

Submission by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform to the inquiry on a Gender Sensitive Parliament

1. Introduction

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this Inquiry.

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (hereafter NIWEP) is a membership organisation working to ensure the voice of women in Northern Ireland is heard at the national and international level. We work with our members and partners to represent Northern Ireland at the UN as well as at the European Women's Lobby. Our core role is to coordinate the response to international human rights processes, in particular CEDAW. At the local level, our work focuses on sharing information and building capacity on international human rights instruments and mechanisms for gender equality, in order to support advocacy for gender equality. We also work with policy makers to inform gender responsive policy making.

NIWEP coordinates the Northern Ireland civil society response to CEDAW, and has a role in representing women in Northern Ireland at examinations by the CEDAW Committee. NIWEP collaborates with women's organisations across the UK on preparing a four nations response to CEDAW, and in engaging with decision makers on Concluding Observations. In this context, NIWEP has also worked with parliamentarians across the UK.

For clarity, NIWEP incorporates everyone who identifies as female in the term 'women and girls', building in action on intersecting inequalities experienced by many women and girls due to their specific background and characteristics. We urge for any review of the Parliament to include a specific consideration of how an inclusive approach can be developed. All references to 'women and girls' should be read in this context throughout the submission.

2. Summary

A world map of women parliamentarians, published by the UN and the Inter Parliamentary Union to mark International Women's Day 2021, highlights that only 25 per cent of parliamentarians globally are women. With 22 female heads of government, gender equality at this level is at least 130 years away¹. The key barriers for women are similar across the world, and include bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment, online violence, and practical barriers from finance to childcare. The common denominator underlying these barriers is a cultural view of decision making as a male domain, employing a traditionally male, adversarial decision making style.²

Development of a gender sensitive Parliament needs to go beyond a review of procedures, to modernising the wider culture within Parliament to fully include women and people of all genders and backgrounds. It is important that this also includes identifying mechanisms for a gender inclusive electoral process, with actions to address the wider barriers to political engagement, to ensure future generations of women, girls, trans and gender non conforming people feel empowered to engage in public life and stand for election. This is essential in order for the UK to meet its international obligations, in particular as a State Party to CEDAW. The CEDAW Committee, with the Inter Parliamentary Union, has also issued a call for gender parity in public life, to mark International Women's Day 2021. This call emphasises setting clear

¹ Inter Parliamentary Union and UN Women (March 2021) [Women in Politics 2021](#)

² Freizer, S et al (June 2020) [COVID-19 Policy Brief 18: COVID-19 and women's leadership: From an effective response to building back better](#) New York: UN Women

targets for gender parity as a driver for action, and outlines core measures, such as fighting stereotypes, mobilising media platforms, ensuring access to information campaigns, providing human rights education in national curricula and ensuring gender parity in peace building processes. It also underlines the role of quotas as temporary special measures required to drive action.³

NIWEP would emphasise that a clear framework for implementing a gender sensitive Parliament exists through CEDAW and General Recommendations developing guidance on specific elements of the treaty, and would urge for these to be used as a framework for identifying characteristics of a gender sensitive Parliament and a roadmap for progressive realisation of this. The international standards context is developed in Section 3 below.

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (hereafter NIWEP) would call for a full review of both the working culture and working practices in Parliament to create the inclusive conditions necessary to fully implement a gender sensitive Parliament. This is an important initiative and a unique opportunity to identify the characteristics of a gender sensitive Parliament, along with a roadmap to implementing initiatives designed to progressively realise this aim. In its role as legislator for the UK, the Parliament also plays an important role in acting as a model for institutions, and institutions as workplaces. Therefore, developing and, crucially, implementing a gender sensitive Parliament sets a precedent for modern working culture across the UK. This submission focuses on key elements of such a review. NIWEP is aware that this is widening the remit of a review from that set out in the call for evidence, but believes that this is a significant opportunity to strengthen the entire political process for women, and should be taken with a view to achieving gender parity in Parliament, as called for in the Agreed Conclusions of CSW65, adopted by consensus on 26 March 2021.⁴

