THE POLITICS OF WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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This paper considers the subject of women’s political presence in the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Dáil from three perspectives—numerical presence, women representing women and gendered political institutions. It points to the relative underrepresentation of women in parliament in Ireland across time and in comparison with other parliaments today. It then asks whether women “act for” women when holding legislative office, and concludes with a qualified “yes”. Finally, it suggests that legislative assemblies, north and south, are more likely to favour masculine norms, values and practices, making it more difficult for women to challenge the culture of parliamentary life.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I reflect on the theme of women’s political presence in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in the Dáil. Today, few will oppose the presence of women in parliament. The force of arguments for equality and human rights in discussions on democratic participation and representation have given women’s claims to equal power sharing with men a solid normative underpinning. These arguments have, in turn, had an important influence on our everyday understandings of politics, with the result that it is no longer seen as acceptable to have a democratically-elected parliament in which there are no women.

But it is a long way from having no women to having an equal presence for women with men in parliament. In the democracies on this island, north and south, we continue to tolerate a less than equal representation of women and men in our elected assemblies. In this paper, I tease out what this means for the representation of women and women’s interests, and I do so in three parts. First I consider the matter of numerical presence, sometimes called “descriptive” representation. Then I go on to examine whether women office holders see themselves as representing women’s interests—an aspect of “substantive representation”. Finally, I address the gendered nature of the Stormont Assembly and the Dáil as political institutions and the implications that holds for women’s parliamentary presence. But first, a story of women’s political presence.

In April 1996, two women with a long involvement in the women’s movement in Northern Ireland, Avila Kilmurray and Monica McWilliams, discussed over dinner the likelihood that women and women’s voices would be absent from the peace talks. They wanted to find a way whereby women would be written into rather than out of the new political future that seemed to promise for Northern Ireland. Working with the Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform—a long-standing campaigning group for women’s equal civic and political rights—pressure was placed on the Northern Ireland Office to reserve a space in the election for a woman’s party, later temporarily named the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition.

Drawing on the organisation of women’s groups in the region, and on shoe-string funds, the Women’s Coalition fielded 70 candidates. This was the first time such a large number of women had contested an election in Northern Ireland. They came from both communities, from working class and middle class backgrounds, from urban and rural areas. To the surprise of many, the Women’s Coalition secured two seats at the peace talks. This new party, with a cross-community membership and support base, opted not to take a single position on the constitutional question, but
to establish three core principles around which to build policy: support for inclusion, equality and human rights. As the peace process unfolded, the two party representatives, Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar, had to translate those principles into practice, often a fraught process, as they tried to find common ground for agreement. This form of political discourse, a “dialogue across difference”, was new to the positional politics of other parties, but in time it was this valuing and accommodation of difference that eventually led to the Good Friday Agreement.

The Women’s Coalition presence at the talks, their different political language and their female presence was deeply resented by leading members of the Democratic Unionist Party. This anger was expressed in the form of sectarian and sexist insults, some of the more mannerly remarks being that they “should stay at home and breed for Ulster” and that their place was to “stand behind the loyal men of Ulster”—to which the Women’s Coalition replied with a lively rendition of “Stand By Your man”.

In the face of overt and other, more muted, hostility, the Women’s Coalition stayed at the talks, and take credit for, among other things, having included in the Good Friday Agreement “the right of women to full and equal political participation” as one of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by this historic document. The party went on to secure two seats in the Stormont Assembly and has played an important part in stabilising the new democratic institutions in Northern Ireland.

This story of the Women’s Coalition illustrates the contested nature of women’s presence in the legislative process on this island. In so doing, it highlights links between the three areas I now address in more detail: those of women’s numerical presence, women representatives acting for women (or substantive representation), and the limitation imposed on the previous two by the gendered legislatures on this island.

**NUMERICAL PRESENCE**

Today, women hold 15 seats in the 108-member Stormont assembly and 21 of the 166 Dáil seats. If democracy on this island were truly representative in numerical terms, then women would hold 54 seats in Stormont and 83 seats in the Dáil. The historical pattern of women’s parliamentary presence, however, does not support an optimistic view for the future (see table 1).

