

The Northern Ireland Assembly and Women: assessing the gender deficit

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Preface

This is a discussion paper from the think tank Democratic Dialogue. Further copies of the paper are available, as hard copy (£2 plus p&p) or e-mail attachment, from DD. Details are on the back cover, as is our web site address.

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Democratic Dialogue wishes to thank those members of the Northern Ireland Assembly who responded to the questionnaire survey. The thoughtful and useful suggestions contained in a number of returns are greatly appreciated.

The under-representation of women in all political institutions in Northern Ireland should be of concern to everyone. This paper is published with the aim of underlining the importance of the issue and of providing information of use to those in the public arena who have the opportunity to advance the interests of women within our society. Hopefully, it may help to stimulate wider debate. Any comments or criticisms are very welcome.

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Summary Report

A) *Political Representation*

The numbers of women in political life in Northern Ireland have increased considerably following the election of fourteen female MLAs. Women constitute 13% of the Assembly total. In the Prior Assembly of 1982-6, there were only three women.

Despite this, we still have a long way to go before there is any prospect of gender parity. The Welsh National Assembly has 40% women, the Scottish Parliament has 37% female representation. It has been calculated that not until a critical mass of 30% has been reached can women begin to have an influence upon institutional practices and policies.

Public support for women politicians is fairly strong. Women make up more than half the membership of some political parties and are well represented within all parties, yet this is not reflected within the power structures of the parties.

Examination of the 1997 election manifestos of the different political parties reveals limited understanding of the issues most relevant to women.

There is little commitment to improving the status of women within the political parties or within the wider society.

Few women were selected as candidates for the 1998 Assembly election. The UUP stood only 4 women, 8.3 per cent of their total candidates. The largest percentage of female candidates were those of the Alliance Party, who stood 27.3 per cent.

Sinn Féin, with five successful female candidates, emerged as the party with the highest number of female MLAs. Nationalist women fared better than their unionist counterparts. There are three unionist and eight nationalist female representatives, together with one for Alliance and two for the N.I. Women's Coalition.

The scarcity of women has affected the committee system, where women occupy only seventeen out of one hundred and ten committee places. The important Finance and Personnel Committee is all-male. Some female MLAs are involved in a number of committees, in an effort to ensure women's voices are heard across a wide spectrum of interests. As smaller parties have little

resources to support their work, there is a danger that they will find it difficult to maintain their ability to make effective interventions.

B) *Survey Results*

A survey of women members of the N.I. Assembly was carried out in September. Its objective was to discover the extent to which gender-based issues were important to female representatives and aimed also at finding out their opinion of the new institution. Eight out of the fourteen female MLAs responded to a questionnaire. A sample group of male MLAs were sent a similar questionnaire in November.

- * Lack of childcare was an important consideration to those with children.
- * Male culture and attitudes came in for much criticism, in particular the hostility towards the female MLAs shown by unionist members of the Assembly.
- * It was suggested that the Assembly could make more effort to promote the public visibility of women, for example, by including them when outside bodies made visits and deputations to Stormont.
- * Political differences had made it difficult for female MLAs to network together, although there were signs that this was beginning to happen on an informal basis.
- * Parliament buildings were condemned for their inaccessibility and lack of adequate public transport.
- * It was felt that much more could be done to make Stormont a welcoming place, both for assembly members, staff and the general public.
- * Childcare facilities for all staff and politicians working in Stormont was called for, together with after-school facilities and summer schemes.
- * Many felt that there should be a dedicated equality department, or an equal opportunities committee for the Assembly, instead of the present situation of an Equality Unit within the OFM/DFM where gender issues were being 'buried'.
- * It was felt by some that the Assembly tried to be a 'mini version of Westminster', with its system of adversarial debating and point-scoring. Assembly procedures could be more 'woman-friendly.'

* A questionnaire aimed at establishing a profile of attitudes on gender issues of male MLAs was sent to a sample group, eight of whom responded. While some were hostile to any special efforts to improve the political participation of women, there was also evidence of strong support for the implementation of a clear policy on gender equality.

C. Recommendations

1. The political parties within the Assembly need to consider how they can ensure a greater gender balance amongst their representatives and develop an understanding of the gender-based policy issues that need to be addressed.
2. Greater support to women within the Assembly should be given. Women should be included on deputations and other events involving Assembly members in order to promote the visibility of women in political life.
3. Awareness of gender issues as contained in the Programme for Government is inadequate. Clear targets for improvement need to be considered.
4. An Equality Committee should be instituted within the Assembly, with the power to recommend action aimed at improving the disadvantaged position of women within the Assembly and in the wider society.
5. The N.I. Assembly remains remote to most citizens of Northern Ireland. More needs to be done to ensure that a sense of ownership is generated. Improved public transport to parliament buildings and improved accessibility within the building are important initial measures to be tackled.

