

Women in the Community – Changing Face of Local Politics

I followed the recent debate on setting up a working group to discuss the lack of women in politics at the Assembly like most women and listened with keen interest.

For me, what I heard throughout the debate was the continual repeat of the barriers that affect gender equality in politics, figures were quoted, issues were raised - but what I and most women wanted to hear was not the problems but the solutions!

What makes solutions complicated is that there cannot be a 'one size fits all' approach to these barriers. In addressing the barriers we need first to recognise the diversity of women socially, economically, politically and geographically and then their multiple identities - single, carers, disabled, black - and if that is not complicated enough then there are the hidden barriers women face in politics - the political structures and culture which were set up for men by men and which can be quite alien and hostile to women.

The women's movement recognised those structural and cultural barriers and began to address the problem in the

early 1970s by finding a way to cut across the political divide in Northern Ireland without becoming involved in political parties. The women's movement concentrated on politics with a small 'p' - childcare, housing, employment, violence and education – those bread and butter issues politicians speak so readily today about.

Women were, and to some degree still are, turned off to contributing to any political party by the macho political lifestyle they have to adopt in order to participate. The women's movement in Northern Ireland found another way to tackle the political issues by, to use a well worn quote, becoming the backbone of the communities they lived in.

But what they gained in their leadership qualities within their communities they lost by being invisible at the decision-making tables.

The women's movement attempted to address this issue by setting up groups and organisation which reflected the diversity of women to lobby and influence local government– groups such as Women's Support Network, Women's Resource and Development Agency, Women into Politics, Women's Aid, NI Women's Forum and Northern Ireland Women's European Platform.

Here women found a way away to share, develop and shape policy, by providing training and networking not only at a local level but also at a European and international level.

This was a way to have your voice heard by government but unfortunately very few women were part of it.

So we are now in 2007 and we have entered a new phase of equality and democracy in Northern Ireland – but unfortunately this is about religion and not gender.

Women are still less visible when we look at political figures, which I am sure you could quote over and over again. To add to this if the review of public administration does not gender proof its procedures in developing the new local councils and political parties do not show a genuine commitment to increasing women to safe seats - there will be even less.

So what can local women groups and organisations do to change the face of local politics? My five big hits are:

1. Lobby political parties to raise awareness of the need to increase women within their parties to winnable seats – (for those of a nervous disposition positive action can be 2 names on the voting paper in a safe

seat – one male one female – and let the electorate choose)

2. Challenge political parties in ensuring their political women have high profiles with the media
3. Encourage local women to only vote for parties who show a genuine commitment to gender equality and to engage with those men in politics who show an interest in increasing women in politics instead of focusing all gender issues on the under-represented women politicians
4. Provide training through programmes such as DemocraShe and Women into Politics to local women in order to develop their skills and knowledge of political life
5. Support political women by providing information and research on the needs of women within the local communities and what policies would have the greatest impact

So what can political people do for women? Here are my

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1. Politicians need to show an understanding of the impact of all policy, programmes and legislation on women in all their multiple identities
2. Politicians need to instruct departments to develop innovate, strong actions to compliment the gender strategic plan for Northern Ireland and which will address the barriers which stop women from participating in politics
3. Political parties need to recognise the strength of the women's sector and to engage with it; after all it can provide the views and needs of 51% of the population - information which stretches from Beijing to Belfast!
4. Political parties need to set targets for increasing the numbers of women elected to local politics and to find new ways to attract women into participating in politics
5. Finally, an issue which causes many parties to break out in a sweat – POSITIVE ACTION:

We have been trying to change the structures and culture of politics for years but it isn't working as quickly as it

should – positive action promotes change until a culture changes itself then it can then be removed

I will end with one example of positive action in Rwanda. Following its genocide Rwanda has been rebuilding its society, its economy, and its political system. One of the first steps toward reorganisation and healing made in the 2003 constitution mandated that 30 percent of all decision-making posts in Rwanda's national government were to be filled by women. However, in addition to the twenty four seats reserved for women in the new parliament's lower house, women candidates won an additional 15 seats in the 2003 elections. With 49 percent of its Chamber of Deputies seats held by women, Rwanda surpassed Sweden as the country with the highest percentage of women in a house of parliament, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

This story is not offered to prove that Rwanda is fully democratised but rather to highlight that Rwanda developed innovative and creative mechanisms designed to bring women into the process. – There must surely be learning for us in this.

Thank you.