representing over 160 women's organisations. Social partnership has produced a range of benefits for women's organisations by providing the opportunity to have the concerns of women put on the policy agenda. However, little emancipation has taken place even though policy-making has improved. Over the period of Social Partnership the NWCI produced a number of research reports, with the purpose of informing evidence based policy, on a range of areas, including childcare, social welfare, and violence against women. These were substantive reports, all with a long-term vision of change, and all still relevant. Presentations were made to Social Partnership committees and working groups as well as to parliamentary committees and Ministers with their advisors in relevant government departments, but the current government have not adopted the recommendations. The key factor in this process and outcome is political will.

81 Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, Allen Lane, 2009.

82 Lofstrom, *Gender equality, economic growth and employment*, Department of Economics Umea University Sweden, 2009

83 Flood et al, *New Models of High Performance Work Systems*, The business case for strategic resource management, partnership and equality and diversity systems, Equality Authority and National Centre for Partnership and Performance, 2008.

The National Women's Strategy Monitoring Committee

The Irish government's statement of policy priorities in relation to the advancement of women in Irish society for the period 2007-2016 is enshrined in the National Women's Strategy (NWS) whose vision is of 'an Ireland where all women enjoy equality with men and can achieve their full potential, while enjoying a safe and fulfilling life'.

The NWS contains excellent critical analysis of women's position, along with up to date statistics and indicators of inequality. However, it is not an action plan and should be noted that the National Women's Strategy does not identify specific timescales or resources to implement its aspirations. A monitoring committee, chaired by a Minister for Equality, includes representatives of government departments, the National Women's Council of Ireland, Trade Unions, the business and farming sectors. Without specific targets and timescales, it is impossible to measure the implementation of the Strategy, and it has remained largely an aspirational document.

National Steering Committee on Violence Against Women

Given the frustrations arising from implementation of the National Women's Strategy, and the conflicting policy goals of government and women's organisations, one example of good practice has been in the area of policy development on the issue of violence against women. Feminists have spearheaded international campaigns to challenge this social scourge, and in Ireland this had led to improvements in legislation and to an ongoing debate with government to improve legislation, and support services to victims.

Following a Government Task Group Report in 1998, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform established a National Steering Committee on Violence Against Women to take forward its action plan. This committee includes members of the police, the health service, the legal service, government departments with responsibilities for vaw, as well as non-governmental representatives. The NWCII hosts the Irish Observatory on Violence Against Women, bringing together organisations working on the issue of all forms of violence against women, including rape, domestic violence, prostitution, sex trafficking and pornography. As a result of interventions by members of the Observatory, the NSC adopted the UN Human Rights definition of violence against women, including pornography, trafficking and forced prostitution as forms of violence against women.

Conclusions

My learning from my experience over the last 30 years of women's empowerment has been that there has to be political will to effect change; where there exists strong resistance to change even where a country like Ireland possesses strong equality legislation and a National Women's Strategy, leads to frustration and disillusionment among women. For political will to change to reflect women's interests more equally, and to

benefit society more generally, there needs to be a critical mass of women participating at a national level in decision making. For this to happen to effect real improvement in women's representation at national level, we need quotas despite (but aware of) the controversy surrounding them, as well as a public debate addressing the merits of having more women participating at national level.

Annex 1. Systemic preconditions for mainstreaming gender equality in national development policies. Case Finland