1. Introduction

Amongst the human rights affirmed within the Belfast Agreement is ‘the right of women to full and equal political participation.’ Although there is no legislation to give teeth to this commitment, the 108-member Assembly, elected by proportional representation through the system of a single transferable vote, saw the return of fourteen women, who make up thirteen per cent of the total membership. In Northern Irish terms, given the low numbers of women in previous legislative bodies (the 78-member Assembly of 1982-6 had a total of three women: two for the Official Unionist Party and one for the

SDLP) , this is a significant advance. Certain questions need to be considered in the light of these changes.

Despite the continued under-representation of women in political life here, has the modest increase in their numbers influenced the manner in which political debate is conducted? Has the political arena itself changed in character? What women themselves think about their new role as assembly members provides valuable insight into the distortions created by our deeply divided society and the changes required before more women feel encouraged to enter the difficult world of Northern Irish politics. What has been the experience of the newly-elected women MLAs of their new role? Is the Assembly a family-friendly arena? Has the Programme for Government proposed policies that will address the unequal position of women within Northern Irish society? Democratic Dialogue believes that these are important issues that need to be taken seriously by the Assembly if people are to feel a sense of ownership of the political process. For that reason we devised a questionnaire that enabled members of the Assembly to voice their own views, allowing their opinions to be expressed in confidence.

This paper considers the consequences of the continued gender deficit within political life. As well as analysing the present situation of women within the Assembly, it suggests possible ways in which the working lives of politicians (male as well as female) could be improved. Without serious consideration of these issues the gender imbalance will be maintained. Northern Irish politics will continue to be male-dominated and the prospect of putting the interests of all, male and female, young and old, at the heart of a policy-making that is truly inclusive will remain unrealisable.

Devolution

In the devolved institutions of Wales and Scotland the proportion of women is substantially greater, and their ability to determine the agenda correspondingly more effective. Forty eight women were elected as Members of the Scottish Parliament, a representation rate of over thirty seven per cent. In Wales, forty per cent of the members of the National Assembly are women. These results (a product of sustained campaigns by women's groups which successfully influenced political parties to work towards great gender equality, coupled with the advantages of the Additional Member System of elections) have ensured that women in Scotland and Wales have surpassed the critical mass figure of thirty per cent, which is commonly acknowledged to be vital before women can begin to have an influence upon institutional practices and policies.

2. Women and political parties

Attitudes towards women and politics

Lack of grass roots support for women is not an explanation for their political under-representation. Public support for female politicians is evident in the electoral success of the Women's Coalition, which succeeded in winning 1 per cent of the total vote in the 1996 Forum elections, despite limited resources, having come into existence a bare seven weeks previously. In 1998 the *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statement "*Women lose votes*" as an explanation for the lack of women in politics in Northern Ireland. While 20 per cent agreed, 40 per cent strongly disagreed with the proposition. Interestingly, slightly more men than women disagreed. This might indicate that women were more realistic (or more pessimistic), perhaps based on observation or personal experience, concerning the pressures facing women who wished to take part in public life. As there was also overwhelming disagreement with the statement "*men are better politicians than women*", one could conclude that no great prejudice against women participating in politics is felt amongst the general public.

A more likely explanation for the under-representation of women lies with the political parties and their lack of support for women wishing to undertake an active rather than supportive role within their respective organisations. Numerically, women form a large proportion of the membership of political parties, as figures compiled by Wilford and Galligan reveal. For example, 60 per cent of the DUP members are women and 50 per cent of the Alliance Party are women. Women also constitute a significant proportion of the total membership of other parties — 47 per cent in the SDLP, 42 per cent in the UUP and 33 per cent in Sinn Fein. Such numerical significance, however, has not improved the position of women within the power structures of the parties. Few women occupy leadership roles within the parties. The numbers of women being put forward for election has improved, but this has largely been an opportunistic response to the advent of the N.I. Women's Coalition and the necessity of ensuring that votes for female candidates are not 'given away' to the Coalition. With this consideration in mind, a number of women were added to various party lists during the election to the N.I. Assembly. Despite this, the end result still shows women to be vastly under-represented in the major political parties.

