

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY  
LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC LIFE  
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**Introduction**

This presentation is about gender equality in Irish politics.

To begin, we look at some facts and figures.

Then we will discuss why it is important to have more women in political decision-making.

Following that, we will take a look at Ireland's record in relation to other countries. This will include a brief mention of the candidate gender quota law.

We will end with some possible measures that would help gender equality in public and political life.

**Women in political leadership – Ireland data**

Let us look at the data. At the 2020 general election, 36 women were elected to the Dail, along with 124 men. Women, then, comprise 22.5% of TDs.

At this moment, this is the highest number and proportion of women TDs in our political history.

SLIDE ON DAIL

In the Seanad, 24 of the 60 Senators are women. This is 40%, ranking Ireland among the 12 top countries in the world.

SLIDE ON SEANAD

At local government level, women won 24% of seats in the 2019 local elections. Ten years previously, women comprised 17% of councillors. At this rate, gender equality is some time away.

SLIDE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

What about government? Since 2014, women have held 4 of the 15 cabinet positions (27%). Over this time, there has been a world-wide trend for gender-equal cabinets. Ireland has yet to come close to this target.

SLIDE ON CABINET

These data show that there is quite some distance to go to achieve gender equality in politics. The Seanad stands as an exception. In 2020, 9 of the Taoiseach's 11 appointees were women. This positive action brought the gender-balance of the Seanad close to equal.

If you wish to look at these data in more detail, there is an excellent interactive government site

Female Representation in Politics in Ireland:

<https://irelandsdg.geohive.ie/app/female-representation-in-politics-in-ireland>

SLIDE ON THE GEOHIVE REFERENCE

**Why more women in political leadership matters**

Since 2009, there has been a lively discussion about gender equality in political life in Ireland. The main points made in favour of having more women in politics are three-fold:

As equal citizens with men, women have the same responsibility to contribute to the public good. When women share equally in political decision-making with men it strengthens democracy;

Having more women in decision-making challenges discriminatory social norms and stereotypes. It sends a message that women leaders are just as legitimate as men in these positions;

Women bring different experiences and perspectives to public decisions. This results in policies and laws that work for both women and men.

Male representatives claim that they can, and do, represent women's interests and viewpoints as strongly as women TDs. Indeed, this is a fair claim to make. Many male TDs have a record of supporting policies and laws that advance women's rights and gender equality.

Yet, consistently, across the world, when parliamentarians are asked to identify their top policy priorities, women give gender equality a higher priority than do men.

In sum, having more women in politics reinforces women's equal role in shaping the public good, and improves the quality of decisions that affect all our lives.

### **Ireland's record compared with other countries**

We noted earlier that women comprise 36 TDs, just under one-quarter of the Dail. A gender equal parliament would mean that women would hold 80 seats – so right now Ireland falls 44 seats short of a gender-equal parliament. It will take until 2061 to achieve that goal. This is almost 140 years since independence.

#### SLIDE GENDER EQUAL DAIL

The InterParliamentary Union (IPU) infographic clearly shows Ireland in the Red Zone along with 35 other countries that have between 20% and 25% female parliamentarians. The 2020 election improved Ireland's world ranking to 90<sup>th</sup>, matching the Czech Republic and Panama.

#### SLIDE ON IPU INFO FOR IRELAND

One measure that has helped increase the number of female TDs is the candidate gender quota law.

In 2012 the Electoral Amendment (Political Funding) Act was passed. Section 6 provides for the quota. It requires parties to select at least 30% candidates of each sex, or suffer financial penalties. That quota will rise to 40% from 2023.

This quota first applied to the 2016 general election. It led to a 90% increase in women candidates - from 86 in 2011 to 163. It brought about a 40% increase in women members of parliament - from 25 in 2011 to 35 in 2016.

In 2020, its effects were more muted. Women remained at 30% of all candidates. Only one additional woman TD was returned. So, for now, women's representation seems to have plateaued.

#### CHART CANDIDATES AND TDS BY GENDER

### **Possible measures to improve women's political representation**

So what can be done? Here are four suggestions.

*Extend the quota provision to local government elections.* Most TDs, women and men, come through local politics. Because women make up only one-quarter of councillors at the moment, the pool of potential women Dail candidates is limited.

*Increase the quota provision to 50% for local and national elections.* It would extend the pool of women available for national politics. It would further assist in getting women onto a general election ballot paper.

*Require political parties to commit to a certain level of expenditure on gender equality initiatives as a condition of public funding.* In 2018, parties received a total of almost 6 million Euro from exchequer funds. They spent just over 200,000 Euro on activities supporting the participation of women in politics. That amounts to less than 4% of their public funding.

#### GRAPH ON PARTY EXPENDITURE

*Withhold a certain percentage of public funds year-on-year from parties and provide it as a dedicated fund to which parties must apply.* This fund could be managed by an independent agency on behalf of government. Should an Electoral Commission be established, this task could become part of its remit.

In conclusion, the extent to which we make progress in achieving gender equality in public life depends on our ambition as a society. It depends on the priority we give to the issue. It depends on the message we send to political parties. This is where your voice, as citizens, matters.

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