3. Setting the scene – women in decision making

3.1 Women political leaders and the quality of democracy

Evidence suggests women tend towards a leadership style that is more cooperative and inclusive, and which is less likely to enforce hierarchies, while women in politics tend to do more constituency work than men. Women politicians are altering the framework of politics, by introducing legislation in areas previously considered beyond the scope of government, from domestic violence to female genital mutilation, but also by broadening perspectives on other policy areas. Having more women representatives is related to lower levels of corruption.⁵

3.2 Women's leadership, peace and security

Women in political decision making is also associated with a stronger commitment to peace and security, as noted in the UN Secretary-General report to the Security Council to mark the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. This report emphasises that involving women in peace talks strengthens peace agreements, and also enables a wider definition of peace building. It also highlights evidence collated during the

³ CEDAW Committee and Inter Parliamentary Union statement 8 March 2021 '[Joint Call by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union for National Action Plans to achieve gender parity by 2030](#)'

⁴ See UN Women press release 26 March 2021: '[UN's largest gathering on women's rights delivers robust blueprint on strengthening women's leadership and participation in public life](#)', Agreed Conclusions text to be published in the near future.

⁵ Cowper-Coles, M (2020). Women political leaders: the impact on democracy. London: Global Institute of Women's Leadership at King's College London.

ongoing pandemic indicates that countries led by women have tackled the pandemic more effectively, highlighting the benefit of a broader and more collaborative decision making style. The report states that ‘Political leadership by women and the inclusion of women are essential components for effective national and local governance and reform’, and stresses that gender quotas remain an effective tool to strengthen women’s political participation.⁶

3.3 Women political leaders and policy making

Women in politics, more often than men, prioritise women’s interests, such as equal rights, reproductive rights and sexual health, families and childcare, and stopping violence against women. Women in politics also prioritise broader social ‘care’ issues more than men such as education, welfare and healthcare; this extends to the international sphere where women politicians spend less on militarism and more on aid. Women in politics often see representing women as part of their role and legislate more than men on women’s priority issues. Women in politics are more able to propose and pass women friendly legislation when there is a greater proportion of women in the legislature and when there is a women’s caucus or women’s parliamentary body.⁷

3.4 Key barriers

In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Assembly published findings and recommendations from a review into women in politics and the Assembly in 2015.⁸ Recommendations from this review included voting procedures that enable family friendly sittings, considering gender balance in delegations, procedures to address bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment and many others relating to candidate selection, media portrayals of women in politics, training and support for women in public and elected office, and women interested in public life.

However, the only recommendation implemented to date is a cross party women’s caucus, which was set up in 2016. This caucus does not have formal powers, and is focused on capacity building on key issues of interest across parties. Meanwhile, women MLAs face increasing online abuse, with little action to tackle this, while limited action has been undertaken to encourage women to stand for office or modernise selection practices. Women, trans and gender non conforming people of all ages, and in particular young people from marginalised and more disadvantaged backgrounds, are increasingly reporting an active disinterest in politics, based on a perception that their views, experiences and priorities are neither included nor represented.

The key barriers for equal representation – gender parity – are clearly set out in the Call for Evidence. However, the Northern Ireland Assembly review, along with numerous studies and guidance documents^{9,10,11} highlight that beyond practical barriers to standing for election, the core barrier for women and girls is cultural attitudes and stereotypes that continue to highlight a traditional, white male decision maker model and decision making style. This applies particularly to women and girls from minoritised and racialised backgrounds, women and girls

⁶ The Secretary-General’s Report to the UN Security Council on Women, Peace and Security ([S/2020/946](#)) September 2020

⁷ Ibidem, p.8-9.

⁸ Northern Ireland Assembly, Assembly and Executive Review Committee (2015) [Review into women in politics and the Assembly](#)

⁹ Maguire, S (2018) [Barriers to Women Entering Parliament and Local Government](#). London: Institute for Policy Research.