Clearly, women’s presence has been little more than tokenist in recent years, consistently below 15 per cent in both elected assemblies on the island. The advance of women into the House of Commons, at 18 per cent, is somewhat more positive, but is still far from equal gender representation (see table 2). Yet, at the same time, there is a very healthy female presence in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly due to the woman-friendly selection practices adopted by Labour, the Scottish Nationalist party and the Liberal Democrats in preparation for elections to the devolved assemblies.
Table 1. Women and men legislators in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, 1969-98

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Dáil Women</th>
<th>Dáil Men</th>
<th>Seanad Women</th>
<th>Seanad Men</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Northern Ireland Women</th>
<th>Northern Ireland Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1982-83</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


bDáil election November 1982; Seanad election 1983.

The importance of affirmative action in supporting women into politics is underlined when one examines the political record of other countries, as is the case in all the other countries listed in table 2, with the exception of France at the time of the last general election. Although the strategies adopted by parties and introduced into political systems varied, the outcome was a significant boost to women’s political presence.

Equal numerical presence in parliament is seen as an important sign of gender equality, because women and men in Ireland, north and south, as elsewhere, have different socialisation experiences, different educational and employment opportunities, different priorities in policy issues, and different experiences of the state. It is seen as important today to incorporate these differing perspectives into policy making for many reasons, including the high minded reasons of justice, equality and democratic renewal. On a more practical level, it makes for more efficient and accountable government, as legislative deliberations respond to women’s and men’s differing needs, perspectives and interests.

Furthermore, women’s equal parliamentary presence with men serves as a goal to which a range of “hard” and “soft” political strategies can be directed—quotas, legal requirements, sanctions, electoral system devices, target-setting, development programmes and other positive action measures. In addition, because of the direct appeal of an equal presence of women and men in decision making, one mechanism that we use to measure democracies against one another is counting the numbers of women and men in their respective parliaments and elected assemblies. The more equal the balance of women and men officeholders resulting from free, fair and regular multi-party elections, we assume, the more healthy the democracy of a society. By this standard, the Stormont Assembly and the Dáil have some distance to go—indeed a longer distance than in most European states—to reach numerical gender parity.
Table 2. Women legislators in selected parliaments, most recent election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ireland: Dáil</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom: House of Commons</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Parliament</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>37.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh Assembly</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland Assembly</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia: House of Representatives</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium: Chambre des Représentants</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France: Assemblée Nationale</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany: Bundestag</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway: Storting</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain: Congres de los Diputados</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Parline database, www.ipu.org; www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/observatory

However, while numbers matter in many different ways, numbers are premised on biological female and male rather than gender, and cannot distinguish between sex and gender. Nor can numbers of themselves cope with the recognition that gender identity may vary among women. Nonetheless, facilitating the equal presence of women and men in the Dáil and Stormont implies a presumption that gender equality in the legislature will bring to politics issues and perspectives that are either marginalised or not fully represented at present. At this point, arguments for numerical parity elide into issues of representation.

**WOMEN “ACTING FOR” WOMEN**

The presumption of women legislators representing women’s interests and perspectives, or “acting for” women, is an inextricable part of arguments for parity between women and men in democratic institutions—in the legislature in particular. It begs a myriad of research questions, many still unanswered in an Irish context, and fundamentally also presumes that women legislators have an awareness of what it is to be a woman politician, as distinct from what it means to be a politician. In other words, it raises the issue of whether women politicians have some sense of a gendered—or even feminist—consciousness that leads them to raise and espouse political concerns that are marginal or excluded in legislatures dominated by men.

At this point, we are involved in exploring the intersection of women’s legislative presence with political ideology, gender, interest representation and political rules, norms and practices. Furthermore, we are also involved in examining the capacity of women legislators to represent differences among women—be these based on economic, social, ethnic, religious, or other identity-shaping differences. The substantive representation of women’s interests presumes that women legislators have a consciousness of what it is to be a woman politician, as distinct from what it is to be a politician. Here, the significant issue is not just equal numbers, but a gendered awareness of the world and a capacity to represent multiple gendered interests.
through being close to women in society. This is an emerging area of research on women and politics in Ireland, but in preliminary studies that ask if women office-holders bring a sense of gender to their representative work, early indications from Northern Ireland are that they do.

