



Tallying up our female politicians

Ireland has been left trailing by its international counterparts in the representation of women in politics; plans are now afoot to help us catch up

A series of programmes to attract women into politics will take place around Ireland next year. Women for Election, which was named one of three 'impact' awardees of the Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI) fund last month, will use some of its €200,000 award to hold the events. The non-profit organisation offers tailored and support programmes for women who want to enter politics. "From quarter one we'll be running programmes to inspire, equip and inform women as to how they can become involved in politics and how they can be successful," says Michelle O'Donnell Keating, co-founder of Women for Election. The training will be delivered by a range of experts and will cover all aspects of political campaigns. These, according to O'Donnell Keating, will include building committed campaign teams, effective planning and administration,

fundraising and budgeting, message development, presentation skills and managing the media. The organisation also intends to set up a cross-party network of political women who want equal representation of women and men in Irish politics, and to initiate an advocacy programme. The programmes will go some way to help Women for Election reach its goal

of having women comprise 40 per cent of public representatives elected in Ireland by 2021. Only 25 of the 166 TDs elected in this year's general election were women, representing just under 15.1 per cent. "This is an increase of just 5 per cent in 35 years," says O'Donnell Keating. "Since the foundation of the State in 1918, just 91 women have been elected in the Republic of Ireland and our Dáil has never had less than an 85 per cent male presence." "From an Irish perspective, we have very poor representation in terms of female TDs and councillors. Even though we have seen some really positive steps by the current Government, it still isn't good enough." On a positive note, Ireland

has had two female presidents, and the election of Mary Robinson in 1990 was an historic occasion. Both presidents have been well regarded internationally, and have highlighted the ability of women politicians in Ireland. However, senator and Reid Professor of Criminal Law Ivana Bacik says Ireland still performs extremely poorly in the world rankings of women

in parliament. She points to figures from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) for 1990, which had Ireland at 37th position in the world for its female representation at government level.

Standstill

Yet over the years, we have stood somewhat still as other countries around the world have improved. The 25-strong female cohort in the Dail puts us in 78th position globally. We lie just below Uruguay, Burkino Faso, the Democratic People's

Republic of Korea, Thailand and Azerbaijan. Our female representation is well below the international average. Figures from the IPU state that of the 45,081 MPs whose gender is known worldwide, 8,716 or 19.3 per cent are women. Rwanda has the largest female representation in its parliament, at 56.3 per cent. It is followed by Andorra, Sweden and South Africa. The Nordic countries lead by a mile in the equality stakes, with 42.1 per cent of their elected MPs being women. In Europe the average percentage of female public representatives stands at 20.1. "The Nordic countries are best in Europe but they've had a long history of policies to promote women in political parties," says Bacik. Both Bacik and O'Donnell Keating point to the 'five Cs' that research shows are the reasons for women's under-representation in politics. These, they say, are confidence, cash, candidate selection procedures, culture and childcare. "For example, there's generally a culture in political parties of meeting in sports clubs. That presents a difficulty for women," says

Bacik

"In addition, women tend to have less money, and traditionally are the main child carers. These issues need to be tackled and overcome," she says.

Impact

According to Women for Election, international evidence shows that women can have a substantial impact on a number of areas when elected.

Women, it says, conduct politics in a more open and

transparent way. They are more consultative in decision making and more likely to work across party lines.

Women are also more likely to highlight equality, social and family issues, says O'Donnell Keating.

"Women tend to spend more time on their casework than men, and if you look to the Nordics where they have very balanced representation, they always have a very high GDP," she adds.

Bacik backs the idea of introducing a temporary quota to increase the number

of women in political life. In this, she is joined by Women for Election and the 5050 Group, both of which have advocated for such quotas.

The Government has proposed a 30 per cent gender quota for those put forward by political parties for general elections, but not local elections.

Those parties that don't meet the quota of female candidates would face a 50 per cent reduction in state funding.

Worldwide, 107 countries have introduced gender-

based quotas. Some have guaranteed seats in parliament for women, while others, including Ireland, have chosen the gender system for candidates.

"While we shouldn't need a quota, the reality is that here we are in 2011 and we have just a 15 per cent female representation in the Dail," says O'Donnell Keating.

"What's being done at the moment isn't working. We believe quotas are a fantastic approach to introducing change," she adds.



Niamh Gallagher and Michelle O'Donnell Keating, founders of Women for Election.

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