¹⁰ Freizer, S et al (June 2020) [COVID-19 Policy Brief 18: COVID-19 and women’s leadership: From an effective response to building back better](#) New York: UN Women

¹¹ Galligan, Y., 2020. Women MPs from Northern Ireland: Challenges and Contributions, 1953–2020. [Open Library of Humanities](#), 6(2), p.20.

from lower income backgrounds and to all trans and gender non conforming people. A core issue for political parties is candidate selection¹², and ensuring women are enabled and selected to stand in winnable seats, and supported to win seats, rather than nominated as ‘also rans’ in order to boost candidate statistics. In order to ensure lasting and comprehensive change that supports and encourages new generations of women, trans and gender non conforming people to stand for public office, these issues also need to be addressed in plans and actions to develop a gender sensitive Parliament. Critically, it is vital to engage the women’s sector, and through the sector women and girls as well as trans and gender non conforming people, in the development of a roadmap, alongside women parliamentarians and women in local government and other public office. This is reflected in the CEDAW Committee’s Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW¹³, which emphasises the need to address misogyny and poor political discourse. In this regard, mandatory, age appropriate relationship and sexuality education is a key recommendation in the report. NIWEP is pleased that RSE has been made mandatory in England, Scotland and Wales, in line with recommendations by the CEDAW Committee in previous Concluding Observations, but notes with concern that this recommendation has not been addressed in any way in Northern Ireland, despite action on abortion legislation itself.

These recommendations are not new¹⁴. The critical issue is focused, sustained implementation at all levels, and therefore restating these issues is important to ensure a comprehensive approach from the outset.

4. International standards, women in politics and gender sensitive Parliament

As noted above, the UK has an obligation under CEDAW to strengthen women’s political participation, and creating the conditions for achieving this. Recommendations by CEDAW in Concluding Observations to several periodic reports¹⁵ have stressed addressing barriers to political participation, particularly for women from marginalised and minoritised backgrounds, while there also has been an emphasis on addressing stereotypes and social norms preventing women from engaging in public life.

The UN General Assembly resolution 66/130 (2011) provides an overview of key issues and recommendations for action, and NIWEP would urge for this to be used as a framework for the review. Key elements include removing barriers to participation through legislation and addressing cultural norms, introducing training and capacity building to enable women to participate, putting in place effective mechanisms to address violence and harassment, and taking measures to ensure women from marginalised and minoritised backgrounds are able to participate in the political process.¹⁶

Recommendations from CEDAW General Recommendations also provide a clear context for developing a gender sensitive Parliament. General Recommendation 28¹⁷ on core obligations

¹² Northern Ireland Assembly, Assembly and Executive Review Committee (2015) [Review into women in politics and the Assembly](#)

¹³ CEDAW Committee (2018) [Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW](#)

¹⁴ See eg. Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) [Women’s rights and gender equality 2018: an update report](#), Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2019) [Equality in Participation in Public Life Priorities for Action](#)

¹⁵ [Concluding Observations](#) 2019, 2013, 2008 on examinations of the UK under CEDAW

¹⁶ UN General Assembly resolution [66/130 Women and political participation](#), 19 December 2011

¹⁷ CEDAW Committee (2010) [General Recommendation No 28](#)

for States Parties clearly sets out the required actions for States Parties to create the legislative, policy and practical context for eliminating discrimination against women in all its forms, including in barriers to political participation.

CEDAW General Recommendation 23 on political and public life sets out the specific measures required to achieve the broader recommendations. This recommendation focuses on the need to bridge the traditional view of the public as a male and the private as a female sphere, in order to create conditions where women have a voice and can participate in decision making as equals. The recommendation underlines women's double burden of paid and unpaid work as a barrier, and provides clear recommendations for action on addressing this, as well as addressing access to information, both for participating in and standing for election. In addition, the recommendation sets out mechanisms for appointing gender balanced cabinets, Board and other senior decision making organs, and recommends the rule that neither sex should constitute less than 40% of a public body's nominees.¹⁸