Political Parties and Policies on Women

The political parties' 1997 election manifestos reveal limited and extremely partial advances in terms of any understanding of the issues most relevant to women or to a commitment to improving the status of women. The Alliance Party does not treat women's issues separately from its general assurance that it believes in "*the same opportunities and rights for everyone*", while supporting an Equality Code which would ban all forms of discrimination. Coverage of "*women's issues*" is less than half a page in length, while detailed policies on subjects such as agriculture, education and economic development nowhere make reference to the unequal position of the female population in N.I. Structural obstacles holding back women's advancement are unrecognised.

The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) has a section on equal rights that is unambiguous in its admission that women are under-represented in society. The party is "*mindful of the fact that women have a vital role to play at all levels of activity in the social, political and cultural development of our Province.*" Internally, it declares that it encourages the nomination of women as party delegates, office bearers, and candidates for election. However, it has no mechanism in place for ensuring that women will be selected and at the present time the party (reflecting its roots in the paramilitary UVF) remains heavily male-dominated.

The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) voice their concern that "*after twenty years of sex discrimination and equal pay legislation there is still a need for a strong lobby on women's issues.*" It calls for a number of changes to social security and employment legislation, in addition to advocating universally available childcare and strategies to enable women to enter the job market. Its advocacy of an affirmative action approach, coupled with an internally-accepted need that the party must recruit younger members if it is to retain its dominance as the leading nationalist organisation, may ensure future gains for women within the party hierarchy.

Women within the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) tend to be channelled into the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, an '*ancillary*' part of the overall-all organisation, with the result that women remain fairly marginal to the overall party structure. The fact that 32 per cent of female councillors are members of the UUP reflects the dominant position the party has occupied within political life here. The party supports women's right to equal access to the employment market and to opportunities to pursue chosen careers. However, as it adds the proviso that it believes "*women should have access to training compatible with family responsibilities*", it is clear that the domestic sphere remains primarily

the responsibility of women. The UUP supports policies "*which promote the reconciliation of work and family life*", yet it offers no strategic understanding of what is meant by the development of 'family friendly' policies which are to the advantage of all members of society, male and female, young and old alike. Its outspoken rejection of all forms of positive discrimination means that the percentage of women candidates is unlikely to increase.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) electoral manifesto places great emphasis upon constitutional issues, to the detriment of any analysis of socio-economic factors. It detailed no specific policies relating to women. However, in its mention of the "*alarming*" increase in single mothers, the party acknowledges housing and childcare as important issues that have to be addressed. Sex education and access to contraception are not mentioned. Although the need for childcare is noted, the emphasis remains on the primacy of women's domestic responsibilities.

The policy of Sinn Féin, as stated in its manifesto, is "*equality of citizenship*" for women. In terms of gender analysis, Sinn Fein accepts that women suffer from "*institutionalised sexual discrimination*" and it has practised positive discrimination on behalf of women by use of a quota system for its national executive. In terms of public visibility, the Sinn Féin leadership has consistently included women within its most senior positions. Party policy, which includes detailed policies on a wide range of issues affecting women, has been reflected in the numbers of Sinn Féin women elected to the Assembly.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, formed to ensure that women were represented within the peace talks, has provided a public focus for including women within public life. Its core principles of "*inclusion, equality and human rights*" inform all policy decisions, which range from a critique of the need to include gender awareness within matters relating to criminal justice to a holistic approach to reproductive rights.

Gender analysis of candidates contesting the 1998 Assembly election

PARTY	TOTAL NO.	NO. OF WOMEN	% FEMALE
UUP	48	4	8.3
SDLP	38	6	15.8
DUP	34	4	11.8
SF	37	8	21.6

ALLIANCE	22	6	27.3
NIWC	8	8	100
PUP	12	1	8.3
UNIONIST	5	0	0
UDP	9	0	0
UKU	13	1	7.7
WP	9	1	11.1
LABOUR	10	1	10.0
NATURAL LAW	18	4	22.8
OTHERS	33	4	12.1
TOTAL	296	47	15.9

Key: UUP=Ulster Unionist Party; SDLP=Social Democratic and Labour Party; DUP=Democratic Unionist Party; SF=Sinn Fein; NIWC=Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; PUP=Progressive Unionist Party; UDP=Ulster Democratic Party; UKU= United Kingdom Unionists; WP=Workers Party

3. Women within the N. I. Assembly

It is obvious, given the low proportion of women selected as candidates, that the numbers of successful Assembly members would be overwhelmingly male. This is confirmed by the list below, which provides a breakdown by gender of those returned. The Alliance Party, with the highest proportion of female candidates, found itself squeezed by the dominant power blocs of unionism and nationalism, with consequent effects on its overall support. Sinn Fein, with the next highest proportion of female candidates, emerged as the party with the largest number of women assembly members. The unionist parties have yet to field an adequate number of women, and this is reflected in the few female members within their ranks. The NI Women's Coalition had the resources only to put forward eight candidates, making its success in achieving the election of two candidates all the more credible. Given the narrowness of any 'middle ground' in the political field, it is probable that some of the gains of the Coalition were at the expense of the Alliance Party.