Interviews in June of this year by Kimberley Cowell-Meyers with matched pairs of female and male members of the Northern Ireland legislative assembly (MLAs; 22 in all) explored the subjective perceptions of women and men MLAs. She found that both women and men were more similar than different in their issues of concern, in their understanding of the role of representative and in their approach to decision making. She also found particular points of divergence. Let us take her findings, briefly, in turn.

Regarding issue concerns, women and men MLAs gave similar priorities to education, the commissioner for children, the economy, health and developing the new political institutions. However, women legislators gave a much higher priority to equality and the equality agenda than their male counterparts. They were more similar than different in their understanding of the role of the public representative. Both women and men felt that the most important part of their job was to help their constituents to obtain public services. Next in order of priority came representing the views of their party on the constitutional question. However, women MLAs accorded more importance to the task of representing women than did men. Even when the two Women’s Coalition respondents were excluded, the remaining women MLAs clearly felt that representing women was a more important part of their jobs as public representatives than did the men. Men explained their lack of enthusiasm for representing women in two ways: by saying that they did not feel comfortable representing or speaking for women, or that they were unwilling to distinguish between the needs and interests of male and female constituents.

In their approach to decision making, little overall variation was found. Not surprisingly, the party position was the most important influence on how MLAs voted on Assembly business, closely followed by the position of their constituents. However, where women and men MLAs differed significantly was when they were asked about their attitudes towards women in politics and women in society. Women were significantly more conscious of discrimination against women in politics and society than were their male counterparts. The points of strongest disagreement between women and men MLAs were on political astuteness, good employment and working outside the home. Women MLAs agreed much more frequently than their male colleagues with the propositions that political women are as astute as political men, that women were discriminated against in employment and that women should work outside the home. They were also more willing than male MLAs to agree that women must work together to change laws and customs unfair to women.

Overall, then, this brief pen-picture of the subjective attitudes of women and men MLAs towards their role suggests that while on the whole there are few differences between them in general policy priorities, role perception and decision influences, there are important differences between them when the subject of women as a group is raised: as a policy matter, as constituents and in attitudes towards women.
What picture do we get in the south? One study of women parliamentarians’ attitudes also found some evidence for gender awareness among women politicians (Galligan, Knight and Nic Giolla Choille, 2000). Although the focus of this study was on patterns in the numerical representation of women in the Dáil and Seanad, it also made a modest gesture towards the issue of women “acting for” women. Although it did not probe to the same extent as the Cowell-Meyers study, it found nonetheless that policies that have traditionally been closely associated with women’s interests—education, health and family concerns—were high on the list of officeholders’ priorities. On the other hand, gender equality as a specific interest was identified by only 13 per cent of respondents. In itself, this is very similar to the pattern of interest representation among women in other countries with similar proportions of women officeholders (such as Canada and the United Kingdom), and comes as no great surprise. However, the finding is puzzling in the context of women’s identified sources of influences encouraging them to enter political life. In this regard, 30 per cent of our survey respondents identified an involvement in women’s rights campaigning as bringing them into political life (thereby indicating an identification with the substantive representation of women’s interest), less than half that proportion, 13 per cent, identified women’s issues per se as a policy interest once they reach parliament.

What is happening here is the intriguing question. At the moment we can only hypothesise as to the answer, as a more robust study of women’s representational role, comparing it with that of men TDs’ role perceptions, needs to be undertaken to give us a more accurate picture of the gendered nature of representation. I return to a possible explanation for this gap in experience and interest below.

Before I do so, let me attach a health warning to discussions on women representing women. We cannot assume that women legislators have a shared experience that unites them just by virtue of their gender. There will always be women politicians that strongly deny gender as an influence on their political behaviour. They will argue that they are politicians, first and foremost—that gender is not a factor in shaping their political priorities and in representing their constituents’ interests. Some very well-known women in the Dáil and Stormont hold these views. There is also the challenge of conceptualising the political behaviour of those women who see themselves as “acting for” women, but whose gendered analysis is itself in conflict with what is normally seen to be in the interests of women. Furthermore, the powerful influences of ideology, party policy and party discipline shape not just how they analyse interests, but how far they can go in representing certain interests. In addition, we should not exclude the possibility that gender-aware men will promote women’s interests and form alliances with women in parliament to advance those interests. Hence, understanding what our legislators do, why they do it, the gender attitudes they hold and who they see themselves as representing is an important element in helping us to understand how and to what extent gender representation takes place.