General Recommendation 36 on education emphasises the role of education, in all its forms, on creating the conditions for gender equality in society, addressing social norms that act as barriers to women's political participation and ensuring women have access to training providing the skills and capacities required for public office.¹⁹ More specifically, CEDAW General Recommendation 30 on conflict prevention, conflict and post conflict situations stresses gender quotas as a concrete tool 'to address this broader context of gender discrimination and inequality in conflict affected areas, in addition to the specific and multiple barriers to women's equal participation that are linked to additional conflict-related restrictions on mobility, security, fundraising, campaigning and technical skills'²⁰. This is particularly relevant to Northern Ireland; however, in light of the barriers identified in the Good Parliament report and subsequent gender audit, temporary measures could be considered as a means for scaling up progress and supporting other measures.

Finally, the CEDAW Committee has recently provided guidance to States Parties for the preparation of reports under article 18 of CEDAW in the context of the SDGs. This guidance stresses that reports must set out, *whether temporary special measures have been used (para 22(d)), whether social inclusivity and diversity are taken into consideration at all levels of political and administrative governance (para 17(k)), and whether 'laws or regulations exist relating to the representation of women on the executive and non-executive boards of political parties and State-owned companies, and whether they include enforcement mechanisms and sanctions'* (para 32(d))²¹. The SDG framework also includes indicators relevant to gender parity in political decision making.²²

¹⁸ CEDAW Committee (2007) [General Recommendation No 23](#)

¹⁹ CEDAW Committee (2017) [General Recommendation No 36](#)

²⁰ CEDAW Committee (2013) [General Recommendation No 30](#)

²¹ CEDAW Committee (2018) [Guidance note for States parties for the preparation of periodic reports under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

²² UN (2016) [Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

5. Priorities for a gender sensitive Parliament

As noted above in the summary and Section 3, NIWEP would recommend that UN General Assembly resolution 66/130 and relevant CEDAW General Recommendations are used as a framework for identifying the priorities. The following section addresses specific elements highlighted in the Call for Evidence.

5.1 Developing an inclusive Parliament

Inclusive decision making

The cross cutting message from the existing evidence base is that development of an inclusive Parliament requires system level action. Perhaps most importantly, this includes long term work to diversify the traditional debating style within Parliament, which is a major barrier for many women who do not recognise it as a helpful approach in their daily lives. It also hinders the utilisation of wider skills, including collaborative decision making styles, which are more commonly employed by women and have been shown to lead to more successful and publicly supported decision making. This is addressed in UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130 and also in CEDAW General Recommendation 28.

Eliminating gendered violence

The core, critical priority for an inclusive and gender sensitive Parliament is the eradication of violence against women, which includes discrimination, bullying and sexist language and practice. A recent study by the Inter Parliamentary Union highlights that 85 per cent of female MPs in the study, which included the UK, have experienced psychological violence, while 58 per cent have experienced online violence and practically half (47%) have received death and rape threats. A quarter have experienced sexual violence²³. The study underlines the urgent need for action to protect women parliamentarians, as part of wider action to eliminate violence against women and girls that among other harms, discourages women from standing for public office.

In particular online violence must be tackled as an urgent priority, using legislation where needed to require social media companies and web hosting platforms to take responsibility for keeping all users safe and call out unacceptable language, action and behaviour. Action is also needed to ensure legislation and procedures for police to investigate such crimes are sufficiently stringent and effective; designating misogyny as a hate crime is a starting point for this. This also requires a change in public debate and education at all levels, including among newly elected and aspiring parliamentarians. The Committee, as well as Ministers for Women and Equalities, play an important role in this, and NIWEP would urge the Committee to take a strong and proactive stance on this issue, working with the women's sector to challenge violence against women in all its forms.