Gender breakdown of assembly membership by political party*

PARTY	TOTAL NUMBERS	NO. OF WOMEN	% female
UUP	28	2	7.1
SDLP	24	3	12.5
DUP	20	1	5.0
SF	18	5	27.8
ALLIANCE	6	1	16.7
NUUP	3	0	0
UUAP	3	0	0
NIWC	2	2	100
PUP	2	0	0
UKUP	1	0	0
IND UN	1	0	0

* As a result of realignments and resignations amongst unionist parties, parties within the Assembly differ from those contesting the 1998 election.

Key: NIUP=Northern Ireland Unionist Party; UUAP=United Unionist Assembly Party; Ind.U.=Independent Unionist.

Political Power within the Assembly

Under the d'Hondt principles underlying the power-sharing executive, the major political parties have a division of ministerial posts. This has enabled women to take up two of the ten ministerial positions. From the SDLP, Brid Rogers was appointed Minister of Agriculture and from Sinn Fein, Bairbre de Brun took up the position of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In the opinion of Brid Rogers, *"When they were giving out the Ministerial portfolios at the Assembly, the two women were given the two that nobody else wanted."* Two junior ministers were later appointed by the First and Deputy First Ministers. Both are male.

It is in the committee system that the dearth of female members is most apparent. Here, women occupy only seventeen out of a total of one hundred and ten committee places. There is no female chairperson, although there are three female deputy chairpersons. This proportion of committee seats, comprising fifteen per cent of total places, is proportionate to the number of female assembly members. Again, it is evident that until a critical mass of women have been elected to the Assembly they will not be in a position of influence over legislation and will not be in a position to determine priorities. It is highly significant that the most powerful committee, that dealing with Finance and Personnel, is all-male.

Committee	Size	No. of members by sex		Committee chair	Vice-chair
		Female	Male	Sex	Sex
Agriculture & Rural Development	11	0	11	Male	Male
Culture, Arts and Leisure	11	1	10	Male	Female
Education	11	2	9	Male	Male
Enterprise, Trade & Investment	11	3	8	Male	Male
Environment	11	2	9	Male	Female
Finance & personnel	11	0	11	Male	Male
Health, Social Services & Public safety	11	5	6	Male	Male
Higher & Further education	11	3	8	Male	Male
Regional development	11	0	11	Male	Male
Social development	11	1	10	Male	Female

There are also standing committees, dealing with procedural issues of Assembly business, again with meagre female representation. Ad-hoc committees have also been established, dealing with urgent political matters (for example, the controversy over the flying of flags). A number of female representatives are undertaking multiple membership within the committee system, in an effort to ensure that women's issues are raised within the appropriate committee. The danger of this, particularly given the inadequate research resources suffered by the smaller parties, is that they will find it difficult to maintain their ability to make effective interventions.

4. The experience of female MLAs within the Assembly

In September 2000, shortly before the opening of the new session of the Assembly, Democratic Dialogue distributed a questionnaire to all female assembly members. This was an exercise aimed at discovering the extent to which the present composition of the Assembly could be said to mark a new stage in the participation of Northern Irish women in public life. A primary concern was to assess if gender concerns had any influence upon the political identity of women politicians, or whether the issue of national identity remained an over-determining allegiance. Could gender-related issues provide a unifying factor, especially in the context of their minority status as women within a male-dominated arena? In addition, questions were asked relating to perceptions of assembly performance and effectiveness, in order to establish the extent to which the new institution could be gauged as a 'family-friendly' arena. Were women welcomed within the new institution? Were male assembly members supportive of their new colleagues? Were the institutional practices and bureaucracies a deterrent to effective performance? To what extent were working practices aimed at ensuring that public responsibilities did not pose an excessive burden on those who combined their public role with domestic responsibilities?

Eight out of the fourteen MLAs replied, providing a response rate of 57 per cent. While individual replies remain confidential it can be stated that there was one response from the UUP, one from the SDLP, one from Alliance, two from the NIWC and three from Sinn Féin. There was no response from the DUP. One woman had been active in her party for more than forty years, three for twenty years, while others had become active during the past decade.