These are difficult yet vital issues that we need to address when interrogating women’s parliamentary presence, north and south. Although it may seem at first sight rather premature to ask these questions in the context of the relatively to-
kenist presence of women in the Dáil and Stormont Assembly, we must, nonetheless, be mindful of them as we uncover the gendered attitudes and behaviour of our elected representatives.

But let us return to the puzzle raised above. Why is it that 30 per cent of women officeholders identified campaigning on women’s issues as their springboard into politics while less than one half of that proportion gave the representation of women’s interests in the Dáil a high priority? Perhaps a clue to the answer rests with the Dáil as an institution, and the norms, values and practices that predominate there.

**GENDERED LEGISLATURES**

Political institutions clearly endow some preferences, some interests and some perspectives over others from the moment of their formation. For women in politics, this means that the legislatures they enter give primacy to masculine interests, resources and power, as well as institutionalising routines, norms, rules and practices favouring men’s political participation and representation. Although the founding principles of newer legislatures sometimes indicate an awareness of the gender bias—the basic documents of the Scottish parliament, for example, identify equality as a core functioning principle—this has been more difficult in the case of the Stormont Assembly. The peaceful and democratic resolution of the conflict left precious little space for the endowment of women’s interests. Indeed, the mere existence of the Women’s Coalition, as an embodiment of women’s interests, was, as we have seen, greeted with a hostility that sprang from a singularly male-gendered political environment. The Women’s Coalition visibly challenged the male political order and sought to carve a woman’s space across the divides of the conflict.

What have been the consequences of this challenging act? Politically, it has brought attention to women’s interests in policymaking; the Stormont Assembly as an institution has practices that acknowledge the family responsibilities legislators bear, with plenary sessions ending at eight in the evening, a small allowance for family care costs and out-of-session times that go some way to corresponding with school routines. Aside from these practical, and symbolic, gestures, there is a sense that women MLAs have scope to “act for” women in the Assembly. Women MLAs from the main parties speak of having difficulty in getting their parties to accept women’s interests, and envy the freedom of the Women’s Coalition in this regard. Yet the very existence of the Women’s Coalition has legitimised parity between women and men. It has forced party leaderships to take their women members more seriously, to promote women to positions of power within parties, and to encourage women’s political development. In addition, the presence of the Women’s Coalition within the Assembly has also allowed women from other parties to consider representing women’s interests as part of their legislative role. Thus, despite its small size, the Women’s Coalition has played an important role in modifying the dominance of male norms, values and practices within the Assembly and among other parties.
The picture is not quite as hopeful when one looks at the Dáil. Although women here have had a longer experience of serving in parliament, and one can point to a goodly crop of women with experience of high political office, there is little sense that the Dáil as an institution recognises the legitimacy of women’s interests. One example above all illustrates this point. The disappearance of the parliamentary committee on women’s rights in the reorganisation of the committee system removed the one institutional channel connecting the legislature with women’s interest organisations. Even more fundamentally, its demise removed a formal facility for making visible the gendered nature of policy, and removed the only formal space for legislators, women and men, to inform themselves of the gendered dimension to lawmaking. In searching for an answer to our puzzle, we must look at the predominance of masculinism as the force shaping how gender is negotiated, contested and transformed within the Dáil that has led to women legislators having to alter their attitudes and behaviour in ways their male colleagues never have to consider doing.

Yet, when there are so few women in parliament, north and south, acting for women is a risky business. But democracy, as imagined today, is not about women standing by their men. Increasingly, it is about there being a parity between women and men, with the experiences, norms, values and expectations of gender equally legitimised and recognised within society and political life. One element of parity is the equal representation of women and men in the assemblies on this island. The second element is the equal valuing of gendered interests, and capacity for the representation of difference within this equality. The third element is an equal endowment of gender preferences within the legislature, as within all decision making bodies. What this amounts to, in effect, is a policy of “parity democracy”, so that the political song will no longer be “Stand by your man”, but will be replaced with one that reflects true partnership in democratic citizenship and decision making between women and men, between gender interests. Hopefully, it will have a catchy tune!

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