Effective procedures for reporting, recording and investigating violence against female Members must be implemented and Members must be made aware of these. These should ideally be handled by a non partisan office or body, to ensure Members feel able to report all incidents. Members subjected to violence should also have access to support. The most helpful approach for this would be to review protection and support for Members as part of a wider review of initiatives to end violence against women and girls, including prosecution and sentencing practice, to ensure Members as well as all women can feel safe in society. This

²³ Inter Parliamentary Union and Council of Europe (2018) [Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe](#)

would also build confidence among women and girls, as well as trans and gender non conforming people, to engage with the political process and seek public office. These issues are addressed in UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130, the UN Secretary-General's report to the UN Security Council on the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and in CEDAW General Recommendations 28, 30, 35 and 36.

Inclusive political processes

The Northern Ireland Assembly review of women in politics highlighted key areas of action for political parties, and the Assembly institution, to encourage and support women to stand for public office, including capacity building initiatives, mentoring programmes and inclusive selection procedures.²⁴ Similar recommendations were made in the Good Parliament report²⁵ and subsequent gender audit, and these areas have been stressed in UN General Assembly Recommendation 66/130, CEDAW General Recommendation 36 . These remain critical for developing a diverse and inclusive Parliament, and for encouraging women, trans and gender non conforming people to engage with the political process and seek public office.

The areas discussed below are also critical to ensuring an inclusive Parliament and political process.

5.2 Developing gender inclusive working practice

In practical terms, a gender sensitive Parliament means developing implicitly inclusive working cultures and practices, and avoiding practices and measures that may become perceived as exceptions, as such interventions are likely to reinforce the original stereotype of decision making as a male domain. Terminology and language also matter. As an example, a core aim should be to normalise flexible working practices within Parliament as well as in other workplaces, and encouraging male parliamentarians to share family responsibilities.

Limiting proxy voting to new mothers is an example of exclusive and 'othering' practice, while linking flexible working specifically to women as a 'family friendly' intervention entrenches the stereotype of women primarily as mothers and carers, and in particular the view that mothers, but not fathers, need to prioritise family before all else. However, short term or temporary actions required to strengthen equity and equality may be needed as part of implementation; all women shortlists and gender quotas are examples of this. NIWEP would emphasise that under CEDAW, temporary special measures are included as a relevant measure for balancing representation, and would urge for such measures to be explored as a mechanism for progressive realisation of gender parity in Parliament. CEDAW General Recommendation 30 further emphasises quotas as a relevant provision, and quotas are also highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's report to the UN Security Council on the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325. It is critical to note these recommendations in light of the CSW65 Agreed Conclusions, as the UK Mission to the UN in its statement at the conclusion of CSW65 emphasised the need to take action 'at home' on the commitments made in the Agreed Conclusions, which include reference to both strengthened political participation for women and use of gender quotas as a temporary measure.²⁶

²⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly, Assembly and Executive Review Committee (2015) [Review into women in politics and the Assembly](#)

²⁵ Childs, S (2016) [The Good Parliament](#) Bristol: University of Bristol.

²⁶ See recording of CSW65 closing ceremony on [UN WebTV](#), at 0:22.

Proxy voting

In light of the above, NIWEP welcomes the introduction of proxy voting in Parliament since the start of the pandemic²⁷. This is a helpful innovation; however, NIWEP notes that eligibility is currently limited, and is particularly concerned that only biological mothers and primary adoptive carers are eligible for a seven month period, while eligibility for fathers and partners of the biological mothers is limited to two weeks. In line with extant parental leave legislation, the right to proxy voting should as an absolute minimum be expanded to all new parents for the period of six months to a year.

NIWEP would urge for proxy voting and virtual attendance to be expanded to all Members form a regular and normalised way of working for Parliament, for all Members. This is in line with wider societal change initiated during the pandemic, and would assist all Members of Parliament to engage effectively with the working of the House, while meeting either family or constituency responsibilities. It would also go a significant way towards normalising flexible working practices, which is critical for creating a genuinely inclusive Parliament. In addition, this could reduce the need for travel, which is significant in the wider context of the climate emergency and the need to develop more sustainable working practices, in line with SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth and SDG Sustainable transport.