Obstacles to participation

In considering whether there were any obstacles to their increased participation in political life, strong differences in views were evident. The divisions clearly related to whether or not respondents had family responsibilities. Those who did found lack of childcare an important consideration. Male culture and attitudes were also cited by many as obstacles to participation. All women were heavily committed to many diverse groups, with considerable involvement in working for the welfare of their communities. Various, they are members of district councils, trade unions, the Probation Board, women's groups, community organisations, youth clubs and Irish language schools.

When asked for an estimate of the extent to which their party was committed to the promotion of equal opportunities, five believed their party to be very committed, one

said fairly committed and only two felt her party to be no more than moderately committed. Similarly, four felt very much assisted by their party's adoption of positive policies for promoting women candidates. Other women did not feel that their parties had positive policies aimed at promoting women candidates.

Increasing women's visibility

Seven out of the eight respondents supported positive action to increase the advancement of women in political life. They also regarded gender as a significant factor in determining the extent to which women had become involved in affairs outside of the home. However, only three regarded their own gender identity as personally significant. Most believed social class or community identification to be more significant factors and two women also felt that age was an important consideration. This reflects the fact that most women in public life have achieved that position because they represent interests regarded as having a wider currency within society, and not because they have been associated with what might be termed 'women's issues'. As long as constitutional issues continue to determine political affiliations, those pressing for changes in gender relations are likely to be dismissed as divorced from reality. Efforts to promote awareness of the disproportionate disadvantages suffered by women in general have yet to make an impact upon the majority of those in the public sphere.

A number of constructive suggestions were put forward in response to a question asking what issues of particular relevance to women they would like the Assembly to consider. Childcare and job sharing for elected representatives

were suggested, to encourage those with family responsibilities to become involved in political affairs. It was felt that childcare, children's rights and health issues for women were also topics that the Assembly needed to discuss. One MLA, considering how a more visible gender balance could be achieved, given the paucity of women within the assembly, suggested that "*more effort be put into ensuring women were represented on visits and on deputations at which external groups or agencies were present.*" Such a visibility of female assembly members would certainly send a positive message to the general public. It would provide an opportunity for those involved to acquire valuable information, particularly on economic matters.

Male Behaviour

The question of male attitudes and behaviour within the Assembly has been a source of great concern to many of the female MLAs. Several commented on the lack of respect accorded to women within the Assembly, exemplified by a tendency on the part of some men (identified as coming from unionist ranks) to comment on their clothes or hair while they were speaking. This was echoed in the heart-felt response to the question asking what they felt they needed to have known when first becoming a MLA. One woman replied '*how to make voice heard over abuse from Unionist male members.*' These interruptions do not appear fully in the Official Reports of the Assembly, which records that a member has been interrupted, but not what was said or by whom.

Consequently, the general public remains unaware of the hostility experienced by women trying to make speeches in the chamber. This may be described or explained as behaviour symptomatic of the deep divisions within the wider society, but it also exemplifies a worrying misogyny within Northern Irish society, one that has nothing to do with the conflict and everything to do with a deep-rooted antipathy to women who dare to venture out of their accustomed domestic role. This phenomenon, evident since the advent of the NI Women's Coalition representatives to the Forum talks, is a response to the new prominence of women in political life. Whether it is a temporary element, reflective of a society in transition, remains to be seen.

Networking

Deep political differences have prevented the female MLAs from working together as a group. While it is notable that six MLAs -from the SDLP, Alliance Party, Women's Coalition and UUP attended the launch of the Citywide Women's Consortium, a community-based partnership providing training to women in socially disadvantaged areas of Belfast - women from Sinn Féin and the DUP did not attend. One respondent commented that female

members had got together on different occasions, for the purpose of meeting female representatives from America, Ireland and England, but on these occasions *"the DUP and the UUP were usually non-attendees."* Another explained *"We have tried to come together as a women's network for the Assembly but there have been the obvious problems. Some of us do work together on a number of issues but not as a group of 14."* Could some middle ground be constructed if political divisions were less acute? One development was mentioned, a recent practice of informal networking with other women encountered around the Stormont corridors. However, from the available evidence, it will be a long time before this *ad-hoc* practice evolves into anything more structured.