<u>Preconditions to be ensured /created</u>	<u>Examples of elements</u>	<u>Examples of practices in Finland (Links to pages in English)</u>
I. A CONDUCTIVE POLICY CONTEXT		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies in line with international standards 	Policy on gender equality; Plan of Action or Gov. Programme including mainstreaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Active participation in UN forums and EU processes - Government Programme on gender equality mainstreaming (since 1997, current 2008-2011) - Civil society involvement in dialogue with Government -Expert inputs to Government Programmes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment and political will at high level 	Government decision; parliament endorsement; legislation; a mission statement; recommended practices; Minister/Ministry for gender equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -First gender chapter in Gov. Programme in 1997 -99 -Since 1997 Government programmes include gender equality - Respective legislation (1987, 2005) -Whole- of- Government approach -Minister with responsibility for equality -Committees and working groups - Subcommittee on men and gender equality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mandate 	Gov. mandate given to a focal point	-Gender Equality Unit at the Ministry for Social Affairs and Health http://www.stm.fi/en/gender_equality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder involvement 	-Mobilization of Women's groups/Men's groups; Forums for dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Umbrella Organization NYTKIS, The Coalition of the Finnish Women's Associations (1988-)</u> http://www.nytkis.org/in-english <u>Miessakit Association ry (Men's organizations)</u> http://www.miessakit.fi/fi/in_english <u>Men and gender equality – seminar</u> http://www.stm.fi/c/document_library/get_file?folderId=28707&name=DLFE-4188.pdf&title=Men_and_Gender_Equality_Conference_Report_en.pdf -Civil society hearings in preparing Gov. Report on Equality (2010)

II. Adequate information and knowledge base		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statistics Analytic information Research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Sex disaggregated data bases; information on gender roles, opportunities, obstacles, participation, administration, gender specific outcomes; Gender Impact Assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Development of gender disaggregated statistical base -Gendered statistical reports (2009): Women and Men in Finland http://www.stat.fi/ajk/poimintoja/2010-02-19_women_men_en.html -Minna- Centre for Gender Equality Information in Finland http://www.minna.fi/web/guest/home -Gender relevant and gender sensitive research e.g. at Universities -Impact assessments of legislation
III. Functional and functioning operative machinery		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Organization; -Responsible units/persons -A focal point - Focal points in other ministries; -Collaboration platforms; -Civil society involvement platforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ombudsman for Equality http://www.tasa-arvo.fi/en -Gender Equality Unit at Min. for Social Affairs and Health http://www.stm.fi/en/gender_equality -Council for Gender Equality -Focal points at other agencies -<u>Link to all relevant authorities</u> http://www.tasa-arvo.fi/en/ombudsman/authorities http://www.stm.fi/en/gender_equality/responsible_agencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management practices & results based management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Inclusion of equality goals in result matrixes; -Gender balance in working parties and personnel policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Guidelines on gender sensitive management and performance evaluation -Bill Drafting Instructions (HELO) 2004 -Equality plan at work places -Gender balance requirement at committees (40%) -Gender inclusive Project Cycle Management guidelines & templates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Allocated time; -Finances, reallocation of existing funds; -Human resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Unit for Gender Equality (TASY) at the Ministry (10 persons) http://www.stm.fi/en/gender_equality

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships and stakeholder involvement systems 	<p>Policy dialogue across sector lines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Joint working groups, -Joint plan of action -Division of labor/responsibilities -Follow- up arrangements -Communication strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working group of Ministries -Involving Management Boards
IV. System for capacity development		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness raising Skills training Toolkits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidelines, - Attractive, accessible training available frequently - Awareness raising - skills development -Manuals -Gender Impact Assessment tools -Gender sensitive budgeting tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - -Manuals. Gender glasses - project http://www.stm.fi/en/gender_equality/gender_glasses Gender equality at work places. Guide http://www.stm.fi/c/document_library/get_file?folderId=39503&name=DLFE-6806.pdf -Assessment of Budget's Gender Impact (2005) Min of Soc Affairs and Health, Min of Education)
V. Feedback systems		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow up/ monitoring, 	<p>Joint monitoring of processes</p>	<p>Working group of Ministries</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting 	<p>National reporting; International reporting, e.g. to regional bodies_</p>	<p>Finland's 5th and 6th report on CEDAW http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/416/03/PDF/N0841603.pdf?OpenElement</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Regular self-assessment of achievement indicators; -Independent external evaluations; -Studies of public perceptions 	<p>Government report on gender equality (forth coming 2010)</p> <p>Gender Equality Report by the Ombudsman</p> <p>http://www.tasa-arvo.fi/en</p> <p>Gender Barometer 1998, 2001, 2008</p> <p>http://www.stm.fi/en/publications/publication/_julkaisu/1374374</p>