Parental leave and remote working

NIWEP welcomes the introduction of parental leave rights for Ministers. However, the arguments regarding proxy voting also apply to parental leave: this should be available to all Members of Parliament, as a cornerstone of an inclusive Parliament that also recognises the wider role of Members in society. This is engendered in UN General Assembly resolution 66/130.

Framing parental leave in this way can also strengthen public trust in Parliament, as it enables voters to relate more closely to their representatives, while it enables Members to engage more effectively with constituents and constituencies, particularly if strengthened remote working is enabled and retained following the pandemic. Part time and remote working, as well as proxy voting, should be enabled not only for Members on parental leave, but all Members as a mechanism for ensuring Members can carry out constituency roles, while also participating in the work of Parliament. This can in itself strengthen confidence in and goodwill towards Parliament, by reducing the need for Members to prioritise their separate roles and risk negative commentary.

However, it is vital to ensure that Members who choose to take parental leave in full are supported to do so, and that they are not penalised on their return either through questioning of their commitment or exclusion from parliamentary delegations, working groups and processes.

It should be noted that many other countries successfully provide parental leave for parliamentarians. For example in Finland, Education Minister Li Andersson is currently on parental leave; current Prime Minister Sanna Marin returned from parental leave less than a year before taking on the position. Finland guarantees parliamentarians the same parental leave rights as other employees; other members of the relevant parliamentary party ensure their responsibilities are met during leave. In Sweden, acting Members are nominated to cover a Member's parental leave.

²⁷ Houses of Parliament (November 2020) [Proxy Voting Scheme](#)

NIWEP would also urge the Committee to utilise its influence to support extension of parental leave for parliamentarians in devolved administrations. The Northern Ireland Assembly makes no provision at present, increasing the burden on Ministers and MLAs with families, and adding a barrier for women to seek election.

5.3 Developing inclusive conditions, facilities and environments

Inclusive facilities

The Restoration and renewal programme offers an important opportunity to modernise Houses of Parliament in inclusive and gender sensitive ways. From the perspective of women, facilities to enable breastfeeding childcare are a crucial consideration. Members' offices should be equipped with remote working facilities, to enable Members to care for children in their offices, where necessary, while continuing to participate in the work of the House. As noted above, this should be a universal adaptation, to ensure all Members can have access to this facility, and to normalise caring as a responsibility of all Members.

NIWEP believes specific breastfeeding areas are not necessary, as breastfeeding should be acceptable in all environments in a modern society. However, the needs of children should be taken into account in the redesign, for example through ensuring suitable toilet facilities are available, and all areas are safe for children.

More generally, the needs of trans and gender non conforming people should be taken into account in the renewal programme, to ensure they feel welcome in the House as Members and as visitors. Toilet and washing facilities are a key issue in this regard; wherever possible, single cubicle units without gender assignment should be made available throughout the House. These units should be built to a disabled access specification, to ensure accessibility for all.

Ensuring full accessibility throughout the House is an important consideration, in line with disability legislation. However, key elements of this such as level and obstacle free entrances and corridors are helpful for all, including parents with prams and strollers.

It is also important that the Restoration and Renewal programme considers external facilities, to ensure the Houses of Parliament are a safe environment. Good lighting in external areas and internal hallways is a cornerstone for this, as is design to ensure areas are naturally overlooked, avoiding inaccessible corners. While measures such as CCTV will be necessary, NIWEP believes overreliance on such surveillance should be avoided, as this may increase the sense of risk and threat in particular for women.

Childcare

More broadly, inclusive facilities includes creating the conditions that enable all Members to engage fully with the work of the House, and for people of all backgrounds to consider standing for election. In this regard, childcare facilities attached to the House should be considered; the critical issue is ensuring access to childcare, subsidies are not necessarily required. A more helpful approach would be reviewing childcare for Members alongside childcare for all parents – as potential candidates – and prioritise policies securing access to affordable childcare for all families. This would serve to strengthen understanding among Members of a core issue affecting voters, and would also contribute to improved trust in Parliament among voters, particularly women voters, by creating a stronger link between the lived experience of voters and the work of Parliament.