Parliament Buildings

Entering parliament buildings and encountering the gauntlet of male security guards is not the most welcoming of experiences. More women employed as attendants within the building would go some way to improving this situation. Parliament buildings were condemned unanimously for lack of accessibility by the MLAs in their returns, who cited lack of public transport provision and disability access as major issues. Front door wheelchair access, better signage throughout and more bus links were called for. While changes in terms of access are being undertaken, it was felt that the situation required some careful monitoring. Other suggestions included daily guided tours individuals rather than just groups could join. The point was made that it would help people *"to have an ownership of the Assembly as a whole."*

Family-friendly policies

Progress has been made to help both MLAs and staff within the Assembly with child-care through the payment of a weekly childcare allowance of £15. The Standing Orders Committee of the Assembly ruled that 'family-friendly' hours should be adhered to, so that when the Assembly meets in session on Mondays it commences business at 10.30 am and debate must end by 6 pm. The suspension of Standing Orders while the Programme for Government was debated was an unwelcome breach in that decision. It was challenged vigorously by Jane Morrice of the N.I. Women's Coalition, who argued it was *"setting a precedent that is totally improper."* She went on to explain *"Not only does (a family-friendly approach to working hours) allow the men and women of this Assembly to go home to their families at six o'clock; it also allows women greater access to public life and to this Assembly."* In fact, business that day was concluded by 6.48 pm. The family-friendly ruling of the Standing Orders Committee is only partial in scope. It does not apply to the Tuesday

sitting of the Assembly, when business is allowed to continue. The budget debate, for example, adjourned at 7.19 pm on the day following the Programme for Government controversy.

The lack of nursery facilities, despite what appears to be sufficient accommodation within the complex of buildings making up Stormont estate, is a striking indication of the extent to which the N. I. Assembly has to go before it can be said to be a 'family friendly' arena along the lines of the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly. For example, the Welsh assembly members have access to a crèche, while childcare facilities are to be included in their new assembly building. After-school facilities and summer schemes for those working during the summer months were other topics mentioned by several respondents.

Equality Unit

In December 1999 the Standing Orders Committee of the Assembly proposed two new standing committees to oversee much of the work of the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers, one of which was entitled the 'Equality, Human Rights and Community Relations Committee'. However, on the grounds that much of the work of the Office needed to remain confidential, the First and Deputy First Ministers tabled an amendment revoking the decision of the Assembly. A 'Committee of the Centre' was instituted, with a vast range of responsibilities, ranging from economic policy, European affairs, community relations, the Civic Forum, freedom of information, victims, Nolan Standards, public service, emergency planning, to "women's issues". As one of the respondents remarked, with considerable bitterness, *'an equal opportunities committee was established one day, but the SDLP and UUP got the vote to abolish it.'* From the evidence provided by the response to the questionnaires, women MLAs from many parties would welcome a stronger commitment to gender issues.

Opinion was divided over the question of the wisdom of locating the Equality Unit within the OFM/DFM. Some felt that there should be a *"dedicated Equality Department"*. In the absence of strong executive commitment to gender equality, it is certainly the case that, as one respondent commented, it is *"getting buried"* in a structure where so many other issues are regarded as having priority. One respondent, as a member of the Committee of the Centre, stated she was *"still undecided on its effectiveness on the matter."* This is in contrast with the wholehearted embrace of equal opportunities evident in the Scottish Parliament. An Equality Unit has been established within the Scottish executive, its initial work programme focused

upon *"mainstreaming...equalities issues into all policies and legislation, developing woman-friendly budgeting, and preparing a Scottish Equalities Strategy."* In reply to the suggestion that the Assembly should have an equal opportunities committee, similar to those in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, only one objected. This is an issue that is contentious for a number of political parties. Male response to the question almost uniformly hostile to the idea of a separate unit for women's issues.

‘The knock-about of party politics’

Before considering what the Assembly could do for women in society, respondents focused upon their own experiences as assembly members. Many expressed views on the lines of *"stop trying to be a mini version of Westminster"*. Again, the contrast with Scotland is striking. Wendy Alexander, Minister for Communities, writes of the challenges facing Scottish Members as they *"try to resist defaulting to the Westminster that we all know too well."* In Wales, Val Feld, Labour member for Swansea, also stresses the challenge of creating a different politics. She is clear that the style of debate is one area that must change, *"The aggression of politics, the endless point-scoring and confrontation so often hinders progress on the detail and clearly leads ordinary people, particularly women, to distrust politicians."* Her hope is that the presence of so many women in the Welsh political arena will have an impact on the *"knock-about of party politics."* For some women in the N.I. Assembly, their experiences of the ‘knock-about of party politics’ has led to a heartfelt wish for *"male unionists to be sent on a course on good manners, respect and basic decency."* Generally, however, women who have managed to get this far in Northern Irish society were sufficiently tough not to find the nature of debates and the adversarial style of debating too intimidating, but some did express a view that assembly procedures could be much more ‘woman-friendly’. It also needs to be borne in mind that for many women, current practices within the Assembly, particularly with the scrutiny of television, are such to deter most from ever contemplating a career in politics.

Can the Assembly undertake initiatives to improve women's position within society?

Robust views were expressed on the kind of initiatives the Assembly could undertake in order to improve women's position. Generally, male attitudes and the lack of power of parties outside the executive were obstacles hindering a considered response to issues. The majority called for measures such as *"more support for female involvement at all levels of decision-making"*, *"job-sharing for elected representatives (male and female)"*, and *"greater effort to achieve*

gender balance". One felt that political differences made it "difficult to suggest initiatives that will bring women from the parties together", although she believed that "the work of the Equality Commission and the efforts of many women's organisations were improving the confidence and the position of women." One constructive suggestion was for "the formation of a policy and strategy think-tank on women's affairs, or an inter-departmental committee."

5. Attitudes on gender issues of male members of the N.I. Assembly

Democratic Dialogue was concerned to hear the views of the male members of the Assembly regarding the inclusion of women in the political arena and the extent to which they might support efforts to bring about a culture of greater gender equality. As a means of making comparison with female MLAs, a sample survey of male representatives was undertaken. In October a questionnaire was sent to a total of twenty two assembly members, weighted in terms of party numbers and geographic location. Eight replies were received, giving a fairly poor response rate of 36%. There were three replies from the UUP, two from the DUP, two from Alliance, and one from Sinn Féin. No member of the SDLP replied. Nor did the one member of the Progressive Unionist Party polled.

The contrast between the male and female members of the Assembly in terms of self-confidence and perceptions regarding the public arena are readily apparent from the differing responses to many of the issues raised by the questionnaires.

While two respondents had been active in their parties for only four to five years, the majority were seasoned politicians with an average of twenty years of party membership. Three believed their party to be "*very committed*" to supporting their female members, three felt their party was "*quite committed*" and only two felt that their party did not support female members. One replied that "*A party leadership may be committed and a party may have positive discrimination policies but results may not reflect the efforts and commitment*", which could be interpreted as criticism of women's failure to seize opportunities offered, or a veiled criticism of male party members. It could also of course reflect the numerous obstacles preventing women's participation in political life. This particular correspondent was extremely sympathetic in his understanding of the difficulties facing female politicians, listing "*the*

adversarial nature of politics, the security difficulties for many politicians and anti-family hours and demands" as additional significant issues .

Would male politicians support positive action to improve the participation of women in political life? Three said they would; one said he would, with the proviso that this could not include "*positive discrimination*"; two were "undecided" and two were definitely in the "no" category.

None of the male respondents had found difficulties in pursuing a political career because of domestic or other caring responsibilities, although one admitted that he had encountered them "*through the long suffering of others*". All supported the provision of child-care facilities. In terms of understanding the problems experienced by women in public life, just over half the respondents indicated an awareness of the demands of families and the difficulties posed by inadequate child-care facilities. There was some recognition of financial constraints and "*attitudes of men in the party*", although one believed the "*attitudes of women themselves*" was an important issue.

Their experiences as members of a new political institution did not cause them any difficulties. While one admitted he would have welcomed briefing on financial matters and one found the procedures of the assembly to be "*intimidating*", he was in a minority. Evidence from research on gendered attitudes within employment has shown men to be confident in applying for a job if they have 30% knowledge of the area, whereas the lack of self-confidence experienced by women has meant that they will not apply for a position unless they are at least 75% confident of their abilities. The evidence from newly elected politicians in Northern Ireland substantiates this finding.

No particular views were expressed on the accessibility or otherwise of parliament buildings.

On the thorny topic of where an equality unit should be located and if there should be a separate unit for women's issues, opinion was again divided, with a significant proportion being hostile to any kind of equality committee. Three respondents were against having an Equality Unit located within the OFM/DFM, and were also against the Assembly having an equal opportunities committee or there being a separate unit for women. Two respondents were firm supporters of women's interests: they opposed the present location of the Equality Unit, wanted the Assembly to have an equal opportunities unit and also supported the setting up of a separate unit for women. These answers revealed a clear understanding of the implications involved in the differing possibilities and it shows that within the Assembly a small but possibly

significant proportion of male MLAs support the implementation of a clear policy on gender equality.

Few suggestions were forthcoming regarding initiatives the Assembly could undertake to improve women's position in society. However, one was made in as emphatic a manner as that made previously by a female respondent, namely: "*Teach the DUP some manners!*" The persistent discourtesies shown to women by members of that party are evidently a cause for concern for political representatives, male and female, from a number of parties. One useful suggestion included "*civil debates on gender/equality issues*" (another reference to the 'uncivil' manner in which such debates have been conducted) and the "*promotion of women already in public life.*" One respondent also expressed a desire for the Assembly to consider related issues in the field of equality — race, sexuality and youth.

6. The Programme for Government and gender issues

The controversy over the suspension of standing orders governing family-friendly hours in order to ensure that the Programme for Government was debated at length within the time-scale of one day was an unfortunate start to consideration of the extent to which the Assembly could begin the process of transforming old structures and influencing traditional mind-sets. During the debate little reference to gender-specific issues was made, although female and male MLAs both made comments on the need to reform the educational system, and on the inadequacy of current provision for sex education within schools. In reproducing the few comments made by MLAs on the broad area of equality, I am mindful of the fact that some chose to spend their allocation of five minutes speaking time on other urgent areas requiring attention, for example the environment, health and the needs of rural communities.

Michael McGimpsey, Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, provided a positive note in an early stage of the debate when he pledged that a priority would be the "*effective promotion of equality in human rights. Key to this will be the development of a number of cross-cutting approaches such as developing and implementing new policies on gender and inequalities.*" He promised that the Executive would consult on a single equality bill, to be introduced in 2002. Earlier, Monica McWilliams of the N.I. Women's Coalition, referring to the recent review of the Northern Ireland Civil Service

which had pointed out that only three women were in senior position, called for "*an affirmative action programme to take account of that.*" Kieran McCarthy from Alliance was critical of the lack of specific content in the Programme for Government, arguing strongly for the Assembly's responsibility in providing leadership on matters of equality:

We would like to see the Assembly's taking the lead in ensuring equality in its workforce through the use of innovative programmes such as flexible working, job-sharing, childcare provision and disability access. As an elected representative I think that part of my duty to the electorate is to lead by example, and this Assembly affords us an opportunity to do so, but the Executive ignores this, and there is no mention of it in its document.

Billy Hutchinson of the PUP endorsed these comments, criticising the vagueness of the details, "*the document could have stated how we could use the affirmative action policies to meet the targets when set.*" ' Mary Nelis of Sinn Féin welcomed "*the proposed single equality Bill which may address the existing discrimination in terms of gender and employability, and the elderly.*" Eileen Bell, struggling against hecklers, devoted much of her address to the topic of education and children's welfare, ending with a call for a children's commissioner to be appointed. Sinn Féin's Dara O'Hagan also suffered interruptions during her speech, which concentrated upon measures to enhance economic development. Such heckling, occurring even while speakers discuss non-controversial issues, is a regular occurrence within the debating chamber.

7. Conclusions

Without the representation of significant numbers of women within the political process, decision making cannot be said to reflect the interests of all the population. Researchers and opinion polls have laid out some of the issues about which women feel most concerned — childcare, equal pay, pensions, maternity leave, sexual violence, health and education being some of the most urgent. There are many other items of policy where what may appear to be neutral in terms of gender impact, on scrutiny turns out to have a very different result when applied to women. Without that 'critical mass' of at least 30 per cent of female representatives, such scrutiny is unlikely.

Given the host of problems to which the Assembly must seek a solution, and given the generally conservative nature of Northern Irish society, women's issues are not high on the list of priorities of the majority of politicians. It has been said that with more women engaged in decision making, politics would become less adversarial because women tend to engage in dialogue, working to achieve agreed policy outcomes. While we do not argue that women are 'essentially' more inclined to peace-making than men, it is notable that many women see problem-solving as a co-operative rather than confrontational activity. We do not know how our political culture would be influenced by an increase in female representation from the different political interest groups. In the interests of gender equity, however, it is vital that all political parties take seriously the importance of creating a gender balance amongst their public representatives.

In 1999 the Women's Agenda for the Northern Ireland Assembly (an initiative of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Union and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland), challenged the Assembly to place economic independence, violence, decision making, work and family life and health "*in the mainstream of policy-making*". The founding statement of the 'Women's Agenda' argues that the Assembly, as a 'key player' in shaping the equality agenda, "*has the potential to transform the situation of women.*" We hope that those within the Assembly and the Executive will listen to